

V I N T A G E

eBooks



THE SHARK-INFESTED
CUSTARD

A NOVEL

CHARLES WILLEFORD

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Charles Willeford was a highly decorated (Silver Star, Bronze Star, Purple Heart, Luxembourg Croix de Guerre) tank commander with the Third Army in World War II. He was also a professional horse trainer, boxer, radio announcer, and painter. Willeford, the author of twenty novels, created the Miami detective series featuring Hoke Moseley, which includes *Miami Blues*, *Sideswipe*, *The Way We Die Now*, and *New Hope for the Dead*. He died in 1988.

NOVELS BY CHARLES WILLEFORD

High Priest of California

Pick-up

Wild Wives

The Black Mass of Brother Springer

Lust Is a Woman

The Woman Chaser

Understudy for Death

Deliver Me from Dallas

Cockfighter

The Burnt Orange Heresy

The Hombre from Sonora

Miami Blues

New Hope for the Dead

Sideswipe

The Way We Die Now

The Shark-Infested Custard

THE SHARK- INFESTED CUSTARD

A Novel

by

CHARLES WILLEFORD



VINTAGE CRIME/BLACK LIZARD

Vintage Books

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New York

What is very sweet, bright yellow, and extremely dangerous?

–old Miami riddle

Part 1

Larry “Fuzz-O” Dolman

*In Florida, the guilty party who spills everything
to the State Attorney first gets immunity...*

It started out as kind of a joke, and then it wasn't funny any more because money became involved. Deep down, nothing about money is funny.

There were four of us at the pool: Eddie Miller, Don Luchessi, Hank Norton, and me—Larry Dolman. It was just beginning to get dark, but the air was still hot and muggy and there was hardly any breeze. We were sitting around the circular, aluminum table in our wet trunks. Hank had brought down a plastic pitcher of vodka martinis, a cup of olives, and a half-dozen Dixie cups. That is one of the few rules at Dade Towers; it's all right to eat and drink around the pool so long as only plastic or paper cups and plates are used.

Dade Towers is a singles only apartment house, and it's only one year old. What I mean by "singles only" is that only single men and women are allowed to rent here. This is a fairly recent idea in Miami, but it has caught on fast, and a lot of new singles only apartments are springing up all over Dade County. Dade Towers doesn't have any two-or three-bedroom apartments at all. If a resident gets married, or even if a man wants to bring a woman in to live with him, out he goes. They won't let two men share an apartment, either. That's a fruitless effort to keep gays out. But there are only two or three circumspect gays in the 120-apartment complex, and they don't bother anyone in the building. The rents are on the high side, and all apartments are rented unfurnished. The rules are relaxed for women, and two women are allowed to share one apartment. That rule is reasonable, because women in Miami don't earn as much money as men. And by letting two women share a pad, the male/female ratio is evened out. So some of the one-bedrooms have two stewardesses, or two secretaries, living together. Other women, who have more money, like school teachers, young divorceés, and nurses, usually make do with efficiencies. If a man wanted to, he could get all of the women he wanted simply by hanging around the pool.

Under different circumstances, I don't think Don, Hank, Eddie and I would have become such good friends. But the four of us were all charter members, so to speak, the first four tenants to move into Dade Towers when it opened. And now, after a solid year together, we were tight. We swam in the pool, went to movies together, asked each other for advice on the broads we took out, played poker one or two nights a month, and had a good time, in general, without any major fights or arguments. In other words, we truly lived the good life in Miami.

Eddie Miller is an ex-Air Force pilot. After he got out of the service, he managed to get taken on as a 727 co-pilot. Flying is just about all Eddie cares about, and eventually he'll be a captain. In the meantime (he only flies 20 hours a week), Eddie studies at the University of Miami for his state real estate exam. That's what many of the airline pilots do in their spare time; they sell real estate. And some of them make more money selling

real estate than they do as pilots, even though real estate is a cutthroat racket in Dade County.

Hank Norton has an A.B. in Psychology from the University of Michigan. He has a beautiful job in Miami as a detail man, or salesman, for a national pharmaceutical firm. He only works about ten or fifteen hours a week, when he works at all, and he still has the best sales record in the U.S. for his company. As the top detail man in the field the year before, his company gave him a two-week, all-expenses paid, vacation to Acapulco. He is a good-looking guy, with carefully barbered blond hair and dark, Prussian-blue eyes. He is the best cocksman of the four, too. Hank probably gets more strange in a single month than the rest of us get in a year. He has an aura of noisy self-confidence, and white flashing teeth. His disingenuous smile works as well on the doctors he talks with as it does on women. He makes about twenty-five thousand a year, and he has the free use of a Galaxie, which is exchanged for a new model every two years. His Christmas bonus has never been less than two thousand, he claims.

Don Luchessi makes the most money. He is the Florida rep for a British silverware firm, and he could make much more money than he does if the firm in Great Britain could keep up with his orders. They are always two or three months behind in production and shipping, and Don spends a lot of time apologizing about the delays to the various department and jewelry stores he sells to. What with the fantastic increase of the Miami Cuban population, and the prosperity of the Cubans in general, Don's business has practically doubled in the last four years. Every Cuban who marries off a daughter (as well as her friends and relatives, of course) wants the girl to start off her married life with an expensive silver service. Nevertheless, even though Don makes a lot more money than the rest of us, he is paying child support for his seven-year-old daughter and giving his wife a damned generous monthly allowance besides. As a Catholic he is merely legally separated, not divorced, and although he hates his wife, we all figure that Don will take her back one of these days because he misses his daughter so much. At any rate, because of the money he gives to his wife, by the end of the year he doesn't average out with much more dough than the rest of us.

Insofar as I am concerned, what I considered to be a bad break at the time turned out to be fortuitous. I had majored in police science at the University of Florida, and I had taken a job as a policeman, all gung-ho to go, in Florence City, Florida, two weeks after I graduated. Florence City isn't too far from Orlando, and the small city has tripled in population during the last few years because of Disney World. After two years on the force I was eligible to take the sergeant's exam, which I passed, the first time out, with a 98. They were just starting to build Disney World at the time, and I knew that I was in a growth situation. The force would grow along with Florence City, and because I had a college degree I knew that I would soon be a lieutenant, and then a captain, within a damned short period of patrolman apprenticeship.

So here I was, all set for a sergeancy after only two years on the force. None of the other three men who took the exam with me was even close to my score. But what happened, I got caught with the new ethnic policy. Joe Persons, a nice enough guy, but a semiliterate near-moron, who had failed the exam for five years in a row, finally made a

minimum passing score of 75. So the Board made him a sergeant instead of me because he was black. I was bitter, of course, but I was still willing to live with the decision and wait another year. Joe had been on the Florence City force for ten years, and if you took seniority into account, why not let him have it? I could afford to wait another year. But what happened was incredible. The chief, a sharp cracker from Bainbridge, Georgia, called me in and told me that I would be assigned to Sergeant Persons fulltime to do his paperwork for him. I got hot about it, and quit then and there, without taking the time to think the matter out. What the chief was doing, in a tacit way, was making it up to me. In other words, the chief hadn't liked the Board's decision to make Joe Persons a sergeant instead of me any more than I had. By giving me the opportunity to do the sergeant's actual work, which Persons was incapable of handling, he was telling me that the next vacancy was as good as mine, and laying the groundwork to get rid of Sergeant Persons for inefficiency at the same time.

I figured all this out later, but by that time it was too late. I had resigned, and I was too proud to go back and apologize to the chief after some of the angry things I had said to him.

To shorten the story, although it still makes me sore to think about the raw deal I was handed in Florence City, I came down to Miami and landed a job with National Security as a senior security officer. In fact, they could hardly hire me quickly enough. National has offices in every major city in the United States, and some day—in a much shorter period than it would have taken me to become the chief of police in Florence City—I'll be the director of one of these offices. Most of the security officers that National employs are ex-cops, retired detectives usually, but none of them can write very well. They have to dictate their reports, which are typed later by the girls in the pool. If any of these reports ever got out cold, without being edited and rewritten, we would lose the business of the department store industry receiving that report in five minutes flat. That is what I do: I put these field reports into some semblance of readability. My boss, The Colonel, likes the way I write, and often picks up phrases from my reports. Once, when I wrote to an operator in Jacksonville about a missing housewife, I told him to "exhaust all resources." For about a month after that, The Colonel was ending all of his phone conversations with, "Exhaust all resources, exhaust all resources."

So down at National Security, I am a fair-haired boy. Four years ago I started at \$10,000, and now I'm making \$15,000. I can also tell, now, from the meetings that they have been asking me to sit in on lately, "just to listen," The Colonel said, that they are grooming me for a much better job than I have already.

If this were a report for National Security I would consider this background information as much too sketchy, and I would bounce it back to the operator. But this isn't a report, it's a record, and a record is handy to keep in my lock-box at the bank.

Who knows? I might need it some day. In Florida, the guilty party who spills everything to State's Attorney *first* gets immunity....

2

We were on the second round of martinis when we started to talk about picking up women. Hank, being the acknowledged authority on this subject, threw out a good question. “Where, in Miami,” Hank said, “is the easiest place to pick up some strange? I’m not saying the best, I’m talking about the easiest place.”

“Big Daddy’s,” Eddie said.

I didn’t say so, but I agreed with Eddie in my mind. There are Big Daddy’s lounges all over Miami. Billboards all around Dade County show a picture of a guy and a girl sitting close together at a bar, right next to the bearded photo of Big Daddy himself, with a caption beneath the picture in lower case Art type: “Big Daddy’s-where you’re never alone....” The message is clear enough. Any man who can’t score in a Big Daddy’s lounge has got a major hang-up of some kind.

“No,” Hank said, pursing his lips. “I admit you can pick up a woman in Big Daddy’s, but you don’t always score. Right? In fact, you might pick up a loser, lay out five bucks or so in drinks, and then find her missing when you come back from taking a piss.”

This was true enough; it had happened to me once, although I had never mentioned it to anyone.

“Think, now,” Hank said. “Give me one surefire place to pick up a woman, where you’ll score, I’ll say, at least nine times out of ten.”

“Bullshit,” Don said. “Nobody scores nine times out of ten, including you, Hank.”

“I never said I did,” Hank said. “But I know of one place where you *can* score nine times out of ten. Any one of us at this table.”

“Let’s go,” I said, leaping to my feet. They all laughed.

“Sit down, Fuzz,” Hank said. “Just because there is such a place, it doesn’t mean you’ll want to go. Come on, you guys-think.”

“Is this a trick question?” Eddie said.

“No,” Hank said, without smiling, “it’s legitimate. And I’m not talking about call girls either, that is, if there’re any left in Miami.”

“Coconut Grove is pretty good,” Eddie said.

“The Grove’s always good,” Hank agreed, “but it’s not a single place, it’s a group of different places. Well, I’m going to tell you anyway, so I’ll spare you the suspense. The easiest place to pick up a fast lay in Miami is at the V.D. clinic.”

We all laughed.

“You’re full of it, Hank,” Don said. “A girl who’s just picked up the clap is going to be

turned off men and sex for a long time.”

“That’s what I would have thought,” Hank said. “But apparently it doesn’t work that way. It was in the *Herald* the other day. The health official at the clinic was bitching about it. I don’t remember his name, but I cut out the piece and I’ve got it up in my apartment. He said that most of the girls at the clinic are from sixteen to twenty-two, and the guys and girls get together in the waiting room to exchange addresses and phone numbers because they know they’re safe. They’ve all been treated recently, so they know there’s no danger of catching anything. Anyway, according to the *Herald*, they’ve brought in a psychologist to study the problem. The health official wants to put in separate waiting rooms to keep the men and women apart.”

“Would you pick up a girl in a V.D. clinic?” Don asked Hank.

Hank laughed. “Not unless I was pretty damned hard up, I wouldn’t. Okay. I’ll show you guys the clipping later. Here’s a tougher question. Where’s the *hardest* place in Miami to pick up a woman?”

“The University of Miami Student Union,” Eddie said solemnly.

We all laughed.

“Come on, Eddie,” Hank said. “Play the game. This is a serious question.”

“When a man really needs a piece of ass,” I said, “any place he tries is hard.”

“That’s right,” Eddie said. “When you’ve got a woman waiting for you in the sack, and you stop off for a beer, there’ll be five or six broads all over you. But when you’re really out there digging, desperate, there’s nothing out there, man. Nothing.”

“That’s why I keep my small black book,” Hank said.

“We aren’t talking about friends, Hank,” I said. “We’re supposed to be talking about strange pussy.”

“That’s right. So where’s the hardest place to pick up strange?”

“At church—on a Sunday,” Eddie said.

“How long’s it been since you’ve been to church?” Hank asked. “Hell, at church, the minister’ll even introduce you to a nice girl if you point one out to him.”

“But who wants a nice girl?” Eddie said.

“I do,” Hank said. “In my book, a nice girl is one who guides it in.”

“If that’s true,” I said, “every girl I’ve ever slept with has been a nice girl. Thanks, Hank, for making my day. Why don’t we give up this stupid game, get something to eat, and go down to the White Shark and play some pool?”

“Wait a minute,” Eddie said, “I’m still interested in the question. I want to know the answer so I can avoid going there and wasting my time.”

“A determined man,” Don said, “can pick up a woman anywhere, even at the International Airport. And you can rent rooms by the hour at the Airport Hotel.”

“It isn’t the airport,” Hank said. “As you say, Don, the airport’s not a bad place for pick-ups. A lot of women, usually in pairs, hang around the Roof Lounge watching the planes take off.”

“We give up, Hank,” I said. “I’ve had my two martinis, and if I don’t eat something pretty soon, I’m liable to drink another. And on my third martini I’ve been known to hit my best friend—just to see him fall.”

“Eighty-six the Fuzz,” Eddie said. “Tell us, Hank.” Eddie poured the last drink into his Dixie cup.

“Drive-in movies,” Hank said.

“I don’t get it,” Don said. “What’s so hard about picking up a woman at a drive-in, for Christ’s sake? Guys take women to drive-ins all the time—”

“That’s right,” Hank said. “They *take* them there, and they pay their way in. So what’re you going to do? Start talking to some woman while she’s in her boyfriend’s car, while he’s got one arm around her neck and his left hand on her snatch?”

Eddie laughed. “Yeah! Don’t do it, Don. The guy might have a gun in his glove compartment.”

“I guess I wasn’t thinking,” Don said.

I thought about the idea for a moment. “I’ve only been to a drive-in by myself two or three times in my whole life,” I said. “It’s a place you don’t go alone, usually, unless you want to catch a flick you’ve missed. The last time I went alone was to see *Two Lane Blacktop*. I read the script when it came out in *Esquire*, and I really wanted to see the movie.”

“I saw that,” Eddie said. “Except for Warren Oates in the GTO, none of the other people in the movie could act.”

“That isn’t the point, Eddie,” I said. “I didn’t think the movie was so hot either, although the script was good. The point I’m trying to make is that the only reason I went to the drive-in was to see *Two Lane Blacktop*, and it didn’t come on until one-oh-five a.m. Where’re you going to find anyone to go to the drive-in with you at one in the morning? And when I didn’t like the movie either, I wanted to kick myself in the ass.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever been to a drive-in alone,” Don said. “Not that I remember, anyway.”

“Well, I have,” Hank said, “just like Larry. Some movies only play drive-ins, and if you don’t catch them there you’ll miss them altogether.”

“I’ve been a few times, I guess,” Eddie said, “and you’ll always see a few guys sitting alone in their cars. But I’ve never seen a woman alone in a car at a drive-in, unless her boyfriend was getting something at the snack bar.”

“Let me tick it off,” Hank said. “First, if a woman’s there, she’s either with her parents, her husband, or her boyfriend. Second, no woman ever goes to a drive-in alone. They’re afraid to, for some reason, even though a drive-in movie’s safer than any place I know for a woman alone. Because, third, a man would be stupid to look for a broad at a drive-in when there’re a thousand better places to pick one up.”

“That’s the toughest place, all right,” I said. “It’s impossible to pick up a woman at a drive-in.”

Hank laughed. “No, it isn’t impossible, Larry. It’s hard, but it’s not impossible.”

“I say it’s impossible,” I repeated.

“Better than that,” Eddie said, “I’m willing to bet ten bucks it’s impossible.”

Hank, shaking his head, laughed. “Ten isn’t enough.”

“Add another ten from me,” I said.

“I’ll make it thirty,” Don said.

“You guys aren’t serious,” Hank said.

“If you don’t think thirty bucks is serious enough,” Eddie said, “I’ll raise my ten to twenty.”

“Add another ten,” I said.

“And mine,” Don said.

“Sixty dollars is fairly serious money,” Hank said. “That’s twice as much dough as I’d win from you guys shooting pool at the White Shark.”

“Bullshit,” Eddie said. “We’ve offered to bet you sixty hard ones that you can’t pick up a broad at the drive-in. And we pick the drive-in.”

“You guys really love me, don’t you?” Hank said, getting to his feet and rotating his meaty shoulders.

“Sure we love you, Hank,” I said. “We’re trying to add to your income. But you don’t have to take the bet. All you have to do is agree with us that it’s impossible, that’s all.”

“What’s my time limit, Eddie?” Hank said.

“An hour, let’s say,” Eddie said.

“An hour? Movies last at least an hour-and-a-half,” Hank said. “And I’ll need some intermission time as well to talk to women at the snack bar. How about making it three hours?”

“How about two?” I said.

“Two hours is plenty,” Don said. “You wouldn’t hang around any other place in Miami for more’n two hours if you couldn’t pick up a broad.”

“Let’s compromise,” Hank said. “An hour-and-a-half, so long as I get at least ten minutes intermission time. If the movie happens to run long, then I get more time to take advantage of the intermission, but two hours’ll be the outside limit. Okay?”

“It’s okay with me,” I said.

“Then let’s make the bet a little more interesting,” Hank said. “For every five minutes under an hour, you add five bucks to the bet, and I’ll match it.”

Hank’s self-confidence was irritating, but I considered it as unwarranted overconfidence. We took him up on his addition to the bet, and we agreed to meet in Hank’s apartment in a half-hour.

We all had identical one-bedroom apartments, but we furnished them so differently none of them looked the same. I don’t have much furniture, but the stuff I’ve got is unique. On Saturday nights I often get the early Sunday edition of the *Miami Herald* and look for furniture bargains in the Personals. That’s how I got my harpsichord. It was

worth at least \$850, but I paid only \$150 for it. I can pluck out “Birmingham Jail,” but I plan to take lessons if a harpsichord teacher ever moves to Miami. I’m not in any hurry to complete the furnishings; I’m willing to wait until I get the things I want to keep.

Eddie has a crummy place, a real mess, but his mother drives down from Ft. Lauderdale every month to spend a couple of days with him, and that’s the only time it’s clean.

When Don left his wife, he took all of his den furniture, and his living room is furnished as a den. He’s got two large comfortable leather chairs, tall, old-fashioned, glass-doored bookcases, and a half-dozen framed prints of “The Rake’s Progress” on the walls. When we’re watching football and drinking beer in Don’s place, it’s like being in some exclusive men’s club.

Hank, because he doesn’t have an office, has almost a third of his living room taken up with cardboard boxes full of drugs and samples of the other medical products his company manufactures. Hank serves as our “doctor.” We get our pain killers, cold remedies, medicated soap, and even free toothbrushes from Hank. Before the strict accountability on drugs started, he could sometimes spare sleeping pills and a few uppers. But not any longer. His company counts them out to him now, in small quantities, and he has to account for the amphetamines he passes out free to the doctors he calls on.

Hank’s apartment is overcrowded with possessions, too, in addition to the medical supplies. Once he has something, he can’t bear to part with it, so his apartment is cluttered. On top of everything else, Hank has a mounted eight-foot sailfish over the couch. He caught it in Acapulco last year, had it mounted for \$450 and shipped to Miami. Across the belly, in yellow chalk, he’s written, “Hank’s Folly.” He still can’t understand how the boat captain talked him into having the sailfish mounted, except that he was so excited, at the time, about catching it. He’s so genuinely unhappy now, about his stupidity in mounting a sailfish, we no longer kid him about it.

When I got to my apartment, I was feeling the effects of the two martinis, so before I took my shower, I put on some coffee to perc. After I showered, I put on a T-shirt, khaki shorts, and a pair of tennis shoes. I fixed a very weak Scotch and water in a plastic glass, and carried it with me down to Hank’s apartment.

The other guys were already there. Don, wearing yellow linen slacks and a green knit shirt, was checking the movie pages in the *Herald*. Eddie wore his denim jacket and jeans with his black flight boots, and winked at me when I came in. He jerked his head toward the short hallway to the bedroom. Hank, of course, was still dressing, and a nose-tingling mixture of talcum powder, Right Guard, and Brut drifted in from the bedroom.

Eddie grinned, and jerked his head toward the bedroom. “An actor prepares,” he said. “Stanislavski.”

“Jesus,” Don said, rattling the paper. “At the Tropical Drive-In they’re showing *five* John Wayne movies! Who in hell could sit through five John Waynes for Christ sake?”

“I could,” I said.

“Me, too,” Eddie said, “but only one at a time.”

“If you go to the first one at seven-thirty,” Don said, “you don’t get out ’til three a.m.!”

“I wouldn’t mind,” Eddie said, “if we all went and took along a couple of cases of beer. It’s better than watching TV from seven-thirty till three, and I’ve done that often enough.”

“Yeah,” I said, “but you can watch TV in airconditioned comfort. You aren’t fighting mosquitoes all night.”

“They fog those places for mosquitoes,” Eddie said.

“Sure they do,” Don said, “and it makes them so mad they bite the shit out of you. Here’s one. Listen to this. At the Southside Dixie. *Bucket of Blood*, *The Blood-Letters*, *The Bloody Vampires*, and *Barracuda!* There’s a theater manager with a sense of humor. He put the barracuda last so they could get all that blood!”

We laughed.

Eddie got up and crossed to the kitchenette table, where Hank kept his liquor and a bucketful of ice. “What’re you drinking, Fuzz-O?”

“I’m nursing this one,” I said.

“Pour me a glass of wine, Eddie,” Don said.

“Blood-red, or urine-yellow?”

“I don’t care,” Don said, “just so you put a couple of ice cubes in it.”

Eddie fixed a scotch over ice for himself, and brought Don a glass of Chianti, with ice cubes.

“The Southside’s probably our best bet,” I said. “There’ll be fewer women at the horror program than at the John Wayne festival. And besides, there’s a Burger Queen across the highway there on Dixie. We can eat something and watch for Hank when he comes out of the theater.”

“Shouldn’t one of us go with him?” Eddie said.

“It wouldn’t be fair,” Don said. “I don’t think he’ll be able to pick up any women there anyway, but it would be twice as hard to talk some woman into getting into a car with two guys. So we let him go in alone. As Larry says, we can watch the exit from across the Dixie Highway.”

Hank came into the living room, looking and smelling like a jai-alai player on his night off. He wore white shoes with leather tassels, and a magenta slack suit with a silk blue-and-red paisley scarf tucked in around the collar. Hank had three other tailored suits like the magenta—wheat, blue and chocolate—but I hadn’t seen the magenta before. The high-waisted pants, with an uncuffed flare, were double-knits, and so tight in front his equipment looked like a money bag. The short-sleeved jacket was a beltless, modified version of a bush jacket, with huge bellows side pockets.

Don was the only one of us with long hair, that is, long *enough*, the way we all wanted to wear it. Because of our jobs, we couldn’t get away with hair as long as Don’s. Hank had fluffed his hair with an air-comb, and it looked much fuller than it did when he slicked it down with spray to call on doctors.

“Isn’t that a new outfit?” Eddie said.

“I’ve had it awhile,” Hank said, going to the table to build a drink. “It’s the first time I’ve worn it, is all. I ordered the suit from a small swatch of material. Then when it was made into a suit, I saw that it was a little too much.” He shrugged. “But it’ll do for a drive-in, I think.”

“There’s nothing wrong with that color, Hank,” Don said. “I like it.”

Hank added two more ice cubes to his Scotch and soda. “It makes my face look red, is all.”

“Your face *is* red,” I said.

“But not as red as this magenta makes it look.”

“When you pay us off tonight,” Eddie said, “it’ll match perfectly.” Hank looked at his wristwatch. “Suppose we synchronize our watches. It is now, precisely...seven-twenty-one. We’ll see who ends up with the reddest faces.”

We checked our watches. For the first time, I wondered if I had made a bad bet. If Hank lost, I consoled myself at least his over-confidence would preclude my giving him any sympathy.

We decided then to meet Hank at the Burger Queen across from the Southside Drive-In. He would take his Galaxie, and the rest of us would ride down in Don’s Mark IV.

Because we stopped at the 7/Eleven to buy two six packs of beer, Hank beat us to the Burger Queen by about five minutes. Don gave Hank a can of beer, which he hid under the front seat, and then Hank drove across the highway. It was exactly seven-forty-one.

3

We ordered Double Queens apiece, with fries, and then grabbed a tile table on the side patio to the left of the building. The Burger Queen didn't serve beer, and the manager couldn't see us fish our beers out of the paper sack around to the side. We could look directly across the highway and see the drive-in exit.

Unless you're going out to dinner somewhere, eating at eight p.m. in Miami is on the late side. We were all used to eating around six, and so we were ravenous as we wolfed down the double burgers. We didn't talk until we finished, and then I gathered up the trash and dumped it into the nearest garbage can. Don ripped the tops off three more beers.

Below Kendall, at this point on the Dixie Highway, there were six lanes, and the traffic was swift and noisy both ways. Eddie began to laugh and shake his head.

"What's so funny?" I said.

"The whole thing—what else? I know there isn't a hellova lot to do on a Thursday night, but if I ever told anyone I sat around at the Burger Queen for two hours waiting for my buddy to pick up a woman at a drive-in movie—"

"You'd better hope it's at least an hour-and-a-half," Don said.

"I know, I know," Eddie said, "but you've got to admit the whole business is pretty stupid."

"Yes, and no, Eddie," I said. "It isn't really money, either. You and Don both know that we'd all like to take Hank down a notch."

Don smiled. "I think you may be right, Larry."

"I'm not jealous of Hank," Eddie said.

"Neither am I," I said. "All I'm saying is that for once I'd like to see old Hank lose one. I like Hank, for Christ's sake, but I hate to see any man so damned over-confident all the time, that's all."

"Yeah," Eddie said. "I know what you mean."

Don snorted, and looked at his watch. "You'll have to wait until another time, I think. It's now eight-twelve, and here comes our wandering over-confident boy."

Don had spotted Hank's Galaxie as it cleared the drive-in exit, and Hank, waiting to make a left turn, was hovering at the edge of the highway when I turned to look. He had to wait for some time, and we couldn't see whether there was a woman in the car with him or not. He finally made it across and parked in the Burger Queen lot. We met him about half-way as he came towards us—by himself.

"How about a beer?" Hank said.

“We drank it,” Eddie said.

“Thanks for saving me one. Come on. I’ll introduce you to Hildy.”

We followed Hank to the Galaxie. When he opened the passenger door and the overhead light went on, we saw the girl clearly. She was about thirteen or fourteen, barefooted, wearing a tie-dyed T-shirt, and tight raggedy-cuffed blue jeans with a dozen or more different patches sewn onto them. On her crotch, right over the pudenda, there was a patch with a comic rooster flexing muscled wings. The embroidered letters, in white, below the chicken read: I’M A MEAN FIGHTING COCK. Her brownish hair fell down her back, well past her shoulders, straight but slightly tangled, and her pale face was smudged with dirt. She gave us a tentative smile, and tried to take us all in at once, but she had trouble focusing her eyes. She closed her eyes, and her head bobbed on her skinny neck.

“She’s only a kid,” Eddie said, glaring at Hank.

Hank shrugged. “I know. She looked older over in the drive-in, without any lights, but you guys didn’t set any age limit. A girl’s a girl, and I had enough trouble snagging this one.”

“It’s a cop-out, Hank,” I said, “and you know it.”

“Suit yourself, Fuzz-O,” Hank said. “If you guys don’t want to pay off, I’ll cancel the debt.”

“Nobody said he wouldn’t pay,” Don said. “But the idea was to pick up somebody old enough to screw. You wouldn’t fuck a fourteen-year-old girl—”

“That wasn’t one of the conditions,” Hank said, “but if that’s what you guys want, I’ll take Hildy home, give her a shower, and slip it to her. I sure as hell wouldn’t be getting any cherry—”

The girl—Hildy—whimpered like a puppy, coughed, choked slightly, and fell over sideways in the seat.

“Nobody’s going to hurt you kid,” Don said.

“She’s stoned on something, Hank,” I said. “You’d better get her out of there before she heaves all over the upholstery.”

Hank bent down, leaned inside the car, and pushed up the girl’s eyelids. He put a forefinger into her throat and then grabbed her thin right wrist to check her pulse. He slammed the passenger door, and leaned against it. His red, sunburned face was watermelon pink—about as pale as Hank was capable of getting.

“She’s dead,” Hank said. He took out his cigarettes, put one in his mouth, but couldn’t get his lighter to work. I lighted a cigarette myself, and then held the match for Hank. His fingers trembled.

“Don’t play around, Hank,” Don said. “Shit like that isn’t funny.”

“She’s dead, Don,” Hank said. “Are you sure?” Eddie said.

“Look, man—” Hank ran his fingers through his fluffy hair, and then took a long drag on his cigarette. “Dead is *dead*, man! I’ve seen too many...too fucking many—”

“Take it easy, Hank,” I said.

“What do we do now, Larry?” Don said. Hank and Eddie looked at me, too, waiting. At 28, I was the youngest of the four. Hank was 31, and Don and Eddie were both 30, but because of my police background they were dumping the problem in my lap.

“We’ll take her to Hank’s apartment,” I said. “I’ll drive Hank’s car, and Hank’ll go with me. You guys go on ahead in the Continental and unlock the fire door to the north-west stairway. Meet us at the door, because it’s closest to Hank’s apartment. Then, while you three take her upstairs to the apartment, I’ll park Hank’s car.”

“Okay,” Don said. “Let’s go, Eddie.”

“Don’t run, for Christ’s sake,” I said.

They slowed to a walk. Hank gave me his car keys, and I circled the car and got in behind the wheel.

On the way back to Dade Towers I drove cautiously. Hank sat in the passenger bucket seat beside me, and held the girl’s shoulders. He had folded her legs, and she was in a kneeling position on the floor with her face level with the dash glove compartment. He held her steady, with both hands gripping her shoulders.

“How’d you happen to pick her up, Hank?” I said.

“Thursday’s a slow night, apparently,” Hank said. “There’re only about twenty-five cars in there. No one, hardly, was at the snack bar. I got a paper cup from the counter, and went outside to pour my beer into it. Sometimes, you know, there’s a cop around, and you’re not supposed to drink beer at the drive-in, you know.”

“I know.”

The girl had voided, and the smell of ammonia and feces was strong. Moving her about hadn’t helped any either. I pushed the button to lower the windows, and turned off the airconditioning.

“That was a good idea,” Hank said. “Anyway, I got rid of the beer can in a trash basket, and circled around the snack bar to the women’s can. I thought some women might come out, and I could start talking to one, but none did. Then I walked on around the back of the building to the other side. Hildy, here, was standing out in the open, not too far from the men’s room. She was standing there, that’s all, looking at the screen. The nearest car was about fifty feet away—I told you there were only about twenty-five cars, didn’t I?”

“Yeah. A lot of people don’t come until the second feature, which is usually the best flick.”

“Maybe so. The point is, nobody was around us. ‘Hi,’ I said, ‘are you waiting for me?’ She just giggled and then she mumbled something.

“Who? I said, and then she said, ‘The man in the yellow jump suit.’

“‘Oh, sure,’ I said, ‘he sent me to get you. My name’s Hank—what’s yours?’

“‘Hildy’ she said.

“‘Right,’ I said. ‘You’re the one, all right. I hope you don’t mind magenta instead of

yellow.'

"Then she asked me for some of my Coke. She thought I had a Coke because of the red paper cup, you see. So I gave her a drink from the cup and she made a face. Then she took my hand, just like I was her father or something, and I led her over to my car. It was dark as hell in there, Larry, and I swear she looked older—around seventeen, anyway."

"That doesn't make any difference now," I said.

"I guess not. I wish to hell I had a drink."

"We can get one in your apartment."

The operation at Dade Towers worked as smoothly as if we had rehearsed it. I parked at the corner, ten feet from the door. Hank wrapped a beach towel around Hildy, an old towel he kept in the back seat, and Eddie opened the car door. The fire door to the stairway, which was rarely used, only opened from the inside. Don held the door partly open for Hank and Eddie, and they had carried her inside and up the stairs before I drove across the street and into the parking lot. After parking in Hank's slot and locking the car, I shoved Hildy's handbag under my T-shirt.

I knocked softly at Hank's door when I got upstairs. Don opened it a crack to check me out before he let me in. Hildy was on her back on the couch, with the beach towel beneath her. She was only about four-eight, and the mounted sailfish on the wall above her looked almost twice as long as she did. The sail's name in yellow chalk, "Hank's Folly," somehow seemed appropriate. When I joined the group, Hank handed me a straight Scotch over ice cubes.

The four of us, in a semi-circle, stared down at the girl for a few moments. Her brown eyes were opened partially, and there were yellow "sleepies" in the corners. There was a scattering of pimples on her forehead, and a few freckles on her nose and cheeks. There was a yellow hickey on the left corner of her mouth, and she didn't have any lipstick on her pale lips. Her skin, beneath the smudges of dirt, was so white it was almost transparent, and a dark blue vein beneath her right temple was clearly visible. She wasn't wearing a bra beneath her T-shirt; with her adolescent chest bumps, she didn't need one.

"She looks," Eddie said, "like a first-year Brownie."

Don began to cry.

"For God's sake, Don—" Hank said.

"Leave him alone, Hank," I said. "I feel like crying myself."

Don sat in the Danish chair across from the TV, took out his handkerchief, wiped his eyes, and then blew his nose.

I emptied the purse—a blue-and-red patchwork leather bag, with a long braided leather shoulder strap—onto the coffee table. There were two plastic vials containing pills. One of them was filled with the orange heart-shaped pills I recognized as Dexies. The other pills were round and white, but larger than aspirins, and stamped "M.T." There was a Mary Jane, a penny piece of candy wrapped in yellow paper, the kind kids buy at

the 7/Eleven; a roll of bills held together by a rubber band; a used and wadded Kleenex; and a blunt, slightly bent aluminum comb.

As I started to count the money, I said to Eddie, "Search her body, Ed."

"No," he said, shaking his head.

"Let me fix you another drink, Ed." Hank took Eddie's glass, and they moved to the kitchenette table. Don, immobilized in the Danish chair, stared at the floor without blinking.

There were thirty-eight dollars in the roll; one was a five, the rest were ones. I emptied the girl's front pockets. This was hard to do because her jeans were so tight. There were two quarters and three pennies in the right pocket, and a slip of folded notebook paper in the left. It was a list of some kind, written with a blue felt pen. "30 ludes, 50 Bs, no gold." There was only one hip pocket, and it was a patch that had been sewn on in an amateurish manner. The patch, in red denim, with white letters, read, KISS MY PATCH. The pocket was empty.

"There's no I.D., Hank," I said.

"So what do we do now," Eddie said, "call the cops?"

"What's your flying schedule?" I said.

"I go to New York Saturday. Why?"

"How'd you like to be grounded, on suspension without pay for about three months? Pending an investigation into the dope fiend death of a teenaged girl?"

"We didn't do anything," Eddie said.

"That's right," I said. "But that wouldn't keep your name out of the papers, or some pretty nasty interrogations at the station. And Hank's in a more sensitive position than you are with the airline, what with his access to drug samples and all. If—or when—he's investigated, and his company's name gets into the papers, as soon as he's cleared, the best he can hope for is a transfer to Yuma, Arizona."

Hank shuddered and sat down at the coffee table beside me in the straight-backed cane chair. He opened the vial holding the pills that were stamped "M.T."

"Methaqualone," Hank said. "But they're not from my company. We make them all right, but our brand's called 'Meltin.' There're twenty M-T's left in the vial, so she could've taken anywhere from one to a dozen—or more maybe. Four or five could suffocate and kill her." Hank shrugged, and looked at the girl's body on the couch. "The trouble is, these heads take mixtures sometimes of any and everything. She's about seventy-five pounds, I'd say, and if she was taking a combination of Dexies and M.T.'s, it's a miracle she was still on her feet when I picked her up." He tugged on his lower lip. "If any one of us guys took even three 'ludes, we'd sleep for at least ten hours straight. But if Hildy, here, was on the stuff for some time, she could've built up a tolerance, and —"

"Save it, Hank," I said. "The girl's dead, and we don't know who she is—that's what we need to know. The best thing for us to do, I think, is find the guy in the yellow jump suit and turn her over to him."

“What guy in what yellow jump suit?” Eddie said.

Hank told them what the girl had said, that she was waiting for a man in a yellow jump suit.

“Do you think it was her father, maybe?” Don said.

“Hell, no,” I said, “whoever he is, she’s his baby, not ours.”

“How’re we going to find him?” Eddie said.

“Back at the drive-in,” I said. “I’m going to get my pistol from my apartment, and then we’ll go back and look for him.”

“D’you want me to take my pistol too, Larry?” Eddie asked.

“You’d better not,” I said, “I’ve got a license, and you haven’t. You and I and Hank’ll go back. You’d better stay here with the girl, Don.”

“I’d just as soon go along,” Don said.

“No,” I said. “Somebody’d better stay here with the girl. We’ll go in your car, Hank.” I handed him his keys. “I’ll meet you guys down in the lot.”

I went to my apartment, and changed into slacks. I put my pistol, a Colt Cobra .38, with a two-inch barrel, into its clip holster, and shoved the holstered gun inside the waistband of my trousers. To conceal the handle of the weapon, I put on a sand-colored lightweight golf jacket, and zipped up the front. Hank and Eddie were both in the Galaxie, Eddie in the back seat, and Hank in the driver’s, when I got to the parking lot. I slid in beside Hank.

On our way to the drive-in I told them how we would work the search party. Hank could start with the first row of cars, going from one to the next, and Eddie could start from the back row. I’d start at the snack bar, checking the men’s room first, and then look into any of the cars that were parked close to the snack bar. I would also be on the lookout for any new cars coming in, and I would mark the position of new arrivals, if any, so we could check them out when we finished with those already there.

“One other thing,” I said. “If you spot the guy, don’t do anything. We’ll all meet in the men’s room, and then we’ll take him together. There aren’t that many cars, and we should finish the search in about five minutes.”

“What if he isn’t there?” Eddie said.

“Then we wait. I think he’ll show up, all right. My worry is, he might not be alone, which’ll make it harder to pick him up. But there aren’t that many guys wearing jump suits, especially yellow ones, so we should be able to spot him easily enough.”

“Not necessarily,” Hank said. “He might be a hallucination, a part of the girl’s trip. Hell, she came with me without any persuasion to speak of, and she would’ve gone with anybody. She was really out of it, Larry.”

“We don’t have to look for the guy, Hank,” I said. “If you think it’s a waste of time let’s go back and get the girl and dump her body in a canal some place.”

“Jesus, Larry,” Eddie said, “could you do that?”

“What else do you suggest?”

“Nothing,” Eddie said. “But before we do anything drastic, I think we’d better look for her boy friend in the jump suit.”

“That’s why we’re going to the drive-in,” Hank said.

I took a five and a one out of my wallet, and had the money ready to pass across Hank to the girl in the box-office the moment Hank stopped the car. Hank had cut his lights, but I regretted, for a moment, not taking my Vega instead of returning in his Galaxie. The Galaxie, because it was leased by Hank’s company, had an “E” prefix on the license plate. But because there were three of us in the car instead of only one, it was still unlikely that the girl would make an earlier connection with Hank.

We parked in the last row. The nearest car was three rows ahead of us. As we got out of the car, Eddie laughed abruptly. “What do we say,” he said, “if someone asks what we’re looking in their car for? Not everybody comes to this fingerbowl to watch the movie, you know.”

“Don’t make a production out of it,” I said. “Just glance in and move on. If somebody does say something, ask for an extra book of matches. That’s as good an excuse as any. But look into each car from the side or back, and you won’t get into any hassles. Remember, though, if you do spot the guy, keep on going down the line of cars as before. Don’t quit right then and head for the men’s room. He might suspect something.”

A few minutes later we met in the men’s room. I lit a cigarette, and Eddie and Hank both shook their heads. I wasn’t surprised. I hadn’t expected to find any man in a yellow jump suit. In fact, I suspected that Hank had made up the story. And yet, it was wise to get all three of them involved. I had realized, from the beginning, that I would have to be the one who would have to get rid of the girl’s body, but it would be better, later on, for these guys to think that they had done everything possible before the inevitable dumping of the kid in a canal.

“Okay,” I said. “To make sure, let’s start over. Only this time, you start with the first row, Eddie, and you, Hank, start with the back. It won’t hurt anything to double-check.”

“If you really think it’s necessary,” Hank said.

“We’ve got to wait around anyway,” I said.

They took off again. It wasn’t necessary, but I wanted to keep them busy. They didn’t have my patience. These guys had never sat up all night for three nights in a row at a stake-out in a liquor store. But I had. I went around to the back of the snack bar, where it was darkest, and kept my eye on the box-office entrance, some hundred yards away. Two more cars, both with their parking lights on, came in. The first car turned at the second row and squeezed into an empty slot. The second car, a convertible, drove all the way to the back, and parked about three spaces to the right of Hank’s car. If you came to see the movie, it was a poor location, so far from the screen, and angled away from it. A man got out of the car, and started toward the snack bar.

I caught up with Hank, and pointed the man out as he came slowly in our direction, picking his way because his eyes weren’t used to the darkness. “I think we’ve got him, Hank,” I said. “Go straight up to him and ask for a match, and I’ll circle around in back of him.”

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