

Fred drove up to the courthouse lying in the midst of a peaceful park with many trees. He parked the car inconspicuously next to the Japanese four-wheel-drive of the caretaker. He scrambled out of the seat, banged the door shut, and while he stood there, rearranging the bundles around his waist, he approvingly admired his low-slung Mustang behind which the caretaker's car looked extremely crude and bulky.

A soft rain was dribbling down, and though Fred couldn't feel the wet through his cap and his uniform, he could smell the dampness, and when he held up the torch to illuminate the facade, shining little droplets started to dance in the light-beam.

Fred illuminated the top-row of windows, and when he looked up, feeling the water on his face, some droplets stinging in his eyes, looking through a corridor of light in which myriads of shining little blobs were drifting towards him, he felt for a fleeting moment that he was moving upwards, rushing through a narrow galaxy of small, dazzlingly twinkling stars.

Then his eyes automatically focused on the grey, imposing facade of the elderly building with its tall windows sunk deeply into its thick walls.

He was walking now, his torch scanning the facade. The windows were all closed (of course they would be) and there wasn't any light in any of the rooms.

He walked up the broad stairway to the main entrance and checked the three doors between the two massive pillars. He didn't check them too harshly, because they were of course under alarm and it would be rather embarrassing if the nightwatchman set off the alarm.

He walked back down the stairs and resumed his tour around the building.

The big parking-lot occupying the whole space in front of the building was empty save for the Mustang and the box-like car of the caretaker. If there were any cars, Fred would have to take down the number of their plates and leave a note for the caretaker. One night Fred had come up behind a car that was parked in the shadowy far-side of the big entrance stairs. He was just about to write down the number when he realized that the front-seats were occupied. Now of course formal identification was unavoidable. He walked up alongside of the car and shone the light straight through the driver's side-window. The occupants had bent down, obviously hoping that he wouldn't see them and move on. Fred came up to the car, holding his torch at a progressively steeper angle, till it shone down into the thus blinded eyes of the young man at the wheel. Fred bent down and knocked at the window. The man, his face all white in the dazzling bundle of light which held it fast, meekly opened the window. There was a girl next to him, but Fred didn't care to have a proper look at her. He kept his torch well-aimed at the man's face. Then he said, in a tenebrous, dry voice, fully aware that he must appear to them as an indefinable, shadowy presence behind the blazing light:

"Good evening... Do you have any business here?" As though he didn't know what they had come to this dark, hidden spot for.

The guy was trying to evade the light with his eyes. "No..." he said shyly.

"This place must be considered as a private property." said Fred. "I have orders to take down your names and the number of your car. Naturally you will get a fine shortly."

"But..." said the guy, hopelessly blinking in the light, "I didn't know..."

"If you leave now, I will let you go." said Fred.

The guy immediately sat up straight, started the car saying thank-you and, while Fred said "Good-bye, sir", he drove off with his girl-friend who hadn't uttered a sound all the while.

Fred had been bull-shitting about the fine. He had no idea what was being done with the numbers and names he collected. Possibly they were just filed away for future reference if anything turned out to have gone wrong during the night.

And yet he shouldn't have allowed himself to let these people go. If a superior had seen him talking to somebody and he had no names to show, he would be in trouble. Today there was nobody. The parking-lot was deserted.

Fred came to the corner of the building, where he could hear the water gurgling through the drain-pipe coming from the roof. It always struck him as a most lonely sound, possibly because it could sometimes be confused with the babble of human speech in a foreign tongue. Fred did feel lonely and would have liked to join such a pleasant sounding conversation.

At the foot of the building there was a trench, about five meters deep and two meters wide. Fred didn't know its exact purpose - perhaps to give some light to the basement (there were windows down there) and possibly to make all windows on the ground-floor inaccessible. Fred had orders to check out the trenches, because there might be bombs lying in there. So he would shine his light along the bottom of the trenches and look for some suspicious object.

Naturally heaps of rubbish and dead leaves would have accumulated down there, and besides Fred had never seen a bomb and had no idea what it would look like. So basically he just looked down into the trenches with unseeing eyes, his thoughts elsewhere.

Fred was about to turn around the corner. He had a last look at the mighty stairs leading over the trench to the main entrance.

Some winter there had been a thin pellicle of ice, formed during the night, on some of the steps, and Fred had almost slipped. He recalled thinking of taking a few corpses from the morgue, naked corpses with bruises and gashing wounds, and realistically, artistically, laying them out across the stairs...

And what would have been the sense in doing that, Fred now wondered? Surely it was not very funny. It was pure maliciousness.

Of course nobody believed that Fred would do a thing like that. He didn't believe it himself.

Corpses were often the only mates he met within nine hours of work, and though he needn't worry about how to present himself to them, they still somehow managed to upset him. He had believed that by having close looks at them he would harden himself against his emotions, but somehow that wasn't the way it worked, and instead of becoming insensitive to them he became more and more reluctant to go and see them. And yet they had become very much part of his life.

That woman for instance...

Maria being just a school-girl ten years ago, it was quite plausible that she would be in her early twenties now. The birth-mark definitely had looked familiar and it was in the right spot too.

The name on the delivery-notice wasn't Maria...

The woman was Maria, there could be no doubt about it. Possibly Fred was the only living man to know that she wasn't who she was supposed to be.

Possibly Fred was the only living man to know that Maria was dead...

Somehow this realisation was scary. And yet, what business of his was this whole thing? He hardly knew Maria and he didn't know the other woman she was supposed to be at all.

Plausibly Maria was visiting that other woman and got killed in her flat. The other woman then disappeared and when Maria was found it was automatically assumed that she must be the owner of the flat.

As soon as tomorrow some relatives would be invited for a formal identification of the corpse and the mistake would become evident.

From then on the problem would be to put a label on the unidentified corpse. Fred couldn't be a great help there, because all he knew about Maria was her first name. The more he thought about it, the more he managed to convince himself that he could in no way contribute to the whole business. Whatever information he held was completely useless and futile.

He was at the back of the building now, checking a couple of doors. Behind him there were some large trees, and although there hardly was any wind he could hear their leaves rustling. It was a confident sound, like the deep breathing of a fearless giant in his untroubled sleep. Fred felt tired. He would have liked to stop walking, lie down next to the giant and let his mind drift off into peaceful realms of oblivion.

But he was the nightwatchman. He had the noble task of watching over other people's property and the fruits of their efforts while they were taking a well-earned rest. His watchfulness allowed them to confidently close their eyes and let themselves be carried away into the land of sweet dreams, knowing that he was, for the time being, taking care of the harsh realities of life for them...

He had taken over. For the next few hours he was the legal representative of the place. Fred walked on.

The woman in the fridge.

It was Maria.

“Do something about it!”

Fred actually turned around, it sounded so real. He had definitely heard a voice. It was inside his head. He wasn't altogether surprised. He had finally gone insane. It had to happen. It was almost a relief. He half expected to hear more of it, but everything remained quiet for now...

Some other night he had heard a strange, squeaking noise, endlessly but not too regularly repeated. It seemed to come from somewhere further off in the dark. It sounded like a squeaking door being opened over and over again, but that didn't make sense. Or was it the agonizing voice of some wounded man or beast lying under a bush? After a while Fred concluded that it must be a pump of some sort, but what was being pumped at this time of the night he couldn't imagine. He had left the place without solving the mystery.

A few nights later he had heard the noise again. This time it was clearly coming from the trees overhead. It must be a bird of some sort! Fred had excitedly shone the light up into the branches of the trees, trying to find the spot where the noise came from. And suddenly he had found it, a stout little fellow sitting on a branch. It looked like an owl. It was turning its head from right to left and walked a few steps along the branch, trying to move out of the light, but Fred followed it with the beam of his torch.

It opened its small beak and uttered its harsh little scream.

From then on Fred knew what the noises were.

That was in summer. Today there were no more noises except for the gurgling of the water down the drain-pipes.

Fred walked across a patch of grass.

Last summer he had tripped over something on this spot. The thing had made hissing noises. It was a hedgehog.

Some other night the beam of his torch had also randomly fallen upon a hedgehog. It seemed to be totally untroubled by the light. Fred had softly approached it and taken a close look. It was feeding on a huge slug, making deep breathing noises as it was doing so. The front part of the slug was still moving, its antennae feeling their way along the grass-blades, while its rear-end was being chewed to pieces by the cute little snout of the hedgehog. Fred was rather shocked by this, but then again, what had he imagined? That the hedgehog would first jump up at the slug's throat and squeeze the life out of it before eating it, like a lioness killing an antelope?

It was too cold for hedgehogs now. They would all be sleeping in a pile of forgotten dead leaves somewhere.

Fred came round to the entrance of the caretaker's flat. There was an intercom next to the door. If Fred had seen anything unusual he would wake up the caretaker.

The job at the courthouse consisted only of walking around the outside of the building. Fred didn't even have a key to enter the courthouse. Usually he came here twice a night. The first time would be around ten o'clock, and if there were any lights burning in some of the rooms it would most certainly be because of somebody still working there. Thus it was rather silly to warn the caretaker about them.

The second time Fred came back here would be at about three o'clock. If the lights were still burning by then, that would obviously mean that they had been forgotten. If Fred awoke the caretaker about them the latter would usually be annoyed at not having been told earlier. Thus Fred would mostly ignore the forgotten lights (if there weren't too many of them).

Today there weren't any lights at all. Everybody had gone home early. Only fools like himself would still be walking around in the cold at this time of the night...

Fred got back to his car, scrambled into the seat, sighed as he started the engine and drove off.

Fred was walking through to the second part of the night now. That meant that he would visit most of the buildings for the second time, but in less detail. All the important things would already have been checked, and so he would just have to walk around, reading bar-codes into his control-watch here and there.

Of course he still had to walk around the exteriors of the buildings before being allowed to go inside, but this time it would be enough to flicker the light at the windows to make sure they weren't broken without having to test them manually. To minimize the distances Fred edged around the corners as tightly as possible, almost bumping into them and scraping his uniform.

He was thinking what a stupid thing to do this was, since anybody smart enough would get the idea and might wait with a stick or metal-bar behind the next corner. A good bang over the head would send Fred into unconsciousness (especially since he was barely conscious anyway in the second part of the night), and it would then be very easy to take all the keys from him.

The relevant keys for the building would possibly already be separated from the rest of the bundle (that should make things easier), and a smart guy might even think of stealing Fred's uniform. If he then managed to walk around with the tired-out gait of a typical nightwatchman he would be as inconspicuous among the buildings as a goldfish in a pond.

In fact, Fred himself had thought of playing this dirty trick on one of his colleagues. Knowing the whole place by heart it would be very easy for him to find what he wanted, pack up the car and drive away without any alarm being raised.

But Fred was scared of being recognized by some office-boy who would for some strange reason of his own come to his office in the middle of the night. Of course Fred would never be suspected in the first place, but the other guy might later remember having seen him around when he was supposed to be on a holiday.

Fred had practically no memory of faces, but he knew that other people did. He often recognized people by their reaction to him (a very bad habit for a nightwatchman, who is supposed to positively identify whomever he meets). Any burglar would simply have had to say "Good evening!" in a jolly friendly way, and Fred would have identified him as the person whose name was on the door of the office that happened to be robbed out that night.

But faces weren't the only thing Fred didn't notice. He felt quite capable of walking through a deep puddle in the middle of the corridor, his shoes making splotchy noises, without the thought that anything was wrong ever entering his mind.

The other reason why Fred didn't try robbing the buildings, in effect making the most out of his job, was that there wasn't any cash lying around. The only things worth stealing were computers, and then he would have had to sell them. A tedious and risky job...

Perhaps Fred almost hoped that he would, someday, be hit across the head. For years he had been telling anybody who would listen that he couldn't bear his job, that it weakened his mind so much that he couldn't think of undertaking anything else... But as long as the job didn't actually get on top of him nobody would worry too much about him. After all, he was doing just fine, there was nothing obviously wrong with the way he worked and he was financially independent. That's what being an adult is all about.

But if he got hit across the head, people would start wondering. Perhaps even his parents, with whom he maintained a very loose, barely existing contact, would start thinking things over once again and feel guilty for what they had done to him. Though what that would concretely be and in what way their feelings of guilt would possibly help him Fred himself didn't know.

Perhaps suicide was a better alternative.

Fred had fantasized about this a lot.

The idea would be to shoot himself. He didn't carry a gun as a nightwatchman, but he owned one personally. He might take it with him and then lock himself up in the fridge. He would hide his equipment, uniform and all his clothes among the spare sheets, then lie down on one of the shiny tables, his gun hidden underneath him, then shoot himself through the head from behind.

The hourly radio-message being missed out, his superiors would eventually come looking for him. They would look all over the place, possibly helped by the police since he might have been trapped by some burglars...

They would even look in the fridge, but it would take a long while before anybody thought of taking a close look at the naked corpse innocently lying on the table. Fred wished, even though he was dead, he could see the shocked face of his superior looking down at him and finally realizing the full truth...

In many rooms there were machines, computers, fax-receivers and the like which were meant to run through the whole night. They all bore big yellow notices saying: "DO NOT SWITCH OFF!"

Nightwatchmen being so much conditioned to switch off everything with a power-button would of course occasionally switch off even these machines. If they noticed their mistake they might switch the machine on again, but then it would possibly have

lost its memory or something like that. Occasionally these situations would give rise to complaints and severe reprimands of the involved nightwatchman.

Fred had thought of entering a room with many of those machines, switching them all off and shooting himself with a "DO NOT SWITCH OFF"-sign hanging around his neck.

He wondered if anybody would get the joke.

Anyway, there he would be lying, the keys spilt all over his body, eyes wide open and a silent reproach staring out of them...

Of course Fred would never really do such an insensible thing with his gun - he might lose his shooter's license, and that thought was unbearable.

He was coming up to the door from where he had started off on his exterior round-trip. It was time to enter the building and he took out the key.

There was a small van parked near the entrance. It hadn't been there earlier. This was the entrance where corpses would be brought to the morgue or collected from the morgue. They would usually be brought in a small, grey, box-like truck from the main hospital-building and taken away in elegantly elongated station-wagons with black shutters across the back windows. It was impossible to imagine that the colourful little van standing here now could have anything to do with that kind of business and Fred was asking himself what it might be doing here.

The front doors of the van opened and two men climbed out. They walked to the door and stood in front of it. Fred approached them seemingly unperturbed but holding on to his torch very tightly.

"Good evening," he said, but the men didn't answer.

One of them was very tall and good-looking. If he had combed his hair and was wearing less sloppy clothes he might have come straight out of a female teenager's pillow-fantasy with his tall, well-proportioned figure. And yet there was something else missing, Fred now thought, to make him into a male sex-symbol - the sparkle of intellectual competence in the eyes that he lacked. He had, in fact, a very blank, almost bored look.

The other guy was stout and mean-looking. His general appearance was dirty. He seemed quite nervous, but this nervousness must have been a natural state for him, because there was no evidence that his surroundings were affecting him (he didn't react to them). He was plucking at his sleeve and his eyes were flickering as they scanned Fred. But as Fred came closer these movements actually subsided.

The two men were still standing in front of the door, the tall one looking incuriously at Fred. Fred would have to brush past them to get to the door.

"Okay, now." said the stout fellow, and Fred realized that he was pointing a small-caliber pistol at him. He almost backed away.

So it had finally happened!

Fred had always thought that this kind of things only happened in the fancy-talk of his superiors and in his own fantasy. Somehow he felt unprepared.

And yet he wasn't as scared as he might have been. The pistol aimed at him was very real to him, and although it was a small-caliber he was aware of the damage it could do, especially at short-range. But it didn't have the surrealistic aura it would have had for the average shitter who sees guns as a symbol of power in all the movies and never actually ever touches, let alone fires one.

Fred had handled all types of hand-guns, semi-automatics and revolvers, right up to the fantastic 44-Magnum, a revolver whose recoil could supposedly (so he was told) break your arm if you fired it while holding it stiffly. He had fired fifty rounds with

such a weapon, and he still remembered slipping the big, heavy cartridges into the cylinder and the sharp smell of burnt powder after each shot.

Fred identified the pistol that was aimed at his belly now as a Berretta, caliber 25, and he suddenly had a great urge to stay alive. It would be pitiful, he felt, to die of a 25-bullet.

"What do you want...?" he asked slowly.

"Open the door and lead us to the forensic medicine department." answered the tall guy calmly, in a manner suited to sensible questions.

Fred let go of the key he was holding in his hand, loosened all the other bundles and let them fall all together, clattering, onto the ground.

The tall guy looked incuriously down. The stout guy's eyes flickered, but his gun-hand remained steady.

Fred was standing there, foolishly looking from one to the other, like a small boy who has just filled his pants.

"Come on now," said the tall guy, slightly impatiently, "take up the key and open the door."

Fred bent down, and as he did so, his hand, reaching out for the keys, brushed past his side and felt for the emergency-call button on his radio. As he pushed it the radio made its little electronic noises, then came the buzz signaling that the call had been registered at the main Securitas-office.

"The office is calling me..." Fred said innocently.

"Give me that radio!" said the tall man with a note of desperation in his voice, pulled out the radio from its clip and flung it away.

The radio flew across the parking-lot and Fred heard the rustle of leaves as it landed among some bushes further off.

Now at least the office was warned. Having got the emergency-signal they would try calling him back. Getting no answer they must assume that something was wrong and the superiors would come looking for him.

Unfortunately they wouldn't know where he was. He very much doubted that they would have the good idea of looking at his notes of the previous nights to find out where he might be by this time. Anyway, a nightwatchman wasn't supposed to be predictable and only burglars knew that he was.

He picked up the enormous heap of glittering keys, held it in one arm like a baby, selected a key at random with his other hand and tried it on the lock. Of course it was the wrong key.

"Ah..!" he said for the benefit of the two guys waiting for him to open the door.

He tried another key which didn't work either.

He looked helplessly up at the tall guy and said meekly: "I lost the damn key..."

The tall guy grabbed him by the hair, turned Fred's throat upwards, and a knife-blade flicked up in his other hand. He laid the cold blade on Fred's throat, then against Fred's cheek and whispered into his ear: "Don't you play these tricks on us. If the next key doesn't fit, I'll cut your ear off, understood?"

Fred nodded sourly, feeling his scalp, in the grip of the man's huge hand, sliding over his skull.

It didn't take Fred long to select the correct key. Being a master-key its blade was cribbed with lines and holes making it very recognizable. He pushed it into the lock, turned it round and opened the door.

He entered the building, the two men following closely, but, bloody hell! he would show those guys that he wasn't just an ordinary nightwatchman!

As he led them to the lift he put away all the keys except the ones he would need.

The two ruffians had brought no torch. Possibly the idea occurred to them now. The tall one grabbed hold of one of Fred's shoulder-straps to make sure he wouldn't suddenly dart away and leave them in the dark.

Fred pushed the lift-button, and the door opened with its fine-sounding hydraulic hiss, revealing the blank and brightly illuminated interior of a lift big enough for a bed (or rather coffins in this case).

As a rule, nightwatchmen were not supposed to take lifts. Since they were often alone in the buildings they visited, being caught in the lift could be a major problem. The portable radio was not a reliable means of asking for help, because radio-waves sometimes had difficulties emitting out of lift-shafts.

Fred assumed that a major power break-down was very unlikely in buildings belonging to the hospital and thus, in spite of the rules of his trade, this lift was familiar to him.

They entered the lift and he confidently pushed the lowest button. The lift started moving downwards. Forensic medicine was on the top-floor, there even was a notice next to the top button saying so, but the two ruffians never noticed.

The door opened and they were in the basement. Fred led them along a dark corridor, past many doors behind some of which the whine of machinery could be heard.

At the end of the corridor there was a big, electrically powered sliding-door. Fred pushed the button and the door started to open with a screeching sound.

The tall guy standing behind Fred was feeling nervous. He had been so cool and emotionless a while ago, when he had taken charge of Fred. But now he was in a place he didn't know, and he didn't like the way Fred confidently touched buttons here and there, without waiting for his permission (they could have been alarm-buttons) - he felt out of control.

Fred sensed the uncomfortable vibrations of the tense body behind him. The guy was still relatively calm, outwardly, but the storm was building up, and his inner nervousness showed in some sinister way that felt like a threat.

Fred almost preferred the company of the stout fellow, the one with the gun. He was hyperactive and unpredictable. He looked mean. There was always some part of him twitching, but all this activity seemed rather cheerful. Fred liked him better because there was no chance of anything building up in him - whatever came to his mind was directly transferred to his body. Fred might die through his hands quite unexpectedly, but at least he always had direct feed-back of the fellow's emotions.

Fred led the two of them through an underground tunnel, through the basement of another building and then through yet another underground tunnel.

"Where the hell is forensic medicine?" asked the stout guy, putting some kind of general resentment into his voice, but without yet the least trace of suspicion.

Fred said: "They don't keep the dead among the living. When somebody dies in the hospital some nurse gets the job of pushing away the bed. They roll it along these endless corridors. It happens any time of the day or the night."

This was of course a beautiful piece of bullshit.

"Isn't there any light in these corridors?" asked the stout guy.

"There must be," answered Fred, "but as a nightwatchman I'm not supposed to switch on any lights, so I wouldn't know where the switches are, you see..."

"Shut up, now!" said the tall guy, and the tone of his voice was the sign of more to come.

The stout guy didn't attempt making more conversation.

They now arrived in the basement of the building called "Pathology". It was the oldest and most sinister building of the whole complex. The walls were all grey and peeling,

the hinges of the wooden doors with old-fashioned handles all needed oiling and there was a black bust of a wise man with prominent moustaches in the majestic stairways. There were pictures along the walls of the stairways too - faded black and white photographs of old rock-carvings showing various (chilling) aspects of primitive medicine.

Fred had known this building even before his nightwatchman-days. There were lab-rooms in here where young students learnt to dissect bodies. He remembered the days when he would be sitting on a bench in a reasonably white shirt at a crude wooden table, scraping out the yellow fat of an open leg.

He remembered the rooms well, the way they had seemed to him in those days. All the wooden tables with all the skin-coloured, hairy, spongy, humid limbs, strongly smelling of alcohol, all the students in their white blouses sitting around them, talking and laughing, just as students do in all lab-sessions. Perhaps they did so here even more, making an effort to distinguish themselves from the deadly silent and yet humanoid objects they were dealing with.

Yes, Fred remembered those fat-scraping days very well, cutting and tearing at the alcohol-soaked limbs, looking for nerves, arteries, veins, getting impatient and scraping them away with the fat...

He remembered working on a head with two or three other guys.

After many years of bathing in alcohol the features had all faded away. The lips were colourless and the mouth just a narrow slit. The beard-hairs looked like tiny arrows sticking in the spongy flesh. Except for them, the shape of the nose was the only prominent thing in this face.

But then Fred had raised one of the shriveled-up eye-lids with the blunt edge of his knife-blade, and suddenly an eye had been staring at him!

The eye had lost every sparkle of life, and yet it still seemed to be aimed somewhere, as though it were ready to come to life again anytime at some divine command.

Fred had taken out the eye. After cutting through the nerve and all the muscles, some of which were surprisingly thick and tough (he used to know their names, long ago), it popped out quite easily. There it was, lying on a metallic plate in front of him.

Fred had dreamily looked out of the window for an instant. When he looked back and the washed-out face appeared in the corner of his visual field he got a small shock because the other eye was staring at him - one of his mates had opened the lid. Fred looked straight at the challenging eye - it was lifeless, what else had he expected?

Today things were different. The rooms were always dark and deserted when Fred visited them. The limbs covered up so they wouldn't dry out, or even put away altogether into some fridge.

Today he wasn't wearing a white shirt. He was buckled up in a heavy nightwatchman-attire, and there were two ruffians following him. He took them through a side-door to the staircase that led up towards the ground-floor of this ill-loved building.

Forensic medicine wasn't in this building at all, of course.

The two ruffians followed him up the stairs and into the corridor full of little ovens, fridges and centrifugal-machines. Fred took them along the corridor for a while and opened the door to the big lab-room. There was the familiar poster of a human skeleton, covered with arrows leading from tightly printed paragraphs at the side to the various bones, hanging on the back-wall, next to a show-glass partition where various items were kept in jars. Among them was a human embryo, its tiny fingers clasped to fists and its small face, lacking none of the features, looking just like a rubbery mask for an expensive doll. Fred made sure that his two followers noticed it. The tables in the room were empty, though.

Fred took them into the next room which contained more charts and empty tables. Behind this room, in the corner of the building, there was a relatively large, refrigerated chamber. The other wing of the building contained some dignified, wood-paneled rooms, with flower-pots and trestles, where recently deceased people could be seen for the last time before burial (or before being stored away for the future use of science, perhaps).

There was a tiny, thick-glassed window in the heavy chamber-door. Fred didn't bother to take a look. He pushed the old-fashioned key into the lock, turned it and bashed down the big handle. He pulled the door fully open without peeping into the chamber first.

Two coffins were lying side by side on some trestles in the middle of the room. Their lids were resting against the wall.

Fred stepped into the chamber unhesitatingly, and the ruffians had to follow.

"Okay," he said.

The stout guy remained standing next to Fred, his little gun pointing. The tall guy moved gradually in among the coffins and looked at the livid faces resting on the pillows.

"Where's the girl..?" he then asked slowly.

"There's only these two," said Fred.

The tall guy looked up from the coffins. There was the faintest trace of suspicion in his eyes as he addressed Fred: "The girl was brought in this evening. She couldn't already be packed away in a coffin!"

"Fuck!" said the stout guy, who obviously had the sharper mind of the two. "This isn't forensic medicine at all!" There was an admiring and deadly menacing undertone in his voice.

The tall guy convulsively moved up towards Fred, almost upsetting one of the coffins. He looked as though he were going to slap Fred across the face.

Fred looked up at him, seeming completely abashed. "This is where they keep the bodies..." he said helplessly.

"Come on, there must be another place!" said the stout guy. "This isn't forensic medicine!"

The tall guy wasn't talking. He was just looking down at Fred, his eyes spitting X-rays.

The stout guy seemed to be thinking, then he said, almost kindly: "Take us back to the entrance we came in and we'll find the department for ourselves."

Fred nodded silently.

"Okay, move! move!" the tall guy finally burst out.

They left the chamber and Fred locked the door. They let him do it, they let him lock all the doors behind him. Possibly it gave them a sense of security.

Fred took them back down the staircase into the basement and through to the underground tunnel. Although he was trying to think of some way to waste more time he couldn't prevent himself from walking briskly. The tall guy was walking beside him, holding on to the shoulder-strap and occasionally, for no reason at all, pulling him this way and that way.

"Bang!.. Clash..." There was the sound of a sample-carrier banging around a corner in the air-flow tube ahead of them. Nothing could be seen in front of them - just the tunnel peacefully sloping away in a sweeping bend. Fred felt the tall man's grip tightening on his shoulder.

The sample-carrier came whizzing towards them.

As it swished past overhead, Fred felt the grip on his shoulder suddenly loosen completely, and as he half turned round he saw the tall guy taken aback in amazement and the stout fellow almost crouching, pointing his gun up into the air with an expression of utter bewilderment.

Fred switched off his torch and made a dash for it.

He ran, the bundles slopping against his hips. Luckily the tunnel was bending to the right in front of him. Every few steps he gave a quick flicker of his torch. It took several seconds before he heard the first report of the gun. He wasn't too scared - bullets don't go around bends.

He arrived in the basement of the next building rather breathlessly, but he took care to lock all the doors. Then he ran up the stairs, to the main entrance, unlocked it rather nervously, tore it open and took a deep breath of the clean, fresh night-air.

He was so excited he actually had to stop and think about what to do next. Since he had lost his radio he would have to find a telephone. Where was the closest telephone?

He found one in an office and selected the three-digit emergency number of the police he had known by heart for so long without ever needing it. While the phone was ringing at the other end, he tried to cool down. When the calm, deep voice answered, Fred immediately felt at ease. He said "Good evening", gave his function and name and a brief account of what had happened. He needed help immediately, he said, and would wait for it at the main entrance of the building "Pathology".

The guy at the other end repeated the message, Fred said "yes, good-bye" and hung up. Then he rang up the Securitas-office which was very glad to hear from him having got the emergency-call earlier. He gave a quick explanation of what had happened and asked for a couple of superiors to come and help dealing with the police.

Whenever Securitas and the police worked together there would be a mutual exchange of signatures and extensive report-writing about which Fred didn't feel too confident.

Then Fred left the phone, the office and the building, went outside and walked back to the main entrance of the Pathology-building. He waited under a street-lamp, his eyes on the road, but looking behind him at the door every once in a while, afraid to see the two burglars suddenly rushing out and coming to take revenge on him. Of course that was impossible - even if they found their way in the dark, unknown place, they would still have to break through several doors before getting out.

Nevertheless he was very relieved when the first police-car appeared, cruising down the street at great speed with flashing lights.