









# **THE 66 CHEVY NOVA BLUES**

**And Other Stories**

## First Edition

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Doodles: Knees Calhoon

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Printing/Binding: Fender Tucker and Jim Weiler

# **THE 66 CHEVY NOVA BLUES**

**And Other Stories**

**A Ramble House Songbook**

*by*

*Jim Weiler*



**RAMBLE HOUSE**





# **CONTENTS**

<b>Introduction: The Ramble House SongBooks</b> <b>By Fender Tucker</b>	<b>i</b>
<b>The 66 Chevy Nova Blues</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>The Cracksman with the Transposed Hands</b>	<b>39</b>
<b>The Casket of Amun Tillado</b>	<b>49</b>
<b>CD with “66 Chevy Nova Blues” Inside Back Cover &amp; “1959 Pinocchio Timex Blues”</b>	



## THE RAMBLE HOUSE SONGBOOKS

Fender Tucker, Ramble House Mojo

"It seemed like a good idea at the time." That's the spirit of Ramble House as we embark on yet another new course on our voyage to the future. No sooner had we announced the debut of the Ramble House 10-Cent Book series—#15 of which you hold in your hand—we stumbled upon a perfect candidate for the very first Ramble House Songbook. Again that thing you hold in at least one of your hands.

A songbook? A book about a song; a book inspired by a song; a book that inspires a song; all of these are songbooks, *as long as they consist of a book and a means for you to hear, in high quality, the song.* Ramble House is proud to announce the first in its brand new series of songbooks, *The 66 Chevy Nova Blues*.

But let us return to the conception of *The 66 Chevy Nova Blues* and the songbook idea. Here's how Knees Calhoon remembers it.

"Well, I was sorta su'prised w'en Jim tole me he'd been lis'nin' to mah song, *Th' 1959 Pinocchio Timex Blues*, cuz he ord'narily lissens t' that opery crap. Ennyways, a coupla days later he hands me a piece—a paper with th' words t' *Th 66 Chevy Nova Blues* on it. It looked purty good, so I sez, what-all inspired ya t' write it? Ol' Jim sez, it's obvious, ain't it? An' I sez whut. An he sez, don't th' words o' th' title sorta...

Let's break away from Knees' fascinating recollections, knowing that his song *The 1959 Pinocchio Timex Blues* inspired Jim Weiler to write *The 66 Chevy Nova Blues*. And move onto Jim Weiler himself, talking to me the day he'd mentioned listening to the Calhoon song.

"That song has the most concise and apt representation of the concept of taking one step forward and two steps back. I'm going to have to try my hand at that."

He was referring to songwriting, and the lines:

"Ah dropped seven pennies onna sidewalk,  
Reachin' in mah pocket fo' a dime."

So I had the words to a song written by Jim Weiler and inspired by a Knees Calhoon song. I was sitting on a gold mine! I got Knees to sit down in his four-track studio and record the first melody and chords that came to his mind after reading the words. He had just bought a new effects box that had one sound that he really liked, a sort of strangled distortion that oscillated with a rhythm of its own. He used a two-string *Honky-Tonk*-like bass riff on the guitar on top of a standard straight 4-4 rhythm section provided by a Yamaha keyboard. The song is a typical 12-bar blues in E.

That was tracks one and two.

Then he sang the lyrics, using the most obvious melody he could think of that fit on top of the background music. The phrasing was sketchy in parts, mainly because he read the line wrong, and halfway through had to make up for it by stretching out the

lyric, or squeezing in some extra syllables. The only departure from the obvious melody is the turnaround right before the beginning of each new verse, where he sang an Elvis-like lick that Mick Jagger used a lot in the early days. It was cool back then.

That was track three. We were fifteen minutes into the recording session.

Then Knees, with a practice round under his belt, sang the song again on track four. This time he nailed the melody and phrasing just about 90% of the time, improving on at least a dozen "errors" in the first take.

Both singing tracks were recorded with the same parameters and sounded alike so I decided on pursuing the most simple and obvious mixing strategy I could—short of doing another take. I used both takes and made the first one a little quieter than the second. This causes a sort of echo effect. The weird thing is that sometimes the echo comes *before* the words it's echoing.

Knees had left a blank verse after the second verse for a guitar solo, and punched in one of his typical out-of-control efforts. The strangling oscillation seems to enhance the desperation of the notes. Later, after the song was transferred to a PC as a WAV file, I used COOL EDIT PRO to move the solo from the middle of the song to the end. I thought it interrupted the flow of the chaotic story.

Now it happened that at this time Jim and I were discovering and exploiting Harry Stephen Keeler, a mystery writer from the 30s and 40s. I had read about Keeler in Bill Pronzini's hilarious collection of "bad" passages from the pulps, *Son of Gun in Cheek*, and had become hooked on his weird books, even though I had yet to read one. I finally found some through

inter-library loans and while I had them, we scanned and OCRed them for editing into publishable shape. About six months before, Jim had perfected the technique of making quality paperback books at home with very little start-up cost. I was slowly learning how, too.

Jim had not read any Keelers before editing *The Case of the 16 Beans*. His second editing job was *The Case of the Transposed Legs*, then *Riddle of the Travelling Skull*. So at the time Jim wrote *The 66 Chevy Nova Blues*, he had read only three Keeler novels.

But he had not just read them; he had *edited* them. In the early days of Ramble House, our best OCRs (Optical Character Recognitions) of the faded old pages of the 60-year-old library copies were riddled with errors. There was enough good text to justify using the OCRed text, rather than typing in the whole book from scratch, but it meant reading every word closely and fixing every fourth or fifth one. And fixing just about all of the punctuation. Then spell-checking the document, which is a nightmare because of all of the dialect. And then printing it out, binding it, and proof-reading it again because there are always things not easily seen on the computer screen.

So Jim had read each of the three books at least three times each in the space of a couple of months. He had Keelerisms on the brain. And now he was ready to write a story in the style of Harry Stephen Keeler, and he had his plot.

Maybe that's not the way it happened exactly. It's hard to say what inspired what. They all happened at the same time. A night or so after hearing Knees Calhoon's rendition of *The 66 Chevy Nova Blues* Jim

Weiler wrote this novello. Harry Keeler called short novels “novellos”, not “novellas”, by the way.

We made a couple of reading copies of tiny book but it was essentially forgotten until early 2004 when we came up with the Ramble House 10-Cent series. It was perfect for the series so Gavin O’Keefe did up a superb tribute to the old Dell 10-Cent style as the cover art.

But as we read the finished product, we realized that having the lyrics of the song imbedded in the text of the story was simply not good enough for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Readers would want to hear the song as they read the book, rather than have to wait for payola-fed radio stations to play it. We had the technology to reproduce the song, but only on a 5-inch CD, which was not easily bundled with the small book.

That’s when I heard about business-card-size CDs. They only hold 50 megs of data, but that was plenty for the MP3 version of the song. And if we made the back cover of the book sort of fold around to make a small pouch, we had a perfect place for the small, rectangular CD to fit.

Which is how the very first Ramble House Songbook came to be. Now we have dozens of Knees Calhoon songs—as well as Jim Weiler compositions—that are ripe for Songbooking. We just have to do as Jim did and write a novello about the song. Luckily, both Knees and Jim rarely write the kinds of songs you hear on radio and TV today, songs that have a catchy hook phrase repeated ad nauseum and whose lyrics can usually be summed up in a bumper sticker: “I love you”, “Gawd is good”, “Dancing is phat”, etc. No, Knees and Jim’s songs always have a plot, and indeed, a beginning, middle and end. Just like a real story.

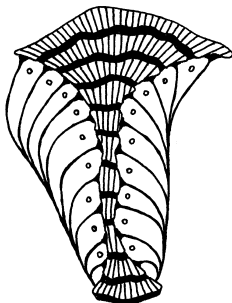
So keep your eyes open for more Ramble House

Songbooks from us. And if you have a song you have written that deserves a novello about it, send us both and you can join the pantheon of prescient professionals who are published by Ramble House.

Years ago, Richard Polt of the HSK Society suggested that the music of Raymond Scott was perfect for listening to while reading Keeler. A half dozen Scott compositions would fit on one card-sized CD. The only problem is getting the rights to using Raymond Scott's music, but that's one of those "business" problems that face Ramble House and other small publishers every day. Problems can be solved.

Stay tuned—and enjoy listening to *The 66 Chevy Nova Blues* while reading *The 66 Chevy Nova Blues*. Believe me, it's the wave of the future—at Ramble House.

At least, it seems like a good idea at this time.





# **THE 66 CHEVY NOVA BLUES**

**And Other Stories**



# The 66 Chevy Nova Blues

## I



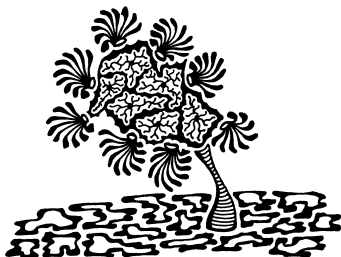
I'm innocent, I tellya! Yeah, I know everyone here sez they's innocent. But I really am! I tellya, Sylskar, it's a bum rap from the git-go.

All right, I'll tell you all about it. Nuthin' else to do for the nex' ten to twenty. You see, Sylskar, it's like this. I don't deserve to be in this joint. I'm innocent as a lamb. Not that I never done nuthin' wrong. I got a record, just like anyone else. But like they say, "If you didn't do the crime, don't do the time." If my damn lawyer'd been any good I'd a got off on a tech-nee-kallity. I was mee-ran-dized, but they never ast me if'n I understood.

Oh, come on, Sylskar. Don't tell me you don't know what mee-ran-dizing is. That means they didn't read me my rights. You know—right to be silent, right to a lawyer, right to a court ay-pointed lawyer. Hell. I had 'em on po-leece bru-tality, too. Damn cop popped me an' I hadn't done nuthin' yet.

Yeah. You're right. I'm gettin' 'way ahead of my self. Sit yerself down, Sylskar, an' I'll start at the start.

## II



It was on a hot July in Phoenix. I think it was around the eighth. The air in the valley still smelled like gunpowder from the dee-splays on the fourth. Damn smog. The air was stock still, like the whole city was stuck inside a big, closed box. No breeze. Not a puff of wind. Only time you felt the air move was when a car went past you. They say there was a in-version over the valley an' the air was trapped, sorta sloshing back an' forth between the south mountains and Camelback.

Camelback Mountain, ya dummy. Sticks up outta the middle of Phoenix like the keel of a capsized yacht. The rich folks live north of it. Us dumb slobs live to the south. Under the in-version. It musta been a hundred an' twenty all that week. The roads was startin' to melt at the intersections. All the white lines at the pedestrian crosswalks was pulled back a couple feet by the tires acceleratin' across'n 'em. Every summer, every crosswalk gets pulled back into the shape of a buncha big cent-signs, an' every winter the city of

Phoenix repaints 'em. If they had any brains they'da used inlaid brickwork or concrete 'steada layin' down paint. I wrote an' offered to inlay all the main intersections for 'em. Reasonable rates, too. They never even answered. Damn morons. Ree-tards. Anyways, it was like the roads was made outa Silly Putty, Sylskar, they was so hot. An' when the roads melt an' the air stinks an' it's so damn hot it's like livin' in a oven, you just know that tempers is gonna be steamin' up and approachin' the percolatin' point.

Well, Sylskar, these here is important dee-tails. You ain't gonna understand what went down if you don't get a grasp of the big picture first. I'm what you call settin' the stage. Besides, what's yer hurry, lifer?

All right. Sorry, Sylskar. Didn't mean nuthin' by it. You just got me rankled, that's all.

So, it's hot, y'unnerstand? An' the whole stinkin' town stinks. An tempers is flarin' up all over the place. An' I ain't a happy camper, neither. My Nova's been gettin' horrible mileage. The lest I drove it the worst it got. Sometimes only four or five miles to the gallon. An' I'd been gettin' thirteen just a little while before. So I takes it to his garage an' I tells Rick, "It's been runnin' great, but the gas mileage gets worser and worser. Was fine this spring, but when it started getting hot—"

Rick Jacobs. He's my mechanic. Works down at the Exxon at Camelback and, what, Twelvth? Somewhere 'round there. He keeps my '66 Nova an' a few classic Mustangs running cherry for his buddies. Works on 'em at home in his garage in the mornings. Rick's got a real attitude about the heat. Always sez sumpin' like "I ain't a-gonna work on yer car in the evening. Too

damn hot. Plus, I ain't a-gonna work on it at night. I gotta *sleep* ya know. I got a *job*. No. Bring it 'round tonight, I'll look at it at dawn tomorrer when the air's still cool and when yer car's had a chanct to cool off. Tell a lot about a car by how it runs when it ain't warmed up." Got a real attitude, that Rick. Always mouthing off about someth—

Right. Whadda *you* care. So I takes the car to Rick an' the nex' day he looks at the motor, an' fiddles with the carb, an' plays around with the wires an' hoses an' gas lines for a while. Lissens to it run. Finally he slams down the hood, wipes the grease from his palms onto the fronts of his pantslegs, leans his butt up against the grill an' sez to me, "Ain't nuthin' wrong with this en-jine. She oughta be gettin' sixteen, eighteen, twenty-two to the gallon." Always calls motors "she." Never cars, though. "It's just a machine," he sez. "A way to get from one place to t'other."

An I sez to Rick, "Gitcher damn butt off'n the hood, Rick. I just waxed it. Don't need yer damn greasy buttprint as a hood ornament." He kinda sees my point an' shifts forward an' down and rests his butt on the front bumper. Well, chrome cleans up easy, I figure. No sweat. "I know it's runnin' great. Any idjit with ears can tell that. What I wanna know is why it's only gettin' five mile to the gallon."

"Well, it ain't the en-jine," Rick sez. Never calls 'em motors. Always en-jine. Like a railroad en-jine. Or a jet en-jine. Guess it makes him feel important or somethin'. "Maybe you got a leak."

"Yeah, *may-be*," I sez. "Now quit yer hy-pothy-sizin' an' find it."

I can tell this makes Rick mad. He loves to say things is "hy-po-thetty-cal" when he's tryin' to fix yer

car. But he don't like to be ragged about his hi-falutin' speechifyin'. He stands up an' puts his butt square on the hood again. Then he looks me square in the eye, spits a bit of chaw in the powdery brown dust on the concrete floor and walks out into the morning sun. He puts all his fingers in his back pockets, looks off at the sun rising over Scottsdale, arches his back 'way back, shuts his eyes and breathes deep once or twice. I know better'n to rile Rick when he's meddy-tatin, so I cools my heels, watchin' that chaw ee-vaperate. Didn't take but a minute an' it was nuthin' but a dry brown crater in the dry brown dust.

Pretty soon Rick saunters back into the garage, all casual-like. "Let's find that leak," he sez, all cheery-eyed, like nuthin' was ever wrong. Rick never stays mad long. Not like me. I get riled, I'll keep poundin' on ya 'til they pull me off. Not Rick, though. Never seen him so much as plug someone.

He walks around to the front of the car and pops the hood, stepping in the crater on the way. "Wonder if he reelizes he jest walked in his own spit," I remember thinkin' to myself. Course it's a hot July mornin'. The spit's already dry an' he don't get none of the chaw on his shoe. Rick reaches into his pants pocket an' comes out with a rusty old Trim Trio. He pops out the blade, an' reachin' down the side of the motor he cuts my gas line up at the gas pump. Then he slips in a tee with some kinder zerk on it, an' hooks it up to somethin' like a bicycle tire pump. Rick pumps on the hand pump a few times, 'til it starts to resist, an' then lays it on th' air cleaner. "Now you take this an' give it a pump when I holler out," he sez. An' he walks over to th' wall, takes down his monkey roller an' gives it a skoot t'wards my Nova with his foot.

Then he grabs a paintbrush hangin' on th' wall an' bends down an' brushes all the dust off'n his monkey roller. Rick's real fas-tidjuss like that. Piles of dust an' dirt everywhere, clothes all greasy and startin' to stink in the risin' heat. But he brushes off his monkey caddy like it was home plate an' he was head umpire at the World Series. Then he squats down—his knees snap like a coupla dry twigs—an' he lays hisself down an' rolls under the back of the car. "All right, give 'er a pump," he shouts. I pumps the handle a few times. Then Rick shouts, all disgusted-like, "Enough already! Geez. I found yer leak."

So I puts down the pump an' walks 'round the back of the car. Rick has slid out from under an' holds up his hand for a lift. With his bad knees it's even harder for him to get up than it is to get down. But I ain't forthcomin' with a hitch-up. Rick's all covered with gasoline, from his face to his belt, anyhow. Now I ain't fas-tidjuss like Rick is, but I got this thing about gettin' gas on my skin. They say it causes cancer in labbatory rats, but that ain't it. I jes don' like the smell. Won't even put my nose close ter it. Ever eat a Jumbo Jack with gas on yer hands? No, course not. Hell, it's like lickin' a parkin' lot. Y'know—that greasy, gassy spot that forms where the motors drip. So I sez t' Rick. "Look atcha! You can jest hitch *yerself* up. I ain't a-gettin' gas all over me. Phee-yoo!"

And Rick *does* look at hisself. Palms an' backs of his hands, both arms, an' he pulls at the front of his t-shirt t' get a better look at it, like. Then he grabs one of them red auto-mechanic rags out'n his front pants pocket an' wipes the gas off'n jest his left hand. He holds it out t' me again an' says "Better?"



I grunt, non-committal-like. He still smells like the blow-off from a gas tank when you open the cap on a hot day, but I reckon there's not so much gas left on that one hand. "What the hell," I sez, an' give him a boost.

Rick slaps his thighs a coupla times to get the dust off'n his pants. Course they ain't no dust on 'em. He warn't never in the dust on the floor. Jest bein' fastidjuss again. "Well," he sez, "I found yer leak. It's a common problem in Novas. You got a hole in the bottom of yer gas tank."

"So how come all the gas don't jest dribble out?" I sez.

"It's a pinhole," Rick sez. "It only dribbles when they's pressure behin' it."

"Jest now's only time I ever pressurized my gas tank," I sez.

Rick get's all superior, like. "Do you hear a 'whoosh' when you open yer gas cap t' fill the tank?" he sez.

"Yeah," I sez.

"Is it whooshin' in or whooshin' out?" he sez.

"How the hell should I know?" I sez. "A whoosh is a whoosh."

"Do you smell gas when it whooshes?" he sez.

All this questionin' is gettin' irritatin. "Hell yes," I sez. "I only take the gas cap off when I'm at a gas station. I hope to shout I smell gas."

This puffs Rick up even more. "No," he sez, "I mean do you smell gas comin' from yer gas tank?"

"Hell no!" I sez. "I don't put my nose nowhere near my gas cap."

"Well," Rick sez, "nex' few times you fill up, pay attention. You should notice a strong o-dor of gasoline

jest as you unscrews yer cap. The va-per pressure of the gasoline builds up—"

"Hell with that," I sez. "Just fix the hole. I ain't run over nuthin'. What you reckon coulda punched a pinhole in my tank?"

"Nuthin'," he sez.

I jest looks at him for a while, scowlin' deeper and deeper. "Hell," I sez. "*Somethin'* punched a hole in it. Holes don't jest grow themselves in Arizona. *Nuthin'* rusts here, 'specially cars."

"No, really," Rick sez, slippin' into his o-ratin' voice. I can tell there's gonna be one hum-dinger of a explanation comin' up an' they ain't nuthin' I c'n do t' stop it, so I pushes some greasy bolts off'n the corner of a desk and plants myself there t' wait it out.

"Like I was sayin'," he sez, "it's largely a matter of va-per pressure an' metal fatigue. An' when you adds in the co-ee-fficient of ex-pansion for gasoline it's surprisin' more gas tanks don't dee-velop holes in 'em.

"Y'see, yer gas tank's a lot like a water b'loon, an' gas is a lot like water. . ."

"My gas tank don't stretch none," I sez.

Rick blinks an' looks at me. "Yes, a poor ay-nalogy," he sez, still usin' his lecture voice. "It would be more apt to say your tank is like a half-drunk bottle of Diet Coke."

"More apt," I think to myself. "Geez, Rick's goin' off the deep end this time." But I keep quiet. The less I say the quicker this'll be over with.

"Yes," he sez. "Not a old glass-bottle Coke. One of them new ree-cyclable plastic bottles. A old half-drunk bottle of Coke that's been rollin' around on the floor of yer car for weeks." I c'n see he's real happy with this idea. "All the fizz is long gone, but every afternoon,

when the heat of the sun warms up the old Coke, the bottle plumps up like it's gonna 'splode. An' every mornin' when you look at it it's half-crumpled an' smashed like you sucked all th' air out'n it. But you ain't touched that bottle in weeks. Whatever's goin' on in that bottle's happenin' 'thout no help from you.

"In fact, it's the sun an' the Coke what's doin' all th' work. When the Coke gets hot in the sun, a part of it e-vaperates an' blows that bottle up like a b'loon. An' at night, when it cools back down, that same part condenses back to a liquid, jes like dew. So the vol-yoom of gas in the bottle is always a-changin' an' the pressure of th' at-mo-sphere on th' outside an' the pressure of the Coke-gas on th' inside takes turns crunchin' that bottle down an' puffin' it back out. If'n you was in yer car at jest th' right time you'd hear a loud 'POP' ever time the pressure in the bottle got greater'n the pressure outsid'n it."

An' I *do* hear that pop, too. Ever time it happens I like t' have a accident right then an' there. An' then I starts t' wonderin' what it was I hit t' make such a whackin' big bang, an' I checks my windshield fer a new gravel ding. Then it happens again an' I c'n see it's my empty Coke bottles poppin' in the sun. Guess I shouldn't oughta put the caps back on, but I don't wanna lose 'em. Nuthin' beats a old Coke bottle fer emergency canteens. They's jest about unbreakable. I'm sorta surprised. Fer once one of Rick's explanations is makin' sense.

"All right," I sez. "So my gas tank's blowin' up an' shrinkin' down like a damn water b'loon. What punched the hole in it?"

"Nuthin'," Rick sez. I c'n see I'm gonna hafta sit through the whole explanation.

"Y'see," he sez, "the hole in yer gas tank is caused by metal fatigue. It's like you took a beer can an' bent it back an' forth an' back an' forth a dozen or so times. Evench'ly the side of the can splits open an' whatever beer's left in it comes dribblin' out on yer lap. The daily expandin' an' con-tractin' of yer gas tank has wore a hole in it, jest as sure as if you'da been bendin' the metal with yer own hands."

I didn't get it. "Show me," I sez.

So Rick plops down on his monkey sled again an' slides under the back of the Nova. "C'mon down here," he yells out. Now, I don't cotton to gettin' my clothes all soiled up, but they ain't really any grease spots on the floor of Rick's garage, so I lays down and scoots under the car with Rick. My belt acts like a scoop an' fills my shorts with sand as I scoot under. "Dammit," I mutter t' myself, "That's gonna turn inta mud when I starts t' sweat."

Rick points to a dry crease in the bottom of the tank. "See? Right here," he sez.

"I don't see nuthin' but a crease," I sez. "Show me the hole."

So Rick reaches up with his Trim Trio, the nail-file stickin' out, an' pokes an' scrapes along the crease-line. In a second er so he finds th' leak an' the tip of the nail-file pokes into the gas tank. "Right there," he sez, an' he pulls it back out.

Right away the gas starts drippin' on his shirt, so Rick reaches up an' stops the hole with the tip of his finger. He reaches fer his tools with his left hand, but it's 'way outa his reach. "Go get me my toolbox," he sez, pointin' at it. "Now I gotta make a patch."

I scoots back out from under the car an' walks 'round to the tool box. With the tip of my boot I scoots

it back of the back wheel t' where Rick c'n reach it. 'Thout even lookin' in it, he feels around an' pulls out a little screw about a quarter of an inch long. Then he feels around for a few seconds an' comes out with a little, tiny gasket, 'bout as big around as a cigarette. Still usin' jest his left hand, he sticks the screw through the gasket. Then he grabs a screwdriver, an' balancin' the screw on the tip, he lines it up to the tip of his index finger, that he's still usin' to hold back the gas.

Then real quick like, he slides his finger off'n th' hole an' pokes th' tip of the screw in. Gives it a couple twists an' th' hole's patched, jes' like that!

"Yer gonna hafta leave yer car with me fer at least three days," he sez. "C'n I give yer a ride somewheres?"

I ain't speechless often. Maybe you c'n tell. But right then I'm what you call 'dumb-founded.' Here Rick had jest patched that there hole right before my eyes an' now he's tellin' me I gotta leave the car. I figger he's jokin'. Finally I sez, "Yeah. C'n y'give me a lift t' th' Rolls dealership? I gotta pick me up some new wheels." He slides out from under the tank an' looks up at me like he doesn't get it an' I starts t' get th' idea that he's serious.

"Waddaya mean I gotta leave it here?" I sez. "You jest fixed the damn hole."

"No I didn't," he sez.

"Yes you did," I sez. "I seen you put a screw in it an' stop the leak."

"Zactly," he sez. "I stopped the leak. But I didn't repair the hole. The screw's just a stopgap. Now I have to drain the tank, dry out all the gas, remove it, weld the hole an' put it all back together. Take 'til Friday at least."

"Hell with that!" I sez. "Jack it up an' weld it now."

"I touch a spark to that tank an' the whole car'll burn up, an' me right along with it," Rick sez.

"Then I'll drive it like it is now," I sez. Rick frowns.

"The screw'll jest fall out an' you'll lose all yer gas," he sez.

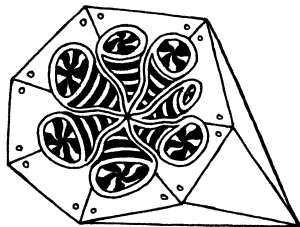
"How 'bout puttin' some Loc-tite on it?" I asks. "Or maybe Super Glue?"

"Might last a day or two," he sez, still frownin'. "Bring it back 'sweekend an' I'll fix it proper." He grabs a bottle of Loc-tite from his tool-kit an' rolls back under the car. "Don't 'spect this t' hold fer more than a coupla days," he shouts.

"Yeah, thanks," I sez. I give him a hand up off the floor an' we goes into the kitchen f'r a coupla beers. Already it's a hot one, an' it ain't but eight AM.

That's "lights out," Sylskar. I'll tellya th' rest t'morrow. G'night.

### III



Damn prison eggs always taste like rubber. I swear they poach 'em in the same pan they use to change oil with.

So you like 'em, eh, Sylskar? Well, I guess enough katsup'll cover the taste of anything. I'll give it a try t'morrow.

Yeah, that's right. I was tellin' you how I got in here. Where'd I leave off?

Right. So we each drinks a coupla beers an' watches the tube an' shoots the breeze for a while, an' pretty soon the whole day's shot an' it's time f'r Rick to go to work at the station. So I goes out t' start my car an' it cranks over once, "Rurrr..." an' then jes' sits there with the starter motor clatterin' like a set of chatterin' teeth like you can buy at the toy store.

See, the battery, it's got a dead cell, an if'n I don't start it three, four times a day it don't keep enough juice in it to crank over. So I goes back in the house an finds Rick in the john takin' a piss. All that beer. Well, when I see him pissin', then I gotta piss, too, so I

traipses around some holdin' it in 'til he's done an' then I step in an' drain out some beer, too.

I don't know 'bout you, but I always lose my train of thought during a good, long beer piss. Feels so good to let it out, it kinda distracts me. So by the time I flushed I'd plum f'rgot my dead battery.

So I goes back out to the car an' cranks it over again. Least I tries. This time all I gets is the clattering sound. So it's back into the house an' find Rick again. "Hey Rick," I sez. "Need a jump."

"Geeze! When you gonna get a new battery?" he sez. But he brings his pickup up the drive an' hooks me up to his jumper cables, just the same. We let it charge for fifteen, twenty minutes an' we go into the kitchen f'r another beer. Still hot as Hell outside, an' we're both sweatin' just from standin' in the garage f'r a minute.

Rick finishes his beer real quick an' goes back outside to try to start the Nova. I sips mine a little slower. Pretty soon I hears the Nova fire up in the garage. Rick leaves it running an' comes back into the kitchen. "Gotta go. Gonna be late," he sez, hintin' that I oughta be leavin. I'm done with my beer by this time, an' I been bending th' can back an' forth an' back an' forth a few dozen times. Pretty soon a little hole cracks in th' side an' the last of the beer dribbles out all over my lap. Looks like Rick was right.

"Yeah, comin'," I sez, an' pitch th' empty beer in the trash.

So I drives the Nova home an' takes a look under the tank. Screw's holdin' jest fine, but Rick usually knows what he's talkin' about. Just to be safe, I slaps a square of duck tape over the screw, too. That'll hold it fer sure.



An' it *does*, too. The leak stops an' I'm getting' fourteen, fifteen t' the gallon again, so I forgets all about it.

Well, I drives it this way all summer an' never so much as think about the leak again, until one afternoon in S'tember. I pulls into a Exxon station with the needle bumpin' empty an' goes t' fill 'er up with reg'lar.

Well, I stands there pumpin' an' pumpin' an' I never seems to get nowheres. An' the whole time the pump handle's poppin' an' jumpin' an' kickin' like a ro-day-o bull with a cinch strap creepin up on his privates. Five minutes I stands there pumpin' an I ain't even pumped a gallon yet. So I leaves the pump hangin' in my gas-hole—they ain't no lock on the handle, so it stops pumpin' when I lets go. An I walks on into the store to talk to th' attendant. Well, he's jest a pimple-nosed kid. Prob'ly don't know nuthin' 'bout the pumps, but I asks anyways, "What's with the pumps, kid?" I sez. "They's slower'n a one-legged bullfrog an' twicet as jumpy."

Kid looks at me like I'm gonna rob the place. Eyes sorta googlin' out an' dartin' t'wards the telephone so's he can call the po-leece quick-like if'n he needs ta. "We're almost outa gas," he says. "The delivery truck was supposed to come yesterday, but there's a trucker's strike. We're gonna hafta shut down th' pump tomorrow. You're gettin' th' last of it."

I've got my head in the beer case. Feels cool, an' I could use a cool one right about now. "Dam' org'nized labor," I mutter t' myself. "Where's the Miller," I shouts at him. He points t' th' left an' I grabs myself a six-pack. On my way back to the car I plops it on the counter. "Ring this up, an' ten bucks gas," I tells him.

So I stands there at the pump for another fifteen minutes an' it's only pumped six bucks worth. "What the hell," I figger. "I got nothin' else to do." My tee is soaked, an' beads of sweat is drippin' off'n my nose an' forehead like I'm takin' a shower. Ten more minutes holdin' the pump an' it passes nine bucks. Hotter'n Hell. Not a breath of air. I'm soaked an' startin' to get thirsty, jest from pumpin' gas! Couple minutes later it passes \$9.90. It's goin' a penny at a time now. 9.91... 9.92... ... 9.93... I'm moppin' my hair with my hankie. 9.98... 9.99... At last! 10.00.

I marches back into the store an' tell the kid, "Might as well turn the pumps off now. I got yer last drop."

"Can't do that," he sez. "We still got plenty of plus an' premium."

I feel like poppin' him one right there over the counter. But I'm jes' too damn hot an' wet. The icebox-like chill inside the store jes' makes me feel clammy, not cool. I'm gonna hit the road, head home, have a shower, an' crack open a beer. This kid ain't worth the trouble.

So I hands him a twenty, gets my change and go back out to the car. I throw the beers in the passenger seat an' gives the engine a crank... An' that's all I gets. One low, groanin' crank. I crank again an' all it does is clatter. I turns off the lights and crank it again. Jest a dull clunk.

"Great!" I thinks to myself, "Now my battery's dead." I get out, pops the hood an' I marches back into the store. "Got a jump?" I ask.

"No," the kid sez. He don't elaborate none.

"Got a friend with cables?" I asks.

"No," he sez.

"Geeze," I mutter. Kid hears me.

He asks "You want me to call a tow truck?"

"Hell, no!" I sez. "I don't want to pay no sixty bucks for a jump." And I slams the door on the way out, as best I can against the spring-action closing.

There's a pay phone on the corner at the edge of the parkin' lot, so I stops at the car an' grabs a beer an' heads for the phone. But I notice a big pool of gas under the Nova when I'm gettin' the beer an' I remember thinkin' to myself, "Hell, I know I din't spill any. Was pumpin' so slow I coulda been usin' a eyedropper." So I drops down on my knees an' I looks under the car. An' there's a stream of gas jest a—pourin' out'n the gas tank. The damn duck tape's come off an' the screw's backed out an' now there's a hole the size of a pencil lead in my tank with gas streamin' out onto the pavement.

So I gets up an' I'm cussin' a mile a minute all the way to the phone. I cuss at the damn slow pump. An' I cuss at the damn Duck Tape company. An' I cuss at Rick, I ain't sure why. An' I cuss at the battery. I even cuss at myself for leavin' the lights on. By the time I gets to the phone I'm so mad I can't even dial straight. Dial three times before I get Rick at work. First time I got the country club over in Scottsdale. Second time I got a secretary at work. I was so mad I din' even ask her name. Finally Rick answers. "No I can't come right now. We're piled up a mile high." "How about after closing?" "Well, maybe in about an hour."

"Fine," I sez, an' slams down the phone. That's jes' great! There I sit in hundred degree heat with a leaky tank, a dead battery and a hour t' kill. I sits me down on the curb an' pops open my beer.

A twelve-ounce beer don't last very long if you jest finished sweatin' out a half gallon. In a minute er two I'm suckin' air gettin' the last drops. So I mosey's back over to the car an' grabs the rest of the six-pack. The puddle's startin' to spread. "Kiss *that* ten bucks goodbye," I tells myself.

Back at the curb I chug down another beer an' sips a third. I'm startin' to feel better about things. "Hell, it's jest a dead battery. A quick jump an' everything's back to normal," I tell myself. The beer's taking hold. Already I've forgot about the gas leak.

It's dark, an' I gots me a wait, an' I'm feelin' pretty mellow, so I decides t' have myself a smoke. I digs into my pants pocket an' comes out with a bag of sinsemilla. "Mexican name," I thinks t' myself. "*Sin*, for without, and *semilla* for semen. Without the male seed. Primo stuff..." When I've had a few I swear I start t' sound just like Rick. I rolls one, lights it up an' takes a deep drag.

While I'm tokin' away I finish off the six-pack. Still sweatin' like a pig there on the curb, but it don't seem to bother me no more. I heads back into the store an' buy a handful of moon pies. "Sure I cain't call you a truck?" the kid sez. I jes' scowls an' leaves.

I plops myself back down on the curb an' finishes the moon pies. Still no sign of Rick. Then I try t' remember why I was waitin' for him. Not a clue. So I steps back to the car an' gives the engine a crank. Well, really I jest turns the key. Nuthin' happens. Now it comes back to me. I'm waitin fer a ride. So I walks back to the curb and sits there in the heat. By and by I gets me a hankerin' fer another drag, so I rolls one an' lights up. I takes a big hit an' gives the match the

heave-ho. An' it lands in a puddle an' "Whoof!" a big red gas flame bursts up at my feet.

"Whoah!" I sez, an' jumps up an' back. An I watches, fascinated, as a line of fire shoots across the parkin' lot t'wards my Nova. Most beautiful thing I ever seen.

Don't take but a second or two an' almost all the flames is out. Ain't like the movies where the littlest spark sets off a huge explosion. Th' only place still burnin' was under my Nova where the gas was still a-streamin' out. I sat there an' watched it. There's nuthin' quite so beautiful as the glorious red of a big gas flame.

Well, as I sits there, the gas is comin' out of the tank faster 'n faster. Rick tells me it's cuz the pressure was a-buildin' up with the heat. Finally, there's a big "whump" sound an' the car lifts up off the ground like there's a crane attached. When it comes back down it hits the pumps an' somethin' ruptures an' there's the most god-awful 'splosion you ever seen. An' here I am on the curb, not fifty feet away, watchin' it.

Well, a wave of yellow flame about a mile high smacks right into me. I thought it was hot before, but I suddenly realize, Phoenix ain't Hell after all.

When I sits back up after a few seconds an' takes stock I find out my beard is gone, an' my eyebrows, an' all the hair on the tops of my arms. An' the front of all my clothes is singed brown, an' my cap's been blowed off, an' on top of my head all the hair front of my ears is gone. An' my nose an my forehead feels like someone's been at it with coarse grit sandpaper, an' there's blisters up an' down the backs of all my fingers. An' I sits there thinkin' that this was jes' about the coolest thing I ever seen, an I wonder if there's

any more moon pies. So I looks at the store, an all the windows is blown out, an' the kid is crouched down ahind the counter talkin' to someone on the phone. I decide this ain't the best time t' buy more snacks. So I sits back an' I watches the big red flames jest a-shootin' into the sky.

Well, it don't seem like but a minute an' there's fire trucks all around jest a sprayin' foam on ever'thin', an' the fire ain't so interestin' no more, so I decides to leave. But there's this persistent cop, an' he keeps leanin' in real close an' askin' me have I been drinkin' an what've I been smokin' an' how I reckoned this fire got started. An' by an' by it occurs t' me that he don't know that I started the fire myself, an' I might be able to get some sorta insurance settlement outa this deal.

An the cop sticks his mug in my face again an' sez, "Kid, what happened here?"

So I tells him, I sez, "Well, officer, I really don't know. I was jest here fillin' up my new Rolls at the pumps, an' I steps over here t' call my broker. Then for no damn reason the gas catches fire an' the whole damn station blows."

The cop looks at me sorta crooked-like, outa the side of his face. I don't think he b'lieves me. He's lookin' me up an' down like I'm a high-priced 'hore an' he don't think I'm worth mor'n twenny bucks. An' it comes t' me that he's lookin' at my clothes. Even if'n they wasn't burned up, they's jest a greasy tee-shirt an' Levis. I reckon he don't b'lieve I'm the type t' be drivin' a Rolls. "Jest what the hell have you been smokin?" he sez.

I decides to give the Rolls thing one more try, so I sez, all snooty-like, "I'm sure I've no ideer *what* you mean, officer."

An' he gets all authority-figure-like on me an' sez, "Now, don't get smart, kid, or I'm gonna hafta take you in," an' reaches t'ward his belt.

I figure I'm gonna catch it now whatever I do, so I sez somethin' like "Really, officer, force will not be necessary," or maybe I was jest thinkin' that an' said "Oh, yeah?" I 'member reachin' fer his arm to try'n stop him whackin' me with his night-stick, an' him sayin' "Yeah, you bet."

Nex' thing I knows I'm sittin' on the curb again an' it feels like my jaw's been broke. I looks up an' the cop's rubbin' his knuckles. There's blood on what looks like a class ring. "Is there gonna be any more trouble?" the cop sez.

"Yeah, you bet," I sez, sarcastic-like, grinnin' an' spittin' blood. I starts t' get up an' I think the cop sez "Stay down," but I ain't really lissenin'. I'm sorta groggy from the punch in the chin. Then all a sudden it feels like I been blind-sided by a linebackin' elephant an' I drops like a rock. When the blackness clears I see the cop standin' there with his shock-box in his hand. I looks down an' there's two new little burn-spots in the front of my tee shirt.

I'm really wobbly now, but I tries t' get up anyways. I makes it t' my knees. My hearin's comin' an' goin' like a bad-tuned FM station an' I hears him sayin', louder an' louder, "Stay down!" I can tell by the way he's standin' that the cop's gonna zap me again.

So I reaches out at him an' sez, "Hey, man, don't zap me no more." An he grins an' sez, "I don't think so, kid," an' gets set t' zap me in the chest again.

Well, all a sudden I'm not groggy no more, an' I jumps up an' smacks the zap-gun out'n his hand. Then I spins him around an' gets my arm around his neck

an' wrestle's him to the concrete, puttin' him face down in the dregs of the foam they used to put out the gas fire. But he jest gets pissed off an' jabs me in the groin a couple times with his night-stuck. Jest like that the fight's over. I lay there in the parkin' lot writhin' in the foam while the cop picks himself up, sorta brushes off, an then wrenches my arms behind my back.

He ratchets the cuffs one or two notches tighter'n he needs to an' then usin' jest one arm he yanks me standin' an' starts with the "You have the right..." stuff. Now I'm glad he poked me with the night stick. If we'd a kept fightin' this gorilla coulda ripped my arms out an' wouldna even been breathin' hard. Nobody never called me "Tiny", but this guy coulda got away with it. He leans me up against his cruiser an' pats me down, an' sez, "Arson, resistin' arrest, assault... Kid, you're goin' down for a *long* time."

"Yeah, you bet," I sez again, still bein' sarcastic. But I don't feel no confidence as I mutter, "You'll never make it stick."

Then the cop pushes down on my head an' "guides" me into the back seat. "Watch yer head," he sez, like I had any control over where he was puttin' me. I tell ya, Sylskar, this guy makes even you look puny.

Only about two-forty, but it was all rock—muscle and gristle. Y'ever read any Doc Savage?

Sorry, forgot you couldn't read. Doc Savage is this crazy science guy who runs down criminals an' lo-botomizes 'em to make 'em toe the line.

No, man. He's not *real*! It's just a book. But in the book Doc does this mondo-workout every day an' it makes him hard as steel. 'Cept for the hair this cop coulda been Doc Savage, or maybe Monk.



No. Not a monkey. One of Doc's friends—built like a gorilla, strong as a ox. A real thug-type. I'll read you *The Man Who Shook the Earth* next week. I seen it in the library last time I was there.

Where was I?

Hell. Lights out already? I'll tell you more in the morning.

#### IV



Well, you were right about the ketsup, Sylskar. Couldn't hardly taste the eggs at all. Now, where'd I leave off?

The Doctor? What doctor? Warn't no doctor involved in my bein' here, cep'n at the station when they first took me in. Looked at my head an' arms an' said the burns was all "soo-perfishel" an' din't need no treatment.

The *monkey* doctor! Sylskar, you're plum nuts.

I'm tellin' you, Sylskar, there warn't no big monkey doctor who was so heavy you could feel the ground shake when he walked. Hell, I was tellin' you about th' arrest, not Jack the Giant Killer.

The brain doctor? I didn't pleat insanity. Oh, yeah. I remember now. I was tellin' you 'bout this gorilla of a cop an' how he coulda been Doc Savage. Remind me tomorrow an' I'll get that book from the library.

So the cop, he crams me into the back seat, talks to the firemen for a minute while they's rollin' up their hoses, an' then he goes into the wrecked store an'

buys a bag of wieners. Kid's got the electric back on inside an' he's sweepin' out the broke glass like his station 'splodes every day. Some people you jes' can't rattle. As we drive to the station house the cop eats them wieners one after another, two bites to a dog.

No, they wasn't Oscar Meyers. They was turkey wieners. Louis Rich, I think. Ate 'em cold, like pop-sicles.

So we gets to the station, an' he drags me outa the car an' up the front steps an' inside of five minutes I'm coolin' my heels in the lock-up.

Well I knows better'n t' call the old lady. She couldn't make my bail nohow. So I calls Pat Albertson, that late-night TV commercial shyster lawyer. An' I tells him about how I'm in jail 'cause of a pure accident the likes of what coulda happened to anybody. An' he hems an' haws fer awhile 'bout him not bein' a trial lawyer, an' I keeps tellin' him this ain't gonna be no trial, jest a damn "miscarriage of justice" an' all a sudden he gits this great idear. He'll take the criminal case, an' if'n he wins it he'll turn right aroun' an' sue the cops fer "wrongful arrest." An' here's the beauty part. If'n he loses he *still* sues 'em fer violatin my civil rights. He sez he'll git me a cool million easy. He'll even defend the criminal trial fer free, long's I give him forty percents of the pro-ceeds of the civil case that'll foller on its heels.

Well I sez, "What about me? If'n you lose the case I wind up in the hoosgow. What'm I gonna do with a million smackers in the joint?"

'N' he sez, "That's the best part of all. If'n you loses the criminal case we takes the pro-ceeds from the civil case an' pumps 'em back into yer criminal appeal."

Now, I don't rightly see how I come out ahead in that case, but a million bucks is a helluva lot of cash so I sez to him, "Yer on," an settles back to wait fer my hearin', 'spectin' I'd be out on bail by mornin'.

Well, my case comes up in night court that night an' they march me into the courtroom an' who d'yer s'pose is at the bench but Judge William B. Abernathy. Same guy as sent me up the river once before on a B&E. An' he looks at me, an' down at the po-leece report, an' back at me, an' over at that shyster Albertson an' then the bailiff calls the room t' order an' the judge he sez, "I'm gonna dispense with the regularities of this here case. What we gots here is a re-peat offender who lit up the biggest fire Phoenix's seen in twenty years. Because of the seriousness of the crime I'm gonna deny bail. Bailiff, escort the prisoner to county lockup."

An' that's that. Pat Albertson tries to make a objection, but Abernathy jes' glares him down. I grabs Albertson's collar an' starts to make a fuss about his promise of me bein' out on bail. He jes' smiles his weasley shyster smile an' sez, "Three million easy. Wrongful imprisonment."

That shuts me up. I c'n handle a few days in county lockup with that kind of carrot danglin' in front of my nose.

While I'm a-thinkin' 'bout that three million I hear the judge say sumthin' 'bout "ree-manded to custody", an' "court date will be set at November 12", but I wa'n' really listenin'. The prospect of all that money had me in another world already.

Well, that one night in County turns into a week, then two, then a month. An' it finally occurs to me that I ain't gettin out on bail, an' I gets really pissed at that

Pat Albertson fer gettin' me into this situation. So the nex' day I calls him an' starts readin' him th' riot act. He jes' lets me rant at him fer a minute or two, an' when I stops fer breath he sez, "Three *million* bucks." An' that shets me right up. Three million bucks is a *par'ful* lot of dough.

Well, Sylskar, I won't bore you with the dee-tails of the trial. It came down t' one simple fact. Fires don't start themselves an' I was th' only one there. Never mind that it was a accident. The damn jury convicted me in unner ten minutes.

"We'll turn it around on the appeal," Albertson sez as they haul me away. "A cool five million, easy."

But it ain't turned around. That shyster Albertson tries to appeal my conviction time after time an' every time he appeals it he calls me up nex' day an' sez, "The appeal was denied. We'll have to try again."

Well that went on fer 'bout a year until one day I gets a visit from Albertson. An' there he sits lookin me straight in the face an' tellin' me they ain't no more appeals. Well, it's a good thing fer him there was a sheet of re-inforced glass 'tween us, cuz I'd of tore his head off'n his shoulders right then an' there otherwise. As it is, the guards had to slug me an' drag me back to my cell.

An' here I sits still.

Y'know, Sylskar, me and Chuckie Manson we got a lot in common. I'm a songwriter, too. I put this whole episode to music. I call it *The 66 Chevy Nova Blues*. Wanna hear it?

Oh, come on. It won't hurt ya. It's only a couple minutes long. Here. I'll get out my geetar. Here goes.

I spill out a gallon of reg'lar  
Fillin' up my Nova at the pump.  
Got me an old dead battery.  
Now I'm just waitin' for a jump.  
So I roll me up some sensemilla  
Just to pass the time away.  
I light up with a match from my pocket  
And steps up to the winder to play.  
Well I drop that match and it lands in the gas  
And the whole damn station blows up.  
The fire engines come and they put out the fire  
And then I'm talkin' to a cop.

He asks "What happened?" and I tell him  
"Don't know—I was just here fillin' up my Rolls.  
When for no damn reason the gas catches fire and  
The whole damn station blows."  
Now I don't think he believes me, 'cause I'm greasy  
And I'm dressed in blue jeans.  
He asks me what I've been smokin' and I ask him  
Just what he means?  
And he says "Now don't get smart, kid,  
Or I'm gonna have to take you in."  
And I ask "Oh yeah?" and he says "You bet."  
And he belts me smack on the chin.

I drop like a sack of potatos  
And I lay there lookin' up at th' cop.  
And he reaches out with his taser  
And zaps me—so I ask him t' stop.  
He laughs and says "I don't think so, kid,"  
And reaches out t' shock me some more.  
So I jump up and get him in a headlock  
And smash his face t' the floor.  
That just makes him pissed so he pulls out his stick  
And pokes me once or twice in th' groin.  
Then he slaps on the cuffs and reads me my rights  
And asks, "Kid, you know where you're goin'?"

*The 66 Chevy Nova Blues*

And I say "Yeah, I know. But you'll never make it stick."

And *he* says, "Now, watch your head."  
But they *do* make it stick, and the judge  
says twenty years

And now I wish I was dead.

That damn old 66 blue Chevy Nova  
Was just more trouble than I need.

I shoulda fixed the leaky gas tank.

I shouldna lit me up that weed.

I guess I just wasn't thinkin'

'Cause the sign said "No smoking here."

But to go t' jail 'cause I didn't read the sign  
Well it jus' don't seem quite fair.

So I sit behind bars and I watch TV

And I wait for my sentence t' end.

And if I stay out of trouble and act real good  
I'll only do five or ten.

But they won't let me have no matches here

And I can't get my hands on no pot.

When you're in a Federal prison for arson

You just got t' sit and rot.

But man! that blaze was a beauty!

I think I'd like t' see it again

So I'm learning all I can about 'splosives

In the library here in th' pen.

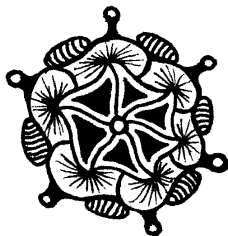
Sylskar! Ya liss'nin', man?







# THE CRACKSMAN WITH THE TRANPOSED HANDS



## Chapter I

Depressed and despondent, Habberton Singlebody looked out the hospital window at the dregs of another dreary, gray January day in Chicago, then down in dismay at his hands. Why in the Six Hells of Sumatra had he gone ahead with his decision to have his left hand attached to the right arm and the right to the left vice-versa-wise? When he tried to make a fist, his hand opened. Painlessly, correctly, but exactly the reverse of—*how in the Third Hell of Heliopolis am I going to read a book or wipe my butt?* he thought.

"How are we doing this morning, Mr. Singlebody?" A perky blonde nurse who Habberton definitely did not recognize—there could be no forgetting that angel face!—sashayed into the room and checked his chart. "Ready for your physical therapy?"

"Still can't make a fist without concentrating on it," he replied, his funk forgotten in the presence of perfection. "Are you new?" *Geeze, what a lame line! There go my chances with her.*

"Everybody's new here, Mr. Singlebody. *The Chicago Center for Frivolous Elective Surgery* has only been open for business for 45 days. I'm Miss Pfaar. I've been working in the west wing for the last month—helping the mouth widenings adjust to their lip grafts. Let's see how our bones are mending, shall we?"

Sweet, petite Loreli Pfaar leaned over the bed. Habberton Singlebody smelled Ivory soap and Johnson's baby powder—his mother had always smelled like that. Nurse Pfaar grasped Habberton's right—or was it the left?—hand with both of hers and gave it a sharp, twisting tug. Cool hands and searing agony. *Strangely erotic*, he thought. *I gotta marry this girl.*

## **Chapter II**



Detective Pinckley Malone stood near the bed in Chicago General's room 303 and listened to the rhythm of the heart monitor. The doctors said their patient, a security guard for Southern Illinois Gemstone Exhibitors, definitely wasn't going to make it. The stiletto blade which three times had entered Dolfus McDermish's heart had exacted too heavy a toll on the tissues and there was no time to arrange for a transplant. He might regain consciousness, but he wouldn't last the night. So Detective Malone stood vigil, hoping to speak—however briefly!—to the sole witness of the biggest gem heist in Chicago's history—bar none!.

Six hundred million dollars worth was a lot of precious stones to keep in one place. But security had been tight: a computer-controlled setup admitted just one person—one and no more!—at a time to see the gems on display but required two to open the door. The person entering put his right hand on a right-hand-shaped sensor on the door while the guard, five feet to the right, turned the pass key. Heat and motion sensors prevented any of it from working if there were

more— or less!—than two people in the anteroom. The doorway leading to the anteroom wouldn't open to admit another as long as the gem-room door was open, which it must remain while the guest viewed the exhibit. At any hint of mischief, all the guard had to do was turn the key back and the gem-room door would close—ker-swoosh!—trapping the culprit in a room that could not be opened from the inside. Southern Illinois Gemstone Exhibitors touted it as "the most secure exhibit since the Treasures of Tut."

Yet one man had entered, overpowered the guard, single-handedly opened the gem-room door, pocketed half a billion dollars in jewels, and quietly left. It was all on tape except—as usual!—the perp's face. No alarms had gone off because both guards watching the monitors—the selfsame guards who were to have given such an alarm should foul play transpire—had already been killed in their sleep.

Security guard McDermish stirred on the bed. His eyes fluttered open. The heart monitor skipped a beat. *It's now or never*, Malone thought. *Our love can't wait. Dammit! Now that stupid song will be playing in my head all night.* "Lie still, McDermish," Malone said. "You're sliced up pretty bad. Can you tell us who did this to you?"

McDermish shook his head no. "Sss-sss-fsss," he breathed.

Malone leaned closer. "What was that? I couldn't make it out."

Rallying his strength McDermish tried again, louder, though still hissing. "Sssih... sssih... fsssssss....."

Detective Malone blinked and searched his mind for a match. "Sisyfus?" he asked.

McDermish nodded, exhaled and closed his eyes, his strength gone. The alarms on all the monitors went wild and the room filled instantly with hospital staff—leaving no space for the detective, who stepped quietly out of the way. From the hall where he stood in thought Malone heard the shouts of “code” and “clear” and finally “I’m calling it.” In twelve years on the force he’d gathered his share of deathbed evidence. *Why can’t they ever give you a clear answer?* he thought. *Why is it always one cryptic word? That old woman who sat up and shouted—“bosco!”—we never did get to the bottom of that. And last month—when that Shakespearean actor Mortimer St. John Pugh died from gunshot wounds—his only word to the police had been “Yorick.” As it turned out, his agent, Horatio Alger had owed him money and killed him to eliminate the debt. Why couldn’t he just have said “Alger?” Now this. “Sisyphus.” The Greek king who was condemned forever in Hades to push a stone to the top of a mountain only to have it roll back down—Gem stone?—Is that the connection?—Endless labor?—Condemned—why? For chaining Death—Thanatos, to be exact. Futility?—Vanity of Vanities?—Ecclesiastes? It’s April Fools Day—maybe he was joking... This is getting me nowhere.*

Pinkley Malone whipped out his cell phone, hit fast-dial. “Hubbard? Malone here. We got nothing. McDermish is dead. All he said was ‘Ssih Ssih Fsss.’ ” ... “Yeah, that’s right. I thought he meant the Greek king damned to rolling a rock forever uphill.” ... “No. I don’t see any connection either. I think we’ve got another ‘bosco’ on our hands. See you in twenty at the scene.”

### **Chapter III**



Detective Elron Hubbard was hopping around the Southern Illinois Gemstone Exhibitors exhibition ante-room in full rant. "This security system is a joke! Sit over there and watch, Malone." Placing his right hand on the door sensor Hubbard reached for the key with his left hand, crossing it under his right arm and stretching as far as he could. "This is what the designers intended," he said. "Can't reach the key—can't open the door, right?" Malone nodded. "Now watch this—" Hubbard said. Keeping his right hand on the sensor he turned his back on the door. He could easily reach the key with his left. Hubbard clicked the key and the door swung open. "That's not all!—" he shouted, warming as he always did at the myopia of design engineers. Reaching into the pocket of his trenchcoat he withdrew a human hand. Not a real hand. One of those battery-powered rubber gag hands that moves on its own. From another pocket he extracted a roll of duct tape and ripped off a ten-inch length. "Think it'll work?" he asked. Malone shrugged. Hubbard taped the rubber hand in place on the door and stepped over to the key station. Click! The door

opened. Click. Click. Click. Close. Open. Close. "The morons used air-flow sensors instead of heat sensors. Now watch this—" He ripped the rubber hand off the door and pitched it into a corner, keeping the duct tape. At the key station he turned the key. Two steps to the door. He put his hand on the sensor. The door opened. "And this!—" He tore off little squares of tape and plugged the sensor holes on the door, then turned the key. The door opened. "Any five-year-old could bust into this room in ten seconds. The two-bodies bit works, though. None of these tricks'll work if there aren't two warm bodies in here."

"That's some great stuff, Hubbard," Malone said, "but I watched the security tape from beginning to end, from start to finish, from A to Izzard and back again. That ain't how it was done. The perp came in, stabbed the guard, put his left hand on the door and turned the key with his right. A fact! Give that a try, why don'tcha?"

"Never thought of that," Hubbard admitted. He picked the tape out of the sensors then put his left hand on the door and turned the key. Nothing.

"Make your hand fit better," Malone suggested. "Thumb in pinky slot—pinky in thumb—"

Hubbard tried to make his hand fit. But there were seven sensors. One for each finger and two for the palm. There was no contortion of the left hand that could block all seven sensors at once. The door stayed closed.

"Curious," said Hubbard. "You're sure this is how he did it?" Malone nodded. "Musta been some kinda mutant—" Hubbard muttered. "Let's get breakfast and a beer. I got some thinkin' to do— And I want a look at that security tape."

## **Chapter IV**



Habberton and Miss Pfaar sat eating a cold sandwich lunch in Singlebody's shabby third-floor walkup, drunk with yesterday's success and with Jack Daniels, laughing.

Habberton laughed because he'd pulled it off. He was going to be one of the richest men in Brazil. And, lame line, reversed hands and all, he'd got the girl. Of course the diamonds had helped. It still surprised him how quickly Lori—dear Lori!—he called her that now, not Miss Pfaar any more—had responded to his hints of limitless wealth.

Loreli was laughing for reasons altogether different. This schmuck actually thought she was going to marry him and follow him to Brazil. Not! As soon as they fenced the gems she would knock off dear old Habby and skedaddle to the land down under with the loot.

Lost in their separate reveries, neither heard the approaching footsteps. But both jumped a full six inches at the sudden pounding on the door and the shouts of "open up—police!"



## **Chapter V**



"All right, Elron—" Pinckley Malone said over beers that evening, "I dig that after looking at the tape you could make out that the perp—" Malone checked his notes. "—Habberton by name—had his hands reversed, the left on the end of his right arm and the right on the end of his left. I dig that they could only be arranged that way surgically. But how in the Five Hells of Santa Monica did you know exactly which hospital to call?"

"Elementary, my dear Pinckley—" Elron Hubbard said. "There are only three hospitals in Chicago that perform this type of surgery: *Lakeshore Lost Hand and Foot Hospital*, *Mother Hitton's Severed Extremities Clinic* and *The Chicago Center for Frivolous Elective Surgery*. The latter is more commonly known by its acronym, CCFES. Cee. Cee. Fsss. Q.E.D.

"Now, tell me more about that Greek king you alluded to this morning..."



# THE CASKET OF AMUN TILLADO

Winner of the 2003 Imitate Keeler Contest

## I



### *A Funeral*

Armond and Mona Tillado watched in grief as the gravediggers shoveled the last spadefuls of dark earth onto their Uncle Amun's grave. The other mourners had gone. Only the two remained. Wrapped in their individual thoughts, neither suspected how nearly alike his—or hers!—were to those of brother—or sister. Siblings two, orphans, too, Armond and Mona had lived with their Uncle Amun since their father, Raymondo Tillado had been killed eighteen years earlier in a freak accident—he had been smashed, flat as the proverbial pancake, between two colliding double-decker omnibuses being driven by two identical sets of Siamese twins—the fabled Siamese Quads of Canterbury.

"Just like Dad," Armond Tillado was thinking. "This can't be coincidence. There's foul play afoot."

"Just like Father," thought Mona Tillado. "There must be a connection. Something's rotten in Denmark."

They turned to face each other, Mona turning to her left, Armond to his right.

"Mona—" started Armond...

"Monty—" started Mona...

A mutual pause.

Again they both began.

Mona: "I think there's a connection between—"

Armond: "It can't be coincidence that—"

Another pause.

"You go first," Mona said, smiling wryly despite the seriousness of the day.

"No, you," said Armond. "I'm not all that sure about—"

"Neither am I. That is—I'm not entirely sure about what I think may be coinci—"

"Exactly!" exclaimed Armond. "There must be a connection between Dad's death between two double-decker British omnibuses and—"

"—and Uncle Armond's demise between two American Grayline busses, each driven—" Mona paused.

"—each driven by circus clowns in full regalia!" finished Armond, excitedly.

"Yes, yes—now that we've said it aloud I am sure there's foul play—not only behind Father's death, but Uncle Amun, as well. But foul play that spans 18 years!" Mona's voice trailed off. "Oh Armond!" she exclaimed frightenedly, clasping her brother's hands. "Do you think they will come after *us* next?"

Armond scowled—thought—gave his sister's delicate fingers a reassuring squeeze. "Why should they?" he asked puzzledly. "Even if Dad and Unc had something going—some bit of subterfuge or intrigue worth, in the

long run, their deaths—even if they were mixed up in some skullduggery, they never clued me in on it. Not even the slightest hint. As far as I know, Dad was just a circus accountant and Uncle Amun just a sub-sub-curator at the Metropolitan Museum of Human Oddities—so why—”

“But they’ve given themselves away,” interrupted Mona, fear darkening her face. “Now that they’ve acted a second time—whatever individuals or whatever organization *did* act to bring about those deaths—now that we’ve *seen* the same *modus operandi* in play twice—and they *know* we’ve seen it—” She began to sob. “Oh, Monty—I feel *certain* they will come after us as well.”

Despite the balmy summer breeze blowing in from the lake, Armond Tillado was shaken by a sudden chill. If his sister was right their lives were in danger at this very moment! He looked around agitatedly. The fact that he didn’t see any busses of any sort reassured him a little—but only for a moment!—only until he realized that his cranium might be lined up in the crosshairs at that very instant!—that even as he thought it, the bullet that would end his days might be barreling faster than the speed of sound toward his now-suspecting brain which would soon bespeckle his sister’s black hat and dress. With a hint of panic in his voice Monty whispered, “Come on, Sis. Let’s vamoose—and pronto!”

Together they scurried toward their waiting limousine.

## II



### *A Plot*

"So!—" hissed Sung Phu Phat, crouching inconspicuously behind a nearby mausoleum, listening intently to the duo, pressing the earpieces of a Munktonston Audionic Amplifier deeper into his earways. "You berieve that you have prumbed the depths of our prot. Ritter do you suspect that even now another pair of Grayrine Streamriners are barrerring among the ranes reading to this cemetery—and reading to your mutual demises! Soon enough you wirr be joining your uncre and father in the Tirrado famiry prots..."

"Tsst!" hissed Moriarty Munktonston savagely. "Do you want them to hear you, your oriental ninny? If they fail to exit the grounds in precisely—he glanced at his wristwatch, attached eccentrically just above his right elbow—in precisely three minutes they shall miss their—shall we say—appointment? We have timed this ceremony to the second and their departure *must* be on schedule. All our plans depend on it. We must do away with these interfering siblings before they find the clew in the will leading to the message carved on

Amun Tillado's coffin and return with an exhumation ord—"

"Hush!" growled Sandomar del Ponce. "They weel overheer you two's incessant yammering and maybe they weel deescover—and even decode—the message encoded into Sanskrit and hieratic by those loco Tillado brothers, and eef they get it into their cabezas to take eets meaning literally—"

"Nevah mind," drawled Colonel Ashley B. Mangham III. "Th' Tillados're leavin' 'n' th' busses ahn't ev'n in sight yet. 'S too late."

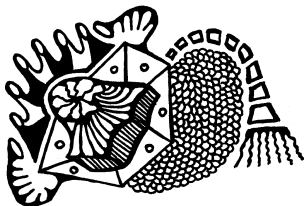
"What!" ejaculated Moriarty.

"*Qué?*" queried Sandomar.

"Curses!" hissed Phat.

"*Will* you boahs shut up?" admonished the Colonel. "Ah sweah Ah've nevah heared such a bunch o' squabblahs as y'all. Now, pack up that theah Mun'st'n Amp an' le's git a move on."

### III



#### *A Telegram*

The limousine bearing the two last remnants of the once numerous Tillado family rolled up the cobbled drive to the Tillado mansion, located high on an artificially mounded hill made entirely of shredded newspapers tightly compacted and glued together with a mixture of pine tar and asphalt. Inside, the surviving Tillados commiserated.

"I tell you, Mona, those busses were meant for us. It was just dumb luck that in our panic we made Giles pull out a few seconds ahead of schedule. If we had hung about at the gravesite for just another half minute we'd be as pancaked right now as—as both Pop and Uncle Amun!"

"But how, Monty? How could they possibly have known exactly when we were going to—to leave dear Uncle Amun's—" A tear escaped Mona's eye, gliding to the end of her nose and dangling.

"I don't know," Monty said gravely. He pulled a kerchief from his breast pocket and dabbed the tear



from Mona's nose-tip. "But if two pairs of colliding busses hint at something more than coincidence, then three pairs hint at—well—No! Three pairs confirms the plot! Someone—someone sinister and vile!—is out to extinguish the Tillado clan. And if there's one thing I've learned running Chicago's largest tabloid these last twelve years, it's this—behind every plot, there's money. Someone has a plan for squeezing moolah from the Tillado turnip and that plan hinges on extinctifying each and every last living Tillado—which amounts at this moment to just me—and you!

"But we're home—let's figure it out after we've chowed down."

Armond opened the curb-side door and slid out, holding the door for his sister. Taking his offered hand, she stepped onto the curb and saw an approaching bicyclist.

"Who's that, do you suppose, Monty?"

Armond Tillado squinted—the years at the newspaper had not improved his vision any—"Looks like a Northern Union messenger boy—Chi-town Enquirer business I'll wager—G'wan inside, Sis. I'll be in for supper presently."

As Mona ascended the steps and Giles rolled the Rolls into the detached garage-cum-guest house where he lived, the boy rolled up to Armond and announced chirpily, "Telegram for Armond Tillado."

"That would be me," Armond replied, reaching for the bright orange envelope. "What do I owe you?"

"Prepaid!" Chirruped the messenger. "You don't owe Northern Union a red cent." He held out his hand expectantly—an expectation that turned into annoyance as Armond tore open the telegram and studied it obliviously of one, Chip Skagwag, messenger boy. An

annoyance that engendered several clearings of the Skagwag throat and finally a loud, "ahem," pronounced pronouncedly enough to break even the trancelike absorption of the message's recipient.

"What? Oh!" Armond said, looking up. "Yes, this is for you—" He reached into his pants pocket and pulled out a two crumpled bills which he jammed into Chip Skagwag's waiting grasp without so much as checking the denominations to make sure they were only ones and deuces.

"Much obliged, Mister," chirped Chip, chortling as he pocketed the two fins and rocketed off as fast as his feet could pump the pedals. But Armond Tillado was again oblivious to the outside world, engrossed again in this mysterious telegram from—of all people—his freshly dead Uncle Amun!

HELLO ARMOND STOP

IF YOU ARE READING THIS TELEGRAM THEN YOU MUST KNOW BY NOW THAT I AM DEAD STOP I KNOW YOU AND YOUR SISTER MONA ARE GRIEVING BUT YOU MUST PUT ALL SENTIMENTALITY ASIDE NOW AND DO AS I SAY IN THIS TELEGRAM STOP THERE IS A FORTUNE AT STAKE AND IT CAN BE YOURS DASH BUT ONLY IF YOU FOLLOW MY INSTRUCTIONS TO THE LETTER FROM A TO IZZARD EXCLAMATION STOP

MANY YEARS AGO WHEN YOU AND YOUR SISTER WERE BABIES YOUR FATHER AND I STUMBLED UPON A SECRET THAT HAS BEEN KEPT FROM PUBLIC KNOWLEDGE FOR CENTURIES STOP A CIRCUS SECRET STOP WE WERE MAKING A PASS THROUGH A PLACE CALLED IDIOTS VALLEY AND SOMEHOW TOOK A WRONG TURN THAT GOT US

ONTO A ROAD THAT HAD MORE TURNS IN IT THAN A PORCUPINE HAS QUILLS STOP WELL I AM NOT MUCH OF A NAVIGATOR AND BEFORE LONG I HAD BECOME HOPELESSLY LOST IN THE SWAMPS OF IDIOTS VALLEY STOP I STOPPED AT A RUN DOWN SHACK TO ASK DIRECTIONS AND WHAT YOUR FATHER AND I DISCOVERED IN THAT SHACK SHOOK US TO THE DEPTHS OF OUR SOULS STOP

WE WALKED UP THE KITTYWUMPUS STEPS ONTO A SKEWED PORCH AND KNOCKED ON A DOOR HANGING BY A SINGLE HINGE STOP FROM INSIDE THE HOUSE WE HEARD A SCRAPE AS THOUGH A CHAIR HAD BEEN PUSHED BACK THEN IRREGULAR FOOTSTEPS APPROACHING THE DOORWAY STOP CLUMP FLAP TAP STOP CLUMP FLAP TAP STOP VERY IRREGULAR INDEED EXCLAMATION STOP BUT WHEN THE DOOR SWUNG OPEN THE SIGHT THAT MET OUR EYES CAN ONLY BE DESCRIBED AS —

Armond felt a touch at his elbow and jumped startledly a full foot in the air, dropping the bright orange envelope he was holding, but managing to keep a grasp on the telegram.

"Dinner," announced Giles, standing at Armond's side, "is served."

"Great! I'm famished." said Monty, absently stuffing the telegram into the pocket from which he had fished the fivers he had handed messenger boy Chip Skagwag a few minutes before. "C'mon. Let's put on the feed-bag."

\* \* \* \* \*

Why has the mysterious Gang of Four been exterminating Tillados for nearly two decades? Why with shiny new busses? And why driven by circus-folk?

What secret can an accountant and a curator have stumbled upon that would make them targets of *murder*?

What is the point of Uncle Amun's mysterious telegram? And what is the coded message he wrote on his coffin in Sanskrit and Hieratic?

Who *are* the mysterious Gang of Four? A Chinaman, a Brit, a southerner and a Spaniard, sure, but why are they together and what are they up to?

And what were the brothers Tillado *really* doing in Idiot's valley more than twenty years ago?

These questions and more will all be answered in Mary Steven-Keillor's upcoming book, *The Casket of Amun Tillado*. Soon to be climbing the Chicago Times-Herald's best-sellers list. A fact! Reserve your copy today.

