

Fred was a nightwatchman, and now that he came to thinking about it, he realized that he had done this job for at least ten years. It had started as a summertime occupation back in his student-days and then, as everything else he tried to undertake failed, it gradually filled his whole life, never to be replaced by anything more rewarding. Fred walked around the buildings, checking all the windows, shuffling his feet through the high, uncut grass on the backside of the block, where nobody except fools of his kind ever set their feet. It was bitter cold and he felt like pulling his neck into his collar, lowering his head away from the biting wind and proceeding without looking either to the right or to the left.

No windows would be left open in this weather, except if they had been forcefully opened by a burglar of course, but Fred knew that these things never happened, not here anyway. Fred's only purpose was to get bar-codes read into the control-watch he carried at his belt. At the end of the night, the data from his control-watch would be transferred into a computer which would then check if he had passed all the points in his nightly round-trip where a sticker with such a bar-code had been placed.

Sometimes, when Fred felt really bad, he just went from one sticker to the next, without bothering to check anything. Yet he didn't usually allow himself to do that, because it was common knowledge that a nightwatchman might occasionally be watched by one of his superiors.

Somebody might be hidden in those dark bushes back there, and so Fred had to at least pretend to be watchful.

In all those past years Fred had been checked out by a superior only half a dozen times, but if he ever got caught unawares, dreamingly and blindly walking from one sticker to the next, he would probably lose his job immediately (and he needed it). So approaching any building he would use his heavy high-beam torch along the facade, and the window-panes would reflect back at him. If the reflection ever missed out, the window seeming just like a dark hole, then that would mean it was open. He would then try to remember on which floor and which room it was, so that he could close it later on, when he finally entered the building.

It wasn't enough just to shine upon the ground-floor row of windows -they could look closed and yet yield under pressure, so they had to be mechanically tested. Fred would therefore briskly walk along the bottom of the building, giving a little push against each window-pane, and if one of the windows unsuspectedly yielded he would almost get his arm caught in the window-frame while he walked past. Usually he would mumble "bloody idiot!" when this happened, and since he was always alone this curse could only be directed at himself.

One day, when one of the windows opened as he smacked his hand against it, he heard a big bang. When he came up to the window from the inside to close it, he saw a big flower-pot lying broken on the carpet. Loose earth was scattered everywhere. He felt like leaving the mess as it was, but he took pity on the flower, which was in full bloom, lying pathetically on the floor, the colourful, passionate petals crushed beneath it, and so he set it back onto the window-sill, carefully leaning the long stalk against the wall. Having done this he felt he couldn't leave the rest of the mess as it was and cleaned it away as best he could, quietly cursing to himself.

After having walked around the whole block, checked all the windows, Fred would finally be allowed to go inside the building. Once inside he would have to continue walking, and at an irregular, tiring rate too, unlocking each door, having a quick look inside, swishing the beam of his torch along the floor and the desktop, carefully trying to avoid letting it fall upon the windows so that it couldn't be seen from the outside, then locking the door behind him to walk a few paces to the next.

Sometimes Fred would walk through several corridors without checking a single room, since no superiors could follow him into the buildings without being seen. But then there was always the risk of complaints going to the main office in the morning because some forgotten machine hadn't been switched off during the night and the nightwatchman was obviously not doing his job.

Usually the rooms would look the same every night. There would be the same posters on the walls, the same kind of mess on the desks, and even the individual smells of the rooms would remain the same.

Many years ago Fred had entertained himself by imagining what kind of person might have been working in each deserted room, and he felt the thrill almost of a paleontologist coming upon a promising discovery, looking at the remains of a life that he could picture without it being aware of him in any way.

Nowadays Fred simply felt jealous of these people who came with their cars straight to the building (not having to leave it hidden somewhere), went straight inside through the doors (without walking around the whole place first) and made straight for the door of their office which they opened with a familiar key they needn't select among a huge, heavy bundle like the one the nightwatchman was carrying. Then they shamelessly switched on the light, not caring if anybody could see it from the outside, and comfortably settled themselves at their desk to remain seated for as long as they liked...

It's no use dreaming about these things. Besides, those guys might have problems too, right? Maybe, if they ever met a nightwatchman when they stayed at their office late, overloaded with bureaucratic work, they would enviously watch him merely walking along, just opening and closing doors, his thoughts free to wander, and finally going home with an empty head, unstressed, his job finished and nothing to worry about... But then, Fred's thoughts weren't free to wander. Suppose he was quietly whistling a little melody, and every now and then he would get annoyed at some door improperly closed, at some key that would remain stuck in the keyhole, at some button that had to be pushed at the other end of a huge, messy table over which it was hard to reach, specially with all the bundles of keys hanging from his waist... Of course he would have to interrupt his whistling on all these occasions, and when he resumed it, he would take it up at the beginning of the unfinished movement. Then he would get annoyed again before finishing this movement and have to start all over, so that in the end there would be just a few notes, endlessly repeated till it got so boring that he had to give up whistling. Maybe he would try playing with some pleasant thoughts instead; but whenever he managed to collect his thoughts, they would be disturbed by some random and unforeseen annoyance, so that he would have to collect them again, again and again without actually ever getting past this point.

Boredom was thus inescapable. And while boredom in ordinary life is something that can usually be tackled with some effort of will, inventing little games, dreaming or in the worst case by just letting the mind go to sleep, this enforced boredom Fred was subjected to just got deeper and deeper every day until he had his weekly holiday, a momentary relief that kept him alive.

An occupation which keeps the mind busy without ever using all its resources is more boring than no occupation at all.

It is hard to remain watchful when this watchfulness is never rewarded by the discovery of something new, stimulating and interesting. Fred had actually told one of his superiors as much, asking to be put on a new job so that he wouldn't have to walk around and through the same buildings every night. But the answer was sort of futile and not very much to the point, so that Fred didn't even remember it. Of course he

knew why he wasn't taught another round-trip -that would mean accompanying a colleague and being paid for learning while one man was really enough for the job. When Fred had first started working for "Securitas", as this nightwatching business was called, it was for a particular and straight-forward reason -he wanted to own a car. It didn't take him long to spot an old, American car that was for sale. It was a '78 Ford Mustang with a huge bonnet, low, worn-out bucket seats, big, tough-looking wheels with five-spoked wheel-caps and an engine with a healthy, throaty growl sending vibrations up Fred's spine when he first test-drove the car, making him crazy for it.

Needless to say, the car was rather unpractical, taking a lot of space on the road while offering little loading-space, using up too much petrol and easily getting stuck in the snow. Besides, it wasn't all that powerful -little Japanese hatch-back cars with fuel-injection and multi valves ran a good deal faster than its stolid, carburetor-fed V8 would ever allow it to go.

It didn't take Fred long to feel regretful about the lack of power. His car wasn't such a runner after all. He would get upset when he was overtaken (which was seldom enough since he was a ruthless driver) by a real sports-car, forgetting that this other car must have cost from five up to ten times as much as he paid for his old Mustang, which, considered in this light, wasn't such a bad performer at all.

Some day Fred decided that performance wasn't so important and that it was all in the looks. He loved the shallow lines of the car, swelling up from behind, running fluently along the roof, towards and along the broad, low-slung windscreen, suggesting a wave, and then merging into the bonnet, running along it till they suddenly ended, forming a fierce brow to the rounded head-lights. Between the head-lights the grill looked just like the foam-crown of the wave, and upon it was the emblem of a galloping horse, its mane and tail trailing majestically behind it...

The car was kept in shiny, metallic blue, a deep, marine blue. When speeding on the highway Fred felt like the part of a natural, awe-inspiring phenomenon, like a wave rushing along the surface between earth and sky, ready to engulf and submerge anything wanting to check its progress.

While walking across a parking-lot as a nightwatchman, Fred would look at all the dew-wet cars, wondering if any of them were as beautiful as his own. Then he would eventually come past his Mustang, wetly glistening in the dim light of the lamps across the street, standing there as if it had merged out of the world at this spot and was still growing, unmoving and yet seeming to surge forward with relentless power, then Fred would know that this was his car and that there couldn't be another car for him.

For the next few minutes after that he would feel happy.

Of course the doubts would come up later on. Had he really bought the car best suited for him? Had he paid a fair price for it? Was it really the uttermost beautiful car possibly imaginable? Walking along endless dark corridors, the beam of his torch swinging in front of him, opening and closing doors as he went, those thoughts would haunt him painfully, and the images of brand new cars, far from affordable anyway, would mockingly flash past his inner eye, reducing his poor old Mustang to an outdated rust-bucket which of course it really was.

And yet all modern cars look virtually the same, licked to a blank, unemotional blob-shape by today's aerodynamic standards. They have power, they have safety and comfort...

Ah, but it is a very different feeling to be sitting at the wheel of an old Mustang, behind a bonnet that extends all the way to the horizon, feeling the vibrations coming from eight cylinders under the tough, sweat-drenched leather-covering...

Working with strong hands along the steering-wheel, whose diameter comes very close to the width of female hips, the car slashing through the curves, the far-off end of the bonnet, far ahead of the front wheels, seeming to drift sideways across the road, as if the car were floating above the bitumen...

Then easing the pressure of the hands on the wheel, the steering self-adjusting after the curve, feeling the leather running through his hands...

All of this is very different in a modern car. The steering-wheel offers no resistance at all, feeling just like a dead branch, a cut-off limb, responding so easily, so passively, to any forces with which you act upon it, that it is almost disgusting, like having sex with a corpse. The bonnet is so short, ending in front of your nose, that when looking downwards from your sitting position, you see the road in front of you, so that while driving you almost feel threatened by it, coming towards you without being first swallowed by the car.

So Fred should be happy -there couldn't be another car for him.

Yet every winter there came the problem of snow. The Mustang would act like a heavy, slithering, uncontrollable mass where small, front-wheel driven cars rode along just like wagons on rails. Besides, snow means salt on the roads, which means splotchy patches on the bitumen, which means that the underside of the car passing over them gets sprinkled with that ghastly mixture of salt and blackened water, which means rusting -rust, the most deadly threat to any old car...

Every year, when winter came, Fred would wonder how he could possibly spare his car. He had a small motor-bike for which he cared less than for his car. Another advantage of the motor-bike was that it wouldn't ever get stuck for good, since it was always possible to pull it out from snow-drifts by hand.

The obvious problem with motor-bikes, besides the discomfort in rain and snow, is of course that slithering usually means falling over and accidents more often have worse consequences than just material damages, even at comparatively low speeds.

So Fred often wondered if he should buy a second car just for the winter. And yet, if he was going to buy a second car, it would have to be something really powerful, something he couldn't afford just now. So in the meantime he kept wondering and suffering.

The buildings Fred had to watch belonged to the hospital, among them the morgue, and it was no big deal to walk across from one to the next. In fact most of them were connected by subterranean tunnels with air-flow tubes passing overhead. The air-flow tubes were used to send all kinds of samples from one lab to another, sometimes even at night. Fred would hear them banging around corners and then swishing past above his head, if ever he went into the tunnels.

But some of the buildings Fred had to watch didn't belong to the hospital-complex and were a bit further off, though of course in the same region.

In the Securitas-business, those nightwatchmen who had to drive around a lot during their round-trip were given a car for the night. The others were given a motor-cycle. Fred would have been entitled to a motor-cycle, but none of his colleagues ever went on this round-trip with a motor-cycle because the hospital-complex was quite far away from the main office where the keys, radio and the rest of the stuff were handed out in the evening and had to be handed back in the morning. Everybody took his own private car.

So did Fred. Thus in the middle of the night he had to take his car to drive a few blocks, and just when the engine was beginning to warm up a bit, to let it stand in the cold again.

It is not so good for the engine to be set to work while it is still cold. Ideally it should be left to idle until it is warm before driving away. Fred usually did this or, if he didn't have time, would drive very slowly for the first few minutes. He made it a point of honour never to take the car for distances of less than ten kilometers, so that the engine ran at its best temperature for most of the time.

As a nightwatchman Fred was forced to use his car for small distances, forced to forget about his point of honour. In the middle of the night he would come up to his car and painfully, due to his inadequate attire, scramble into the low bucket-seat, arranging all his bags and equipment on his lap. He was always scared of marking the seat-covers by rubbing the fancy brass-buttons and shoulder-straps of his uniform against them while he settled himself.

Then he would turn the key. He would listen to the high-pitched whine of the self-starter, a shrill, horrible noise like the alarm of a clock calling to duty. He would wobble his foot on the gas, sending little spurts of fuel into the engine till it finally, uneasily awakened, coughing and growling.

He would loosen the hand-brake, setting his huge beast free, loosen the clutch, stir up the beast by pushing the gas, and lead it away, muttering and mumbling.

He would drive away as slowly as he could, the engine on the verge of dying, the whole car shuddering from time to time. Eight cylinders take a bloody long time to warm up.

And yet, after several minutes of running, the noise and vibrations would become smoother. The needle of the temperature gauge would have risen past the blue mark. Slowly, but certainly, life would be dawning inside the huge steel structure; it would be making itself ready for hard driving, ruthless acceleration, swallowing the distances...

And just when this was happening, Fred would park the car, switch off the lights and the engine, pull the hand-brake (tying up his beast, like) and leave it there, letting it down after awakening it, for another half a dozen hours in the cold.

Of course Fred was worried because of the inappropriate use of his car, which would eventually lead to shortened life-time. This might mean he would have to get the engine replaced if by then the body hadn't rusted away. Maybe by replacing it with something more powerful..?

This was an excellent topic to be wondering about for half the night.

Whenever Fred sat at the wheel of his car he forgot all about these intellectual thoughts. He just plainly and simply felt guilty of stirring up the car's desires when it was peacefully asleep -kicking it to life, promising a fun-ride and then, as soon as it was going along with it, letting it down.

What about leaving the car at the main Securitas-office and taking the motor-cycle for the round-trip?

But then the car would be cold for the way home at the end of the night.

Usually, when it was time to head back to the office, the car would already be half warm having driven a little bit through town just before. Fred would cruise along slowly for a little while longer, and then he would hit the gas, roar through the dark, deserted streets and arrive at the office with the tinge of excitement still echoing in his crotch, hand in the keys and all the other stuff with a feeling of elation, walk back to his car all lightly and free, then race home with a careless, drowsy smile on his face.

While if he headed back to the office on the motor-cycle, he would be roosting on top of the narrow seat for many minutes, the sharp whine of the small motor all around him, the cold wind hissing past his ears, and advancing at a depressingly low speed... Fred rarely had any bad dreams, but he had many unpleasant ones. In one of them he was sitting on such a motor-cycle, the motor screaming at him, revving at its highest, and yet the cycle hardly moving at all, slowing down continually, till Fred had to jump off, the speed being insufficient for him to maintain his balance. Then Fred looked up and saw an endless stretch of wide road before him. The cycle had disappeared and he was alone with his heavy nightwatchman-attire...

All these painful preoccupations about the car were of course, as one might say, just the tip of the iceberg. Fred's unhappiness was far deeper.

Long ago he had had dreams, and he had looked upon his future as a wide landscape, the mist of dawn still hanging over it, and he had looked upon it for the first time from a high mountain he had climbed from the other side. All had looked promising. The land was asleep, but ready to be awoken by a magnificent sunrise. Fred had taken a deep breath and made ready to climb down into this promising future.

Then he had sunken into the mist, which became denser and denser. At first he hadn't worried too much -the sun would shortly clear it away. To his right and left bright corridors would occasionally open, but he wasn't too eager to follow them because he wanted the whole thing and still believed in the sun.

Now he knew that he had passed all the bright corridors, and the mist had become a heavy, opaque, filthy, smoke-laden vapour that no rising sun would ever clear away. The sun might actually have risen already, it might be past midday -he wouldn't know, he couldn't see...

Fred had had the usual dreams of a fulfilled life -he had started studying Medicine with some vague idea of helping people, and he hoped he would some day find a person with whom he would build up a family.

Then the years had flown past, studying had become more and more tedious while nothing else seemed to happen, the smoke had become so thick that it not only blinded and irritated his eyes but actually offered resistance to his movements. At some stage he had tripped into his nightwatchman job and never got up again. He was lying there in the mud and wondering about his car.

Whatever the real problem was, it was floating so far above Fred's present day-to-day experiences that he couldn't address it. To bring it within his reach again he would have to solve some minor difficulties first -collect his thoughts, clear his mind of the overwhelming boredom, escape from his present situation that was holding him a prisoner.

In order to change anything, to be able to evolve in any way, Fred must first free himself from whatever was holding him down.

The only means of escape and freedom Fred knew about and which had ever brought him anywhere close to a feeling of satisfaction was, of course, ...his car.

So while Fred intellectually knew that his problem lay further off, that his unhappiness was rooted far more deeply, he was nevertheless genuinely and sincerely worried about his car.

There was this red lamp glowing on the control-panel. Fred had already seen it the night before and rang up one of the numbers for technical problems. The bored voice at the other end had said that he would further the information.

Tonight the little red light was still there.

There were two possible scenarios. Either the problem was meaningless and would be taken care of in its own good time, in which case Fred would simply mention the disturbance in his notes or even ignore it completely having already furthered the information yesterday. Or, in the other possible scenario, the problem was very meaningful, had been fixed yesterday thanks to Fred's vigilance and had reoccurred today, in which case he would have to ring up the bored voice again. When in doubt that was what a nightwatchman was supposed to do -in a polite and correct manner further the information. Be it the same piece of information every night, he had to further it without the least signs of impatience and without feeling offended by the disagreeable manners of people woken in their sleep.

Yet Fred didn't feel at all like writing a clear note, finding a phone, piling out his bag to find the number for technical emergencies for this particular building and selecting the number with one hand while holding up the torch with the other. Halfway through the number the booklet would shut itself because he didn't have a third hand to hold it open. When all these problems were overcome he would read out to the tired guy at the other end from his note-pad which lamp was glowing and on which panel it was doing so. Then the tired guy at the other end would answer that he would further the information and thank-you-very-much.

The prospect of all this was so boring that Fred decided against it. With a sour smile on his face he pictured himself being accused of overlooking important disturbances. He would answer that the red light hadn't struck his mind as unusual since it had already glowed the night before. He would even go before court to make the office see that it was bad for a man to have to do the same thing all the time.

Of course he would simply lose his job, his explanation accepted as an admittance that he wasn't suited for such a responsible position.

All of this swirled through Fred's mind, while he really knew that the lamp would still be glowing tomorrow, possibly even the day after, that nobody cared about it and that it would somehow disappear as suddenly as it had appeared.

So Fred didn't even mention the lamp in his notes and felt pretty sure that he would never hear of it again.

He shut the door behind himself and locked it, trying to forget about the control-panel with that one red glow where there should only have been green lights.

This winter he would have to put snow-tyres on his car.

At this very moment the red lamp would still be glowing.

Last winter he had waited so long to get them fitted that there hadn't been any snow left to use them for their rightful purpose.

This damned lock always stuck! The key must be totally worn! Why didn't anybody complain? Maybe he should complain himself...

The red lamp would still be accusingly glowing back there behind that door.

Besides, the winter before that there hadn't been any snow at all, and since he was going to avoid...

To the right, to the left, nothing special here. The special thing was back there -that damned red light.

This winter he would avoid driving in the snow.

Open the door -the whine of machinery- close the door.

So he wouldn't need any snow-tyres.

End of the corridor, shut the door, select the new key.

One winter the snow had taken him by surprise and he had to leave the car at the bottom of the hill, because his summer-tyres had no grip till the road was thoroughly salted.

Now that he needed the former key again, he could just select it by touch, because it still felt warm. There is nothing worse than holding the torch in the armpit, turning over keys in your hands looking for the distinctive marks and usually finding those you don't want over and over again...

Salt makes cars rusty and dries out slugs by osmotic pressure if you sprinkle it over them. Poor slugs, all wrinkled and shriveling up...

Fred saw tiny sparks in the dark when he punched the key into the key-hole. Thank God the lock turned easily -it was the right key.

What about a healthy, swelled up and athletic slug, glistening all over, crawling up a girl's vagina?

Fred was climbing up some stairs. He knew the number of steps and never stumbled except when he started to think about it.

If salt was all that was needed, girls needn't feel threatened by men any longer.

Besides, salt also burns in the eyes. So it not only finishes off old cars but also men.

Fred came to the top of the stairs and was selecting the next key.

Maybe a man can still rape a girl even with salt in his eyes. His slug, all he really needs, can't be affected much by salt, since it's not a real slug anyway. Besides the girl wouldn't get a chance of sprinkling it there, unless her vagina was able to secrete it.

Here we are, the door is open.

Salt is very good on meat. Wouldn't do to eat meat without salt.

Talking about meat -there must be some fresh meat in the fridges here. There usually is on Sunday-nights -car-accidents during the week-end, when people are less sensible...

Maybe they had gotten their snow-tyres fitted the day before and today they were lying in this fridge...

Snow-tyres aren't a life insurance.

Fred would get his fitted next week.

And all this while the red lamp would still be glowing down there in the basement.

Fred always hesitated before this door. A big, glistening metal-door it was, too. It had a lock to which the usual key fitted and a great big handle. Once the handle had been pushed down, the door could be pulled open. The door would resist a bit, the isolating rubber-bands reluctant to separate, like lips joined in a farewell kiss. It would let go with a little smack and then, the resistance overcome, yawn open freely, sighing like an awakening creature.

Inside it would be dark and cold. The intruding warm air would condense and make the beam of Fred's torch visible as he scanned the shiny, empty tables (or should they be called beds?). Further off there might be a bundle lying on one of the tables, something strangely irregular lying in this square and sterile place, covered by a blanket.

Fred would walk into the fridge, driven by curiosity. Maybe the feet would be sticking out from the bundle, just a pair of ordinary, naked feet, perhaps a bit unnatural in colour (too yellow) and with a waxy quality that was slightly disturbing, not like feet on a beach.

Fred would walk up to the bundle and take hold of the sheet with his finger-tips, then without hesitating any longer, he would uncover the head of whoever was lying here. A pair of cold eyes would be staring up at him. He would be taken aback for a split second, then he would examine the face, unshaven, wrinkled, expressionless, a shocking face maybe, but with nothing to say. Perhaps the mouth would be open, and

Fred would see the tongue lolling in there, grey and dried-out, still securely resting in its nest, but dead like its surroundings.

Only the eyes would still be conveying some intensity, a frozen intensity that could be blotted out with one blow. The eyes could have been pecked out without altering their gaze, as if they were still desperately holding on to something. Something that might have been before them a while ago, and that would never reappear to break the spell. So the spell would never be broken. It would just lose its significance and merge into the more general mystery of the past.

Sometimes the bodies in there would still be uncovered, brought in during the night perhaps, and left there just as they had been found.

One night Fred had entered the fridge to find a man lying on one of the tables. He was wearing jeans and a worn-out jumper. His curly, dark hair was in a mess around his tough-looking face, his unclean mouth gaping wide-open and his eyes staring into the ceiling. Fred bent over him and was inspecting the gashing wound across his forehead. In the profound silence, perfect save for the soft whine of the ventilation overhead, he could distinctly hear the man's wrist-watch ticking off the seconds.

There was no need to go inside the fridge. If there was an anomaly it would show up on some control-panel somewhere. Fred had proven to himself many times that he could bear the sight of cadavers, and it hadn't done him any good. Why should he go in there now?

Then Fred remembered the red light that would still, at this very moment, be glowing on a control-panel somewhere in the basement. Fred had no idea what the red lamp meant and what the control-panel was generally monitoring. It might possibly have something to do with this fridge. Since he was here in front of this door now, he might as well check it out.

So he turned the master-key in the lock, pushed the handle down and pulled the door open.

There were two people in the fridge, but Fred had eyes only for one of them – indeed, she was uncovered, completely naked and lying on a glistening, spotlessly clean metallic table in the middle of the room.

The air was cool and there was the usual soft whine of machinery. Fred was about to close the door and resume his lonely walk when he felt that since he was here he might as well have a look at the woman. He entered the fridge and half-closed the door behind him in order not to waste too much of the cold.

He walked over to the corpse, wondering why she had been undressed but not packed up. Maybe she had been found naked.

She was a beauty with long, smooth legs merging into strong hips, the stream-lines moving unbroken from there over a flat belly, slightly less in width than the hips, flowing over firm, small breasts and converging towards the neck. Fred positioned himself at the foot-end of the table and held up his torch, let the light-beam glide up and down along the body, his view extending from her toes to the tip of her chin. Fred had never before had a woman like this for himself, and he guessed that she wouldn't have let him come up so closely in her lifetime. Only yesterday the chances of getting close to this woman would have been approximately zero. She would have walked past the slow-moving nightwatchman very swiftly indeed, having better things to do, and if he ever made a move on her, she would have sneered at him, then brushed past him with a polite and icy "excuse me...".

Now she was lying here motionless and unprotected and Fred could admire her for as long as he wished, study her body as closely as he liked.

Her eyes were staring up into the ceiling, as these corpse's eyes always did. Fred had seen this before and was used to it. Her lips were parted as if she had been panting. Fred had moved up between the rows of tables and was looking down at her. She was inert, paying no attention to him. In that sense she was as far away as ever.

He saw that she had a stabbing wound above her left breast. Else her body was flawless. He felt like finishing the job, taking a knife and punching it into every part of her body, teaching the world that whatever he couldn't understand and get for himself he would destroy.

He looked at the wound more closely and suddenly had a strange feeling of familiarity. The wound itself wasn't familiar -it was just another disgusting stabbing wound. Fred had seen them before, but they never struck him as particularly familiar. There was something else, half chopped up by the wound, a birthmark, and Fred knew that he had seen it before.

He left the fridge feeling very thoughtful. He felt strangely reluctant to close and lock the door behind himself. He was about to walk away when he turned back.

There was a little anti-chamber next to the fridge. It contained a desk and a swivel-chair, and recent records were kept there. Usually some delivery-notice concerning fresh entries would be lying on the desk. Fred decided to go and have a look. He unlocked the door and stepped into the small room.

As expected the usual form was lying on the desk, hurriedly filled out by some guy with a miserable hand-writing - name and address of the victim, date of entry and a list of belongings (even underpants and socks would usually be listed). The list was empty so presumably the corpse had been found naked.

Fred looked at the name and it told him nothing. The address seemed just as unfamiliar - some street in town Fred had never heard of before.

Fred left the room and walked away, trying to mind his own business and empty his head of the thoughts which were beginning to churn in there, gaining momentum. He remembered a day many years ago, just after he had moved out of his parents' home into a flat of his own. He had had great expectations - having no mother to fuss over him any more he saw himself becoming a daring and dashing young man. He now had a stable home-environment that wouldn't be affected by his undertakings in the outside-world. No one would be trying to read information off his face inside these four walls of his own. Whatever happened he would now be able to come home and forget about it.

He was sitting at his window watching the people coming and going in the street. It was not quite two o'clock in the afternoon and he had to go to work at six in the evening. He had plenty of time.

There was this girl outside, a school-girl, somewhere between ten and twelve years old, doubtlessly on her way to school. She was walking along not very quickly, dreamingly playing with the shoulder-straps of her bag. Fred had an immediate craving for her.

Following his impulse he went out to meet her. There she was, innocently walking along, playfully and unconsciously showing off her sensitivity, quite unaware of the effect she had on Fred.

Fred walked up to her and said hello. She smiled up at him and confidently greeted him as an adult. Possibly this girl had had no major bad experiences with adults and believed that they did whatever they did because it was the right thing. She didn't realize that Fred might have addressed her for reasons of his very own.

So she was a great believer in adults! And she obviously saw Fred as an adult, his being in his early twenties making no difference.

Fred asked her: "Do you have a minute?"

She was plainly a bit puzzled by that: "Yes..., but a minute for what?"

Fred made an earnest face: "You see, I make advertisement photos for a big company. I have to find a young girl like you to wear a pair of brand-new jeans. I think you might be just the person I need. Posters of you will be hanging all over town."

He was playing a very dirty trick on her, but he had plainly got her interested. She flushed a little, forcefully swallowed down the saliva accumulating in her mouth and tried to say something.

"But..., but I have to go to school now..."

Fred nodded thoughtfully. "I know" he said, "but this is really important, you see. I will write out an excuse for you to hand over to your teacher."

This settled the matter. Fred didn't even need to say that other girls would be glad to be in her place. She was plainly going along with him.

"And where..?" she asked, suddenly a little scared.

"Oh, just up there." said Fred, successfully dismissing the very last of her reluctance. He took her up into his flat. In the stairways she became very eager to talk. "All over town!" she said.

"Yes," he said, "and you'll have an impertinent little smile on your face, standing there in a pair of brand-new jeans that nobody has ever worn before!"

She could hardly wait for him to unlock the door of his flat.

He took her into the flat, shut the door and told her she would have to take a shower first. She was a little surprised by that, but he showed her the bathroom and gave her a fresh towel out of the cupboard. Then he left her and went into the living-room.

He let himself fall into his one comfortable chair and a moment later he heard the water turned on in the bathroom. He knew that she was naked in there, standing under the gushing water in his home.

He was plainly doing something that he couldn't have allowed himself to do at his parents' place. Nobody would come and see what was happening. As long as he kept her from yelling he could do whatever he liked to the girl.

And yet he felt strangely at loss about what to do next.

After a while he heard the water was turned off. On impulse he stood up and walked to the bathroom, entered without thinking and saw her standing there, all wrapped up in the towel, her wet hair glued to her face and shivering a little. She looked up at him, not at all suspiciously, but questioningly. He smiled reassuringly, went up to her and rubbed her down.

He told her he would have to feel her vertebrae to see if she was suited for the photos. He gently lifted the towel a bit and confidently let his fingers find their way down her spine, pressing a little here and there, as if he were playing the piano. His face was very close to her face, and she was looking at him with big, hopeful eyes.

He reached the bottom. His hand brushed past her buttocks. He didn't look at her. Her front was still covered by the towel and he had only felt her back without seeing it. He gently closed the towel round her back again. "Come now." he told her and led her out of the bathroom. He led her into the living-room and, drawing the curtains, told her to lie down on the couch.

She was lying on her back, still wrapped up in the towel, trying to relax but shivering again.

He went up to her, kneeled down next to the couch and told her to close her eyes. She did as she was told and he uncovered her, pulled the towel away completely and flung it away.

Surely she must realize that something was wrong by now. She was shuddering uncontrollably and holding her eyes tightly, almost desperately, shut.

In a very calm and kindly tone he asked her if she felt cold. She only nodded. He laid his hands upon her belly and started to knead her slender body, softly but purposely.

He felt the shuddering subside under his strong, warm hands.

Then he lovingly followed the slight curve of her hips and worked his way down along her legs. She was completely relaxed now, almost hypnotized.

"Do you feel better now?" he asked warmly.

"Yes..." said a sleepy, tender voice.

He stroked her legs absent mindedly, then decided that he could have a good look at her unashamedly, since she had completely abandoned herself to him. He touched the spot between her legs, where the first tufts of pubic hairs were appearing, and, asking her if it hurt, gently parted the folds of her skin.

"No..." she said dreamingly, and he put his fingers here and there, exploring the nooks and crannies, pausing and asking her again, waiting for her answer and then going a bit further.

Gently pressing and stroking, squeezing and kneading, he was having a wonderful time, but then, as if some realization had suddenly hit him, he became self-aware and ashamed of himself. He felt the heat mounting into his face and knew that he couldn't go on.

He stood up quite suddenly and almost ran to the bathroom, but then his steps faltered and he felt weak. He sipped a few drops of water at the tap (his mouth was feeling very dry), and looked at himself in the mirror, barely recognizing himself.

He saw the neat pile of clothes she had left lying on the washing-machine, took them up and brought them into the living-room, flung them onto the couch next to her feet and told her in a voice that was surprisingly matter-of-fact and unaffected, that she wasn't suited for the photos and that she'd better get dressed.

Then he left her and went into the kitchen where he sat down at the small table. Now it was he who was shivering.

He heard her walking around in the living room. He stood up with a jerk and rushed out to her. She was looking very upset and bewildered. He gave her some money, said he was sorry and led her to the door. She stepped out, he again said he was sorry and closed the door on her, even locked it.

That was all that ever happened between him and that girl. He never saw her again and never even heard of her. He knew her name was Maria because she had told him, and he remembered the birthmark on her left breast.