

## **IN THE ROUGH**

Stony Point Road straightened before him, lancing the downpour with its black ribbon. Sheri still on his mind, Eddy Peters steered the Mustang with his knees and licked the gummed seams of a joint. Had to get out of there, he told himself. Can't deal with that woman sometimes. Best just to leave.

A rusty pickup approached from the opposite direction. The driver, a rancher in his seventies, took a rag from beneath the seat and wiped the windshield. He leaned forward and squinted through the foggy-edged portal to see a pair of racing stripes tight-roping the double yellow.

Eddy stomped on the accelerator to push his '65 Shelby along the slick, two-lane country highway as the faint sounds of yesteryear wiggled through the radio static. He reached to change the channel but withdrew, letting The Doors transport him back forty years to another era, to another war. Lyrics repeated themselves inside his head: "This is the end, my beautiful friend..." His mind drifted. All bullshit, he thought—Vietnam, Iraq—and flicked the still unlit joint out the window when the wind threw the rain back into his face. He fumbled to shut out the gale and then looked up, but the curve arrived without warning.

The old timer jerked his pickup to the right and darted onto the soft shoulder. Loose gravel pinged off the undercarriage.

The muscle car rushed past, shaved the truck's fender, and barreled up the berm and took flight. Fencing and grassy stalks replaced the fading highway in Eddy's rearview mirror. His numbed mind, wrapped in submission, marveled at the rushing sound of the passing wind until the fastback slammed into the soggy turf and spun out of control. Tires spiraled, cutting a trail of interlocking circles through the alfalfa. With a dull thud, the GT-350 crashed sideways into a wall of hay.

Eddy sat there, stupefied. His breath came in pumped spurts. Other sounds began to surface—the whooshing of the wipers, the slapping of the rain against metal.

He rubbed the haziness from his pupils. His scrutiny meandered beyond his pulsating body, through the mud-streaked window and onto the front hood. Sludge, tangled weeds and cow-pies hid his Mustang from view. Emotions welled up, and he sat there for a long time, dazed by his sad existence, wondering how he had fallen to such insignificance. He felt deserted, betrayed. Bitterness began to fill his hollowness when, in the distance, Stony Point Road took shape before him. His jaw tightened.

"The hell with it," and he hit the gas.

The rear end fishtailed as it tried to latch onto the muddy terrain. Chunks of the field sprayed in an arc from under the treads until the ground surrendered and bade farewell. The Shelby raced back across the rolling terrain toward the barbed wire enclosure. A rutted track, which lined the field's perimeter, slipped under the passing vehicle. The fastback shot through the prickly fence, roared up the earthen slope and thumped onto the blacktop. Tires gripped the gritty tarmac. Billows of white smoke unspooled from the wheel wells.

The rancher leaned out the window of his truck and said, "Nev'r seen anythin' like it!"

## In The Rough

Doped with adrenalin and rage, Eddy could not reply.  
“You sure tore up that car of yours.”  
Eddy sped off, leaving the old timer to ponder.

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The GT-350 squeezed between two rotund SUVs at the Washoe House. A fixture in northern California’s Petaluma since 1870, the clapboard remained little unchanged since it was a stagecoach stop, still serving the best gutrock in Sonoma County.

For some unknown reason, the driver side door opened only six or eight inches. Eddy tried again...and again. Blunt thuds repeated themselves.

“Can’t catch a break.” He climbed across the console and exited.

Curious, he circled his Mustang. The grill sported new denture ware, barbwire everywhere. Dings dotted the hood like a pimply-faced teenager. Weeds, alfalfa, tangled vines and strings of dirt balls poked from rusty seams to add an exclamation to the car’s “beater” status. He continued his survey until he came upon a startling sight. A fence post jutted outward from the driver’s door, and he remembered the thumping. Black and white stills of his carnival-like ride flitted across the inside of his eyelids. He shrugged as if not caring and left the tattered scene and limped up the wooden steps.

Cowboys and blue-collar working stiffs sat on stools within their hanging clouds of smoke; their blank expressions fixed upon the amber bottles of booze lining the glass shelves behind the bar. Eddy made himself comfortable at the end of the lacquered counter and ordered a double-bourbon, straight up.

“Haven’t seen you in a while,” the husky bartender said. He sized up his customer’s downcast demeanor, filled a shot glass and asked, “Tough over there, huh?”

“You could say that.”

“How’s that woman of yours?” The bartender pretended to busy himself with the stacking of napkins. “Still as mean as ever?” He had a crush on Sheri ever since high school, but the girl intimidated him.

“Ever seen an alley cat on speed?”

“Sounds about right.” The bartender placed a bowl of mixed nuts upon the bar. “Let me know if ya need anything else. Good to see ya, man.”

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A sharp pain banged against the inside of his brain much like an anvil receives a hammer’s descending blow. Chatter, agitated and rapid, stirred within the hallway. Eddy thought about getting up and investigating, but the disturbance came to him.

The morning gray silhouetted a familiar figure at the bedroom’s entrance. The bottle-blonde hair, stern posture and robust cleavage belonged to the same woman who greeted him upon his return from the Middle East a year ago.

Sheri stood there and glared at her rummy boyfriend. Images of their alcohol-marinated love affair rushed back to her. They had exhausted the Petaluma bar circuit

and decided, one drug induced night, to play house rather than jump back into the merry-go-round dating scene. But her passion soon disappeared along with his boyish charms.

“How could you?” she yelled.

Eddy’s pasty lips fought to separate. “Huh?”

“Your car was the best thing ‘bout this sorry-ass relationship.”

“Oh, yeah...nice car.” His words sounded muffled.

“In fact, that was the only good thing you ever did for us!”

“Ah huh...us...good.”

“After all I’ve done for you—fed you, paid the rent, waiting for you to turn the corner. But, oh no, you’d rather drown in the past and feel sorry for yourself.”

He pulled the blankets further over his head.

“Can’t do this wine-and-roses thing anymore,” she said. “One moment you’re like your old self—funny, upbeat. The next, you’re a complete stranger—moody, brooding. If you don’t keep your counseling appointments, I’m going to...”

Eddy’s snoring sounded above her words. Infuriated, she thumped to the bathroom and returned to the rumpled bed where she emptied a bucket of toilet water over his jet-black hair.

Eddy sat up, ramrod. “What the...” He brushed the dampness from his face, blinking. Disoriented, he reverted to a pet phrase: “Wanna have makeup sex?”

Sheri raised both hands, screamed and marched to the closet. Clothes evacuated their hangers: rayon Hawaiian shirts, khaki pants, white loafers, tennis shoes, two cardigan sweaters and a lone black suit landed on different parts of the poster bed.

From behind the shield of his raised arms, he jested, “Jeez, whatever you do, don’t sugarcoat it. Just let me know how you really feel.”

Drum sticks, cymbals and other percussion paraphernalia careened off the headboard. A hand-me-down suitcase followed.

“Get out of my house...now! And take that fart-snorting bulldog with you!”

Jarhead raised his jowls from the saliva-stained bedspread and with a smacking sound showed his indifference at the uproar.

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The red edge of a flannel shirt peeked from the seam of Eddy’s frayed valise. He glanced back into his former domicile and gestured goodbye to another failed relationship. Two drum sets and their various carrying cases came across his vision.

“I’ll send for the rest of my things when I get resettled.”

A flower vase flew past his spectacles. He retraced the projectile’s path to a distraught Sheri who sat Indian style upon the carpet, cupping her hands over her moist eyes. He contemplated returning to her side to comfort her, but a helpless feeling overcame him, and he departed through the screen door.

The rain pelted his hatless head. His arthritic foot throbbed as he stepped down the porch steps where he viewed his Mustang for the first time that morning. His luggage and bulldog dropped from his grip at the sight of his car’s fresh bruises.

“That’s a tad extreme. No need for her to go ballistic.”

Four flattened tires lay upon the front lawn. From beneath the opened hood, a jagged bouquet of wires, ripped from their sockets, sprouted from the grimy, gray engine.

## In The Rough

He looked down at Jarhead. “Doesn’t matter. Thing had more rot on her than a junkyard.” On one knee, he stroked his brindled companion. “Well, at least we’ve got each other, right?”

Jarhead’s tongue lolled down to his spike collar.

“Close enough. I’ll take that as a yes.”

Eddy tilted his shoulder into the storm and lumbered down the road toward the nearest bus stop, three blocks away. He nudged his horn-rimmed glasses upward and surveyed the neighborhood one last time. Copycat bungalows lay unfinished as their skeleton frames scarred the skyline. Weedy lots dotted the landscape while red demarcation flags outlined abandoned projects.

The pair huddled within the protected slot. Advertisements bedecked the Plexiglas walls. Uncle Sam pointed at him, asking what he had done for his country.

“Surrendered my sanity, you old fart,” he mumbled. “That should be enough.”

His Navy issued pea coat felt weighty as images of his last mission streamed past: sulfur fires, black snakes, pearl chains of blood. He stood there lifeless, encased in his past, when a windswept newspaper curled around his pants leg. He plucked it off, wiped the murkiness from his eyes and skimmed through the rental listings for western Sonoma County until he came across a potential prospect: “Downstairs unit with bathroom. \$600/mo. 865-9922. Don’t phone before noon”.

The clicking from the public transport’s digital board mimic the sound of baseball cards flapping against bicycle spokes. He stood there and stared at the electronic characters rolling over each other. “P-E-T-A-L-U-M-A” disappeared, one letter at a time.

A voice called out: “Well, ya comin’ or not, mister? Haven’t got all day.”

## Chapter 2

Jarhead padded down the metal steps in search of a familiar scent. But the air, tainted with the Greyhound's exhaust, caused the bulldog to brace his paws against the tug on the other end of the leash.

"Not today, dung-breath."

Eddy pinched up his collar, reached for his suitcase and slogged along Monte Rio's boardwalk. They passed a fire station's hose tower. Next door, a mound of sodden cardboard boxes and plastic bags lay sprawled in front of the Salvation Army Store. Sun burnt newspapers covered the windows. They continued along a fence that served as a billboard. Five or six sienna tinged photos, mounted and framed, called for his perusal, but the weather's bite restarted him.

Crabgrass wedged its way through the sidewalk's planks. The leafy strips led to a building where a pink elephant perched above the entrance. The saloon had to date back to the Depression, he reckoned. Coats of peeled paint exposed its age like the rings on a redwood stump. The most recent layer, dollar-bill-green, was probably added to spit in the face of adversity, Eddy thought. An independent bunch, that's for sure.

A neon "Open" sign flickered from a window, and he entered. Beams of ashen light shot past him, and the saloon came to life in sections as the black dots dissolved from his vision. Glassware, garments, peanut shells, cases of booze, empty produce crates and cigarette butts lay about without notice. On a sidewall a naked temptress posed invitingly. On the opposite end, behind the bar, a pink elephant chased a man holding a beer bottle through a jungle. He remembered the ageless rumors that the paintings, more like murals, were "donated" in lieu of an out-of-control bar tab.

Stubbly faces demanded that the stranger shut the door or leave. Eddy sat his luggage down upon the floor and squeegeed the rainwater from his face with the flat of his hand and said, "I was told that I could find a Brackett Sampson here."

"Who wants to know?" responded a patron, detached, sitting in the rear.

"I'm answering an ad in..."

"C'mon," the local interrupted, waving him over.

Eddy walked past a six-foot-four male, wearing a ponytail. A priest's white collar showed from under his black leather jacket. A disheveled woman sat next to him with tinsel hair, counting food stamps. Her jaw jetted upward where teeth once were. The citizens aren't much prettier than the town, he mused, and circled the pool table and came to a lone figure, his mud-caked boots straddled atop an oak table.

## In The Rough

“I’m looking for a Brackett Sampson?”

“Well, ya found him.” Sampson tipped a silver flask into a glass of coke.

“My name is Eddy Peters and I’m answering an ad in the Press Democrat for a...”

“Don’t stand there, drippin’ all over me,” and he kicked a wooden, birdcage chair toward the Navy pea coat.

“As I was saying, I’m answering an ad in the...”

“Six hundred dollars plus last month’s rent.”

“Twelve hundred dollars up front?”

“Sharp guy...Went to math class, did ya?”

Eddy pushed the sarcasm aside and caught, within his peripherals, the longhaired priest vacate his seat next to the bag lady and wander over to a couple of other customers. Stares skittered across the room and settled upon Eddy and then withdrew back into a huddle. Faces bobbed up and down, taking mental notes and vital signs as if handicapping a racehorse before the next event. A head shaved brute with tattooed arms dragged out a three-foot-square poster board and began drawing a grid.

Sampson noticed the outsider’s puzzled expression and said, “You’re their next bar-pool.”

“Say again?” Eddy asked.

“How long ya last will determine the winner.”

“Nice to be wanted.” The subject of the bar-pool prompted Eddy to ask, “Tell me, Mr. Sampson, did they bet on your previous renter as well?”

“Name’s Brackett.”

Eddy nodded.

“Square eight won. That’s how many weeks Anthony Carrillo hung around.”

“What happened?”

“He had an accident.”

“What kind of accident?”

“The lethal kind of accident.” Brackett used the chair’s armrest as a crutch and started to rise. “He fell off the toilet seat. Worthless puke. Overweight HUD reject.” He took another drag and drew a bead on the stranger. “You got the makings of a Carrillo. Thirty something. Chubby. You’re not on HUD are ya? Won’t allow it. Too much friggin’ paperwork.”

“Nope, not on HUD.”

“Hmmm,” Brackett murmured as he lumbered away with his empty glass.

The U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development provided several services to the public such as home financing, foreclosure counseling, grants and rental assistance. Mounds of paperwork followed. In the case of Anthony Carrillo, Brackett Sampson filled out thirty pages of the bureaucratic gobbledygook.

Eddy surveyed his potential landlord. Not yet fifty, he owned the carcass of a much older man. The caked dirt under the curled fingernails, the shock of untamed auburn hair, the Popeye forearms and the radish nose—all complimented his gruff demeanor. But it was more than Brackett’s blunt ways that he found disturbing—something else, something dark and foreboding, yet something familiar. Unable to put a label on it, he twitched within his chair while the buzzing of the neon “Open” sign attacked his agitated mind.

Brackett returned to the table and stretched for his rawhide pouch and began building a cigarette. In the background a white collar approached the jukebox. Coins slid down a metallic slot, and the Excalibur came to life, bubbling with color. “Grandma Got Run Over by a Reindeer” leaped from the speakers and reverberated off the smoke-varnished walls.

Brackett chuckled, “Hey, Padre...Santa left town three months ago!”

At least he’s got a sense of humor, Eddy thought. Disturbing and dark, but, nevertheless, some semblance of social skills is there, somewhere.

Brackett slid his attention back to Eddy. “Do ya want the place or not?”

“Can you describe it?”

Brackett crunched up his face, dropped his boots from the table and said with a poet’s voice, “A grand bungalow sits atop a majestic mountain with a panoramic view of...”

Eddy halted the hyperbole and asked, “Privacy? I need privacy.”

“Ya can waste away up there and nobody would be the wiser.”

Eddy deliberated. Alternatives came forth, and he weighed the pros and cons of each. Impatient, Brackett pushed the stranger’s luggage away from him and started to say something when the cracking of timber sounded from above.

Jarhead jerked up from the planked floor, ears perked. A hush descended upon the saloon. Without warning, a limb pierced the ceiling and settled just inches from the pool table as water dripped upon the green felt.

“Another widow-maker. Let’s go.” Brackett downed his rum and coke, quick-stepped to the coat rack and slid into his yellow slicker, “Monte Rio Volunteer Fire Department” stitched to the breast pocket.

Needles and fallen branches masked Main Street while the strong winds uprooted any stray objects. A garbage can lid clanged against two or three junks in front of Hanks Auto Repair, rolled past the bamboo-skirted window of Deb’s Boutique and struck the newspaper rack outside the general store.

“Get the chain saw out of my Bronco,” Brackett yelled, pointing to a rusty SUV across the street.

“I don’t think so,” Eddy said.

“Whatever.” Brackett gave him directions to the rental, threw a set of keys into a flooded pothole and headed toward his car.

Not knowing why, Eddy rescued the drowning keys and went back inside. Instead of collecting his belongings, he stood there, studying his worn suitcase and his drooling bulldog, and mentally rung up his financial balance sheet. Still in the red, he thought. Not good. Not good at all. Dispirited, he ordered a drink. He rolled the bourbon before his eyes, hypnotized by the wavy lines. The syrupy liquid drew him closer. And then, without hesitation, he slugged the drink down, gathered his things and exited.

He continued along the billboard fence where he heard the rushing of a creek. But another sound, like waves lapping against a seawall, rose above all others. He dismissed the anomaly and started up again. At the junction near the firehouse, two roads converged upon a seldom-used parking lot. Moscow Road seemed the more hospitable, winding down a level path, parallel to the swollen Russian River. Starrett Hill Road, on the other hand, appeared steep as it withdrew into a dank and uninviting forest.

## In The Rough

Jarhead growled.

“Come on, you lily-livered mutt. Where’s your manhood?”

Their journey followed a switchback of one-lane country roads. They soon left Starrett Hill Road and plodded up Middle Terrace behind the fire station when a transformer sparked. White-hot embers cascaded downward as the metal box moaned and gave up the fight, turning the night tar-black. A siren blared three times. A long lull followed, and then the alarm repeated itself to summon everyone.

He gazed down upon Main Street as the townspeople poured out of three or four buildings. Vehicles rushed to the east and west ends of town. Headlights ignited the block. Others snatched shovels and other tools from pickups. A human chain formed to pass sandbags along to storefronts. With silent judgment he mocked the mayhem with a smirk. Why bother, he thought. Do the town a favor and let it drown.

Eddy turned his back on the pandemonium and turned onto Rio Vista Terrace to Huckleberry and then to Highland Terrace where the hill grew steeper. Eddy pushed off the balls of his feet to move forward, his body at a forty-five degree angle to the blacktop. Two or three cottages hung with uncertainty, their fronts tethered to the road’s edge with cockeyed cement piers while their rears rested atop twenty-foot high stilts, which poked upward from the gathering darkness.

A strong gust approached, and the giant sequoias swayed to their breaking point. Cracking and snapping punctured the night. A weighty branch fell from the sky and penetrated the soil not ten feet away. Eddy took a step forward, after collecting himself, and examined the pointy spear. So that’s why they call them widow-makers, he thought.

He stroked Jarhead to calm him. “No need to worry, boy. The gods are just enjoying a playful game of darts.”

The road’s path vanished under the debris and the night, and he shuffled his feet to detect the broken shards of redwood. Around the next bend, a dozen or so widow-makers had pierced the ground, standing vertical. The topsy-turvy landscape inflamed memories of another place halfway around the world where anchor poles, water planks, and the splintered sections of pulverized boats pointed upwards from decay.

In a frenzied fit he searched through his suitcase, pushing pants and shirts aside, and remembered that in his hurry to leave Sheri’s he forgot his medication. I’ll never make it, he thought.

A rumble accompanied an approaching truck. The driver slowed down and studied the pedestrian. A wad of chewing tobacco splattered across the door panel followed by a tar-stained, toothy smile.

Eddy’s vision carried upon the passing vehicle until he swung around to receive the leading edge of another surge. His suitcase flew from his grip, splayed out across the road. He steadied himself against the gale and retrieved, as best he could, his scattered pieces of clothing and trudged onward.

A half-hour later the storm abated and through an opening in the redwood canopy, a quarter moon wedged itself between the jostling clouds. The minimal light showed the vague outline of a tired bungalow that rested atop the hill’s crest. The structure took on the appearance more of a shack than a house as he neared.

Eddy stumbled across the ivy-covered front yard and climbed the porch steps while clutching onto the railing for support. The clouds resumed their flight across the



moon and returned the bungalow to the night. He felt for the knob, but the jagged edge of a torn screen greeted him.

“*Majestic bungalow*, my ass,” and swabbed the blood from his cut finger onto his khakis.

Once inside he pried off his Navy pea coat and kicked the soggy lump as if it was a disobedient dog. “No good piece of crap.”

His wet clothes chilled him, and, unable to find the light switch, he started to undress within the darkness. A Hawaiian shirt and a pair of jeans stuck to his flesh. Buttons resisted. A zipper snagged. Frustrated, he flung a dripping sock across the room. His battle continued as he tossed clothing from his suitcase, but not a dry garment could be found.

Nude, he inched his way across the inky room but stumbled over containers of some sort. “Son...of...a...bitch.”

He pulled on a chain in the bathroom and a bulb came alive to show a terry cloth garment drooping from a nail. He squeezed into the bathrobe and looked down at his plumpness, which spilled over the cotton waistband. Could lose a pound or three, he thought, and then shrugged as if not caring.

Four ancient stains marked the linoleum where the claws of a bathtub once reposed. He shook his head and then tested the sink’s faucet. No hot water. He made a mental list of his concerns.

With the help of the bathroom light, he backtracked, dodging various rain buckets, and found a thermostat. His hot breath warmed his arthritic hand, and he flipped the switch. But there was no response.

“You got to be kidding.”

Broken and exhausted, he shuffled throughout the cabin until he gathered some kindling and a split oak from under a window seat and threw them into a makeshift stove. The flame from the fifty-gallon oil drum started to show different corners of the cabin. A Formica table, flush against the kitchen wall, provided sufficient seating for two. The living room couch looked lived in. The springs in the middle cushion were shot; a rumpled blanket and pillow were piled up against the armrest.

He shivered into the lone bedroom and noticed clothing hanging from exposed wiring, which ran between the studs. The old knob and tube electrical system reminded him of his childhood vacations to the river where cabins, such as this, required little to survive the summers. There was no need for insulation. In fact, the one-wall construction provided welcomed ventilation. But this wasn’t summer, and he bristled at the sight of a thin layer of frost that coated the inside of a window. Two twin-size mattresses lay stretched out on the floorboards, their steel supports missing. Shoes, dirty laundry and personal knickknacks lay about.

“Must belong to the dead guy.” Perhaps he’s the lucky one, he thought.

He returned to the fire and began to hang his wet clothing over an improvised nylon line when a gnawing feeling attacked him. He gathered some stale rations from the kitchen cupboards and hobbled to the couch where he collapsed into the cavity of a springless cushion. Mice played frenetic games within the walls, and he ceased his eating to listen. Intoxicated by the rhythm of their pitter-patter, he slumped to one side. Crackers, chips, and a half eaten chicken wing dropped from a plate onto his lap.

## In The Rough

The sound of wind and rain streaming through the doorway awakened him. “Oh...it’s you,” Eddy said in a blurry tone. “Thanks for stopping by, but I was able to find what I needed.”

Brackett perused the bungalow in a silent inspection.

“Got a few questions, but they can wait ‘til morning if you’d like,” Eddy said.

“I’d like.”

“Where can I reach you?”

“Right here.”

“Say again?”

“You’re wearing my bathrobe, eating my food and decorating my living room with your Calvin Klein’s.” Brackett doused a match with a flick of his wrist and took a drag on his cigarette. “I’m the landlord...and live upstairs. You’re the worthless renter...and live downstairs.” His words tumbled forth in measured time as if talking to a child.

“But you said I had complete privacy.”

“All the privacy ya need...downstairs.” Brackett grabbed the clothes off the line, threw them at Eddy and told him to follow.

The upstairs bedroom door, opened wide, hid a staircase. At the bottom of the steps, Brackett said, “The studio comes complete with a microwave, sink and party-fridge at no extra cost.” He noticed the newcomer surveying the stained walls. “Don’t pay any attention to the green stuff. Ain’t gonna kill ya.”

Got enough mold in here to start a penicillin factory, Eddy thought. From that moment forward, he always referred to his new residence as “Mold City”. Built into the hillside, the cinderblock room possessed two burglar barred windows buried under the shadow of the front porch, if he had his bearings correct.

Brackett pointed at the foldout couch. “Here’s your dining area, luxury appointed living room and master suite.”

“What, no wine cellar or humidor? Not even a lap pool?” Eddy said in a sharpened tone.

Brackett looked sideways, scowling, and then continued: “And that’s where ya do your business,” nodding toward the bathroom.

“Sweet, my favorite color, concrete-gray. Adds a nice cozy touch. The perfect pick-me-up for that dreary winter’s day or perhaps for that once in a lifetime event—Armageddon.”

“Are we gonna have a problem here?”

“Just want to be left alone.”

A single stem washbasin, a stand up shower and a latrine occupied the tight confines. So tight in fact, one needed to sidesaddle the toilet in order to close the door.

Eddy’s examination tracked the path of a six-inch asphalt abutment that bordered the floor. Interesting. Must collect stray urine and gray water.

The unhinged porcelain seat brought back an earlier recollection and Eddy asked, “What happened to your renter again?”

“Like I said, Carrillo fell off the john.”

With a glazed expression, Eddy stared back into the studio, at the couch. The fatal scene began to unfold before him: the obese Anthony Carrillo, needing to take a three a.m. piss, would have pushed off the hide-a-bed and lowered both feet to the ground. A

picture lamp might have been left on, casting a dull light past Dogs Playing Poker to the surface below. Perhaps feeling disoriented from a bout with tequila, the renter would struggle to navigate the shadowy path, no doubt strewn with bottles and dirty dishes. Once inside the bathroom, he'd maneuver his buttocks over the toilet with care while letting the pine door remain open. Still hung over, he might have leaned forward to rest his brow within his palms. The unhinged seat would shift, thrusting the startled Carrillo headfirst into the concrete abutment.

"You can throw the litter box away," Brackett said.

"What?" a distracted Eddy asked.

"The litter box...no use to me."

A mangy calico entered as if on cue from some off-Broadway farce. Eddy petted the patchy coat, and the feral creature responded, licking his chicken-scented hand, purring.

"What's your name?"

"Not worthy of a name." Brackett stamped out his cigarette on the back of his boot and tucked the stub into the crook of his ear. "Carrillo was never able to domesticate the thing, and if I was you, I'd leave well enough alone."

"Another outcast, huh? Welcome to the club." Eddy continued to plow his fingers along the cat's spine. "We shall dub you St. Bridget, in honor of the ordained saint of lost souls."

"Possessed by the devil, this one."

"Seems harmless enough."

"After Carrillo bounced off the concrete border," Brackett said, "he landed in the litter box. When I found him three days later, the calico was sittin' atop him, takin' a leak."

"Kind of fits...I'll keep her."

"Bad omen."