

The police were very efficient. Fred took a few of them into the basement and unlocked the doors for them. He left them as they penetrated into the underground tunnel.

Then he took a couple down to the other building and let them into the tunnel from the other side.

Within minutes all the policemen came out, the two ruffians wearing handcuffs held between them.

Then Fred's hand was warmly shaken by the police-officer and by the superiors and finally he was allowed to get on with his usual job.

He went back to the forensic medicine department, found his radio in the bushes, had another look at the woman in the fridge and took down her false name, Hanna Sedgewick.

The next day Fred's story appeared in the newspaper. It would also find its way into the Securitas-yearbook. The day after, Fred got a letter of congratulations from the federal police. He framed it and put it away among some other useless documents.

Instead of victimizing himself, he had managed to make himself into a hero. For this reason he was very reluctant to show himself pleased and responsive when admired for his courage and cleverness. Besides he had also been lucky, not only clever.

The two men, captured thanks to Fred, had been wanted by the police for several months. They were accused of some attempted and one effective murders.

And yet they were small fry. They had been paid by somebody they didn't know to steal a body in the morgue and dispose of it in the best suited way. They didn't seem to know why, what this was all about, and they didn't care.

So the case was closed.

But why didn't anybody get the idea that Hanna wasn't Hanna? And where was the real Hanna?

Fred could think of only one sensible reason for stealing a corpse, and that was to prevent its identification. So obviously someone wanted society to continue believing that Hanna was dead, or that Maria was still alive, or both.

By now, formal identification of the body would have taken place, and yet Fred had heard nothing about an unfortunate confusion. He had even read the announcement of Hanna's death in the paper. So by now, Maria would have been buried as Hanna.

How was this possible?

Perhaps Hanna was rather alienated from her parents, and they didn't know what she looked like anymore... And possibly the idea that it wasn't Hanna might have seemed absolutely absurd for some strong reason, washing away all doubts...

But these could only be partial explanations - the resemblance between Hanna and Maria would still have to be bloody big!

So Hanna and Maria must be twins.

So Maria's surname must be Sedgewick, unless she was married, or adopted...

There definitely was some mystery to be uncovered in this whole business. Fred wondered if he should go to the police and tell whatever he knew.

But what did he really know?

He had seen the body of a beautiful woman in the morgue, and the woman had a birth-mark on her left breast. This had brought back to him the memory of a most unfortunate experience - his first sexual experiment, a bitter failure.

That was all that had really happened. How could Fred possibly claim that he had positively identified the body? His emotional reaction to the body had been very strong, and that was understandable, after what he had been through. That meant something about him, but nothing about the body.

And yet,...

Fred had seen many dead bodies. Corpses were part of his life. If that particular body had brought back a faded memory, there must have been a reason, a reminder...

The birth-mark was in the right spot, and it was the right shape too. Fred closed his eyes and tried to picture it, turning it around in his mind.

But could he be sure? The more he thought about that damned birth-mark, the less he remembered it.

Should he go to the police and tell them about this birth-mark that he had first seen many years ago on a school-girl he had tried to rape? Tell them that this school-girl was Maria and not Hanna?

And then possibly the corpse would have to be exhumed, the parents would be asked to confirm the identification of the body...

It would be a big thing.

Surely Fred's mind, numbed and blurred by too many years of inaction, was just confused at having been shaken awake so suddenly. It was seeing connections where there weren't any. The birth-mark was just a birth-mark, a meaningless blotch with no particular shape that just happened to be on the left breast.

Whatever Fred had originally wanted to do with Maria, he had failed and lost her. It was no use to go on hoping that he might meet her again and fix things up.

All he had to do was shut up and forget about it.

Okay, he would shut up. He wouldn't go to the police. But he couldn't forget about it and so he would do some research of his own.

Maria was dead, lost to the world. But her sister Hanna might still be saved. Perhaps she was held a prisoner by the murderers of Maria. Perhaps there was something for Fred to do. Besides, that was what his inner voice had told him, wasn't it?

Obviously there was no use in asking people about Hanna. Everybody would tell him that she was dead. He would have to find out about Maria first. Assuming that she was a Sedgewick, all he had to do to get started was to find the Sedgewicks.

So Fred dug out the death-announcement from amongst the old newspapers. There wasn't any address given, of course, he should have known, but the church in which the ceremony took place was in the suburb where Fred had had his first flat, about ten years ago...

Fred looked in the telephone-book for some Sedgewicks living in that suburb. As luck would have it, there was just one family with that name. Well now? should he ring them up?

He didn't like talking to people over the phone too much. He was always scared of forgetting to ask some of the relevant questions and not getting all the answers. Then he would have to ring up again and that was usually beyond him.

When he talked to people directly, the introductory "hello"s and all this stuff would be much more extensive, giving him time to settle into the conversation and feel comfortable. Then he would be less likely to forget to ask all the questions. Besides, in physical encounters it was always possible for him to feel strong through imposing his physical presence. People couldn't just hang up at his face if he got too boring and so he could take his time even when they were growing impatient.

There was another reason for going to see the Sedgewicks - he would get an impression of the place, and since he didn't exactly know what he was looking for, that could be important.

He put his town-map into the breast-pocket and took his motor-bike to go and see the Sedgewicks.

He found the place quite easily. It wasn't very far from his former flat. It was an uninteresting, average-sized family-house with grey walls, large windows with rather colourful curtains, and a reasonable front-yard. Fred left his bike on the drive-way and walked to the entrance-door. There were flower-pots everywhere which seemed to have been left on the lawn randomly. Only half of Fred's mind wondered about this. He knocked on the door using the blackened brass door-knocker.

It took a while till he heard steps inside. Then the door opened halfway and a non-descript, elderly woman peeked out.

"Good afternoon." Fred said in his most polite manner. He was wearing his uniform without the badges. Those were the only formal clothes he had and it made people confident or at least gave them a feel of his fake authority.

But this woman reacted as though she had seen many men in uniform lately and had grown rather tired of them. "What do you want?" she asked in a resigned way without opening the door any further.

"I once knew your daughter Maria," said Fred, "but I lost touch with her. I was wondering if you could give me her current address."

The woman looked up mildly surprised. Clearly she had been expecting something, but this was something else.

There you are! thought Fred. This woman hasn't got a daughter named Maria!

"Aha..." said the woman and remained quiet. She seemed to be thinking, and the effort made her look older and completely worn-out.

"Yes, you see, we were sort of friends in the time when I..."

"Yes, yes, I understand." said the woman and nodded. Maybe she had wanted to explain something, but now she felt too tired.

"Just a moment..." she said and walked away, leaving the door open.

She came back a little later with a piece of torn-off paper on which she had scribbled a street-name with a number.

"There you are." she said and handed the note over to Fred.

"Oh, thank you!.." said Fred, but she was already closing the door.

He returned to his motor-bike and drove off.

Now all those flower-pots made sense to him - they must be leftovers from the ceremony. He had just talked to Hanna's mother who had another daughter called Maria..!

Well, Fred set out to find Maria's place immediately.

The street where Maria lived already belonged to the main town, Fred guessed. There were a couple of bus-stops, a mechanic's garage or two, a few shops and many elderly houses lacking in character, some of them tastelessly renovated. The number Fred was looking for belonged to one of these houses. The entrance was at the side, away from the street, hidden behind some bushes. Fred looked at the letterboxes, most of them bearing a little sticker with some girl's first name, written in cute, girlish handwriting, sometimes accompanied by a drawing of a little red heart.

Fred grew a bit suspicious seeing all this, and sure enough, Maria's name was there too...

He stepped into the building and looked for her door. He didn't hesitate for too long when he found it and knocked purposefully.

Nothing happened.

So now what? He had found the place where Maria lived, and since she was dead she could obviously not be home...

He went over to the next door and knocked there. It took only a quarter of a minute and the door opened a crack. A female face stuck out and said in an artificially melodious and suggestively flavoured voice:

“Hello, darling... Do you want to come in..?”

“I’d be looking for Maria.” said Fred, matter-of-factly.

“Oh, I see...” said the slow, slurring voice, “well, what about me for a change..?”

“No offence meant,” said Fred with a half-smile on his face as though he were tolerantly amused, “but my mind is rather set on Maria.”

“Yes,” said the woman, and her voice lost most of its surface sensuality, which uncovered something that seemed to Fred almost mournful. “Maria is young and beautiful, just the type suited to a guy like you.”

“Thank you,” said Fred, “now where or when can I find her?”

“How would I know?”

“She’s your neighbour. What can you tell me about her?”

“Listen, either you’re going to come in, or I’ll have to close the door. You might be blotting out my customers.”

“I’ll come in.” said Fred simply.

The woman started to open the door further. Fred saw her tight skirt under which some elaborate underwear was showing. Her legs looked fat and reddened, bursting out from under the skirt as it seemed.

“That will be eighty euros, then.” she said.

“No, no,” said Fred, laughing and holding the door. “All I want is to find out about Maria.”

“If you want to talk, we can talk.” said the woman. “You can have me as a bonus. It’s all the same price.”

Fred had the money. He suddenly felt like going in there with her and undressing, completely, lying down on the mattress with its pink little roses on the bed with its artistically curved, golden bedstead. There he would be lying, on his back, shamelessly naked, looking up into the cracked ceiling and at the fancy lamp with all the purple wool-cords hanging down from it...

A slight breeze would be coming in from under the light, pink curtains mildly filtering the daylight, and would brush softly past his genitals and through his body-hair...

She would come towards him and put a glass of whisky into his outstretched hand...

But then she would lie down next to him, put her fat hands all over his body, try to make him do something, and this thought didn’t stimulate him at all.

“I want Maria, not you.” he said, quite sternly. He was glad to be wearing a uniform.

It was good to be appearing as a diplomat instead of just a man in front of such a woman who could imagine any man naked so easily.

“What do you want of her?” said the woman, suddenly suspicious. Obviously she had gathered that he really wasn’t here just as a man, but as a representative of something bigger.

“Guess..!” said Fred and smiled quizzically.

Now the woman really didn’t know what to think.

“You can help me.” said Fred. “I’ll give you eighty euros now if you promise to ring me up as soon as somebody enters her flat. I’ll give you another eighty euros when it has happened.”

“You really want to meet her, don’t you?” asked the woman.

“Yes.” said Fred.

“Well, you see, she hasn’t been round for quite a few days now. She didn’t tell anybody where she went. She never talked much. She is much younger than most of

us and seems to come from some rich and well-educated back-ground. Her customers also are strange...”

“What do you mean?” asked Fred, hardly hiding his interest.

“Well, they would only stay for a few minutes, so I sometimes wondered what she was doing with them. They are mostly gentlemen in suits and with business attaché-cases. They come fairly regularly, I suppose. I saw a few hanging round recently, not knowing what to do now that she is away.”

“Why are you telling me all this?” asked Fred, as though he wasn’t interested.

“Well, you don’t seem to be part of the game,” said the woman, looking at him curiously, “so I just wanted to warn you that in the end you might be dealing with something bigger than you think.”

“That’s okay,” said Fred with faked casualness, “you just ring me up as soon as somebody is around.”

He took out a note-pad and wrote down his phone-number. He gave her the number and eighty euros.

“Okay?” he asked.

“I’ll do what I can...” she said.

“Just ring me up any time of the day or the night.” he said and left.

Fred was lying on his bed in the dark, listening to music. It must be rather late in the evening, but of course he wouldn’t be able to sleep - nightwatchmen don’t sleep at night, not even in their holidays. Their circadian rhythm is tuned for night-activity.

He was wearing his head-phones and felt surrounded by the music. Somehow he didn’t remember having enjoyed music this much for a long time.

He wasn’t quite sure if music should be considered as a useless invention, a soothing voice that beckons to the mind and leads it into issueless dreams and illusions, or if it should be considered as mankind’s greatest achievement.

Is music just a drug?

First of all, what is a drug?

A drug is usually some chemical that sets the mind spinning. It doesn’t bear any information, it doesn’t teach or show the mind anything new but just reveals to consciousness things that were hidden or carefully filed away, throws them about, lets the mind play with them, and then its effect wears off, leaves the mind sitting in its own mess.

Perhaps the mind really gets fun out of playing with its own fantasies. Perhaps it gets so much fun that it doesn’t wish to interact with the outside world any more.

But of course drugs don’t bring any renewal. They just disrupt connections, hinder inhibitions to do their work, allow the mind to play but never offer it any new items to play with.

And so what? Why should the mind be so neophile in the first place?

Well, being neophile is possibly what life is all about - after all the universe is not an excessively stable place, its entropy keeps growing and nothing in it is ever absolute.

By being neophile, life-forms manage to keep ahead of the changes in their environment and thus to survive.

While a mind which plays its own games without interacting with anything outside of itself will just drown in this careless, aimless world, waves of destiny regretfully lapping over the sinking body as it disappears from view together with its amazing (but useless) internal structure.

So drugs, whatever they are (good or bad), certainly don’t uphold life.

What about music? Is music just a drug?

Fred certainly was addicted to it, but it wasn't a drug for him, he felt. Music bears some information, many people have put a life-time of effort into setting it up.

Music, Fred felt, offered him a roster for his thoughts and feelings. With its rhythm, its recurring and yet evolving themes it offered him the kind of steadiness his mind needed to organize its blurred visions into some picture that made sense.

Like a washing-line to hang out the freshly cleaned and invariably hopelessly mixed clothes from the washing-machine...

And yet music is more than just a steady line.

Even when there is a steady line, a mixed-up mind might still forget what it was trying to do while walking between the line and the washing-basket. This is where music offers some real help - through the familiarity of the musical theme it reminds the mind of what it has just done, and through the novelty of the development it shows the mind what might come next.

Well now, what about a piece of music that you know so well it has become a part of yourself? What about listening to it over and over again? Does this start to resemble drug-addiction?

This is when the phone rang.

In the middle of the night? Incredible!

It was the prostitute. She didn't sound like a prostitute over the phone. Her voice was slightly excited, but not at all in a suggestive way. In fact, she was trying to hide it.

"You wanted to find out about Maria, didn't you?" she said instead of a greeting.

"Yes..." answered Fred, also becoming rather excited.

"Well, there's somebody in her flat now, rummaging about."

"I'll be right there!" said Fred and hung up.

He got properly dressed, shut down the CD-player and the lights, left the flat and went into the big, underground, common garage of the building. His Mustang was standing there, waiting for him, looking at him with its rounded headlights from under its fierce brow, ready for a night-ride.

But Fred decided that his present assignment was too ill-defined to take the car and warm up its eight cylinders. He went for his motor-bike instead. It was standing further off, next to the supermarket-trolleys. Its rough two-stroke, air-cooled one-cylinder engine would be better suited for the job.

He fitted a couple of ear-plugs into his ears, unfastened the helmet and slipped it on, threw himself astride of the saddle with its crackled and bursting pseudo-leather covering, fitted the key and punched the choke in to its full capacity.

Then he kick-started the motor with a single, violent movement of his leg and fed it with little bursts of gas from his right hand on the handle-bar. The growling noise was unpleasant, high-pitched and nerve-wrecking.

Keeping the engine alive with his right hand, Fred eased the choke away. Then he pulled the clutch with his left hand, clanked in the first gear with his left foot, gradually let go of the clutch, and stimulating the engine a bit he drove off.

The huge garage door opened in front of him, he drove through, and it silently glided back into its place behind him.

The fresh night-air that hit his face was extremely rejuvenating, and soon the motor-bike was howling through the streets, rushing along at rather unlawful speeds.

He came to the house of the prostitutes and left the bike on the sidewalk. There wasn't any light in any of the windows on the street-side. Obviously it was too late at night even for sex-business, or maybe they were just all doing it in the dark. But everything was so quiet that Fred suspected there was nothing going on at all.

He entered the building (the main-door was still open at least - it must always be open) and went straight to the door of the woman he had met last time, next to Maria's door. He knocked on it, discreetly. The door opened, the woman appeared, hurriedly drew Fred inside by the sleeve and closed it.

Her one-room flat was inadequately illuminated by the fancy lamp with the wool-cords, giving a yellowish, dirty glow by which diverse colours couldn't be told apart. The light curtains were drawn, behind them the window and the shutters were closed. The air was stuffy and stale, listlessly hanging in the room like the feeble light.

"He's still there!" said the woman, rather nervously.

"It's a He then, is it?" asked Fred.

"I think so," the woman whispered, "listen...", and she applied her head against the wall.

Fred did the same and listened carefully. There was some kind of noise, as if some biggish stuff was being shifted around.

"How long has this been going on?" asked Fred.

"It had just begun when I rang you up." That was less than a quarter of an hour ago.

"Here's eighty euros for you." said Fred and handed her the money.

Then he just remained sitting there, on her bed, listening at the wall, while she sat beside him, not very close, waiting for him to go.

The shifting stopped. Fred stood up and silently moved to the door. He listened intently. The mysterious man next door was leaving. Fred could hear the key being turned in the lock, then steps down the corridor.

Fred waited for half a moment, then he swiftly opened the door and let himself out.

The man was just going through the main-entrance. He was carrying a big cardboard-box. Fred followed him out of the building, remaining in the shadows when possible, only going a few steps at a time, around the block till he saw him loading the box into the boot of a smart car.

Then he ran to his motor-bike, started it and rode to the other side of the street where he stopped and waited among some parked cars, the small motor in front of his feet, still warm, busily but not too loudly tuckering at a steady idle.

Then the car came out of the parking-lot, its blinding headlights seeming to shine straight into Fred's face, turned into the street and drove away with the soft, low-pitched whine of a modern, powerful engine.

Fred let the car gain plenty of distance, then started off in pursuit.

The car was going at a steady, sensible speed, and Fred had to be careful not to get too close, because then it would have seemed strange for him not to overtake. But when the car left town and struck a national road that was winding its way into some woods the driver's mood seemed to change abruptly - Fred had to push his bike very hard in order not to lose him on the steep upgrades.

It occurred to Fred that the driver of the car might actually be trying to do just that - lose the hunter. As long as there were curves he didn't have a chance, of course, because by bending low Fred managed to corner in a way no car could. With the Mustang he might have been unable to keep up, despite its eight cylinders.

After the upgrades came the downgrades. Fred decided to play a trick. In a tight curve with little visibility he suddenly flung the gears from fifth into fourth and accelerated. He passed the corner of the car at a few centimeters' distance, and, the small engine howling like a desperate, cornered creature as it launches its final attack, he overtook the car with his knee almost scraping the ground.

He swung back into his lane a short distance from the grill of the car, shifted back into fifth and swiftly left the car behind him.

Now the car-driver must assume that Fred was just a crazy kid playing dangerous games on the almost deserted roads at night - nothing more.

Further off, when the headlights of the car had disappeared from view, Fred slowed down, shifted down into second gear and switched off the high-beam headlight, leaving the job of illuminating the road ahead to the feeble park light.

The car was coming up, still driving relatively hard.

Fred was tuckering along at the side of the road like a baby-motorcycle, or a moped. The car was behind him. It wasn't slowing down.

Whamm! It passed him at great speed, Fred felt the gush of wind, and it was gone, disappearing in a curve ahead.

Fred switched the high-beam back on again and accelerated. He had some difficulty catching up with the car, but finally he managed and kept at a sensible distance from it. He didn't reckon that the car-driver would get the idea that the hunter was behind him again - Fred was just another bkie, and the original hunter must be miles ahead or lying in a ditch, dead.

The road was leaving the woods now. They were coming into the spacey suburbs of the rich. This was not too far from where Fred's parents lived, where Fred himself had lived for most of his youth, in fact...

The car slowed down to a lawful speed, and so did Fred as he came up closer.

He was following the car closely, but without rousing suspicions this time, he hoped. When the car turned into a drive-way, Fred refrained from following it only just in time.

He parked the bike further off and came back to the drive-way by foot. He memorized the house-number and checked out the name of the street.

Now should he go and spy out the house?

There might be a big dog or some form of burglar-alarm in the garden. Fred's prey would get very suspicious if he suddenly saw all the lights going on in his garden, specially since he probably didn't have a clear conscience and possibly hadn't quite forgotten about those motor-bikes following him.

Fred decided against it. He had played the hero for long enough. It was time for him to go to the police, tell them about the strange things he knew and let them finish the job.

So he walked back to his motor-bike and set off on his way home.

At three o'clock in the afternoon Fred was sitting in the kitchen, eating lunch. He had reluctantly come out of bed a couple of hours earlier, when he had lost interest in the car-magazines that were lying on the floor next to it.

Then he had got dressed, putting on the same smelly clothes he had worn the day before, since it didn't indispose him himself and there was no chance that anybody else would take a close sniff at him today.

Then he had watched a trick film on video, the story of a little dinosaur looking for his mother in a grand, desolate, antediluvian world. The stereo-soundtrack was excellent, he loved the music, a grand orchestration of sentimentality...

He wondered what he got out of these children's tales. Perhaps his parents should have taken him to the movies when he was the right age for this stuff. But they had made him wait till he could afford it for himself. Nowadays these films didn't make him happy.

After the film, Fred got hungry, and so he went into the kitchen. He was sitting there now, finishing his lunch, and didn't yet know what to do with the rest of the day - and the better part of the night.

The police - he should go to the police and tell them...

Tell them what?

Well, Hanna's parents had a daughter called Maria who was a prostitute and who had disappeared after Hanna's supposed death...

Maria's den had been searched at night by a man who drove a smart car and lived in the well-to-do eastern suburbs...

And so what?

Fred would have to tell them that Hanna wasn't Hanna, that Maria was the one who had been killed and that efforts on solving the case should be concentrated there.

He would have to claim that even though he hardly knew Maria he had been more able to identify her than her own parents.

The whole story about how he knew of the birth-mark would have to be brought to light...

Well, maybe not. He could possibly say that he had been one of Maria's customers, since she was a prostitute. That would explain his knowledge about the birth-mark and his immediate reaction to finding her body in the fridge.

Immediate reaction... The police would then inquire why he hadn't come to see them about this earlier, if he was so sure.

But he wasn't so sure. Perhaps Hanna too had a birth-mark on her left breast. Perhaps Maria who was a prostitute had nothing to do with the Maria he had fleetingly met ages ago.

Perhaps there had never even been a birth-mark on the corpse in the fridge - perhaps the swelled edges of the deadly stabbing-wound had only seemed like a birth-mark in the wavering torch-light, and Fred, being in the midst of sexual fantasies, had jumped to conclusions...

Fred could never go to the police now.

When the telephone rang he shivered almost convulsively.

But it was only Securitas, asking him if he could do some extra work. Since he had no family and hardly any friends with whom to make arrangements it wasn't very important to him when he had his holidays, and he had often accepted work at short notice. He was the odd-job-man at Securitas.

"Yeah," he answered, "if it's not the usual walkabout around the hospital-buildings."

"No it's not, it's some business-man who wants someone around his house for the night while he is away. A very quiet job."

"Fine." said Fred.

"We'll expect you at the office in full uniform at seven pm, then, ok?"

"Right." said Fred.

"Thank-you!" said the guy at the other end with some real warmth, because by saying yes Fred had spared him from making at least half a dozen more unsuccessful calls.

Well, the question of what to do with the rest of the day was resolved. He had four hours to go shopping (buying some food and some comics to read for the night), to prepare a big meal that he would be able to take with him (something like a cheese-pie and an apple-pie; the cheese-pie would get cold, but maybe there would be a microwave-oven in the house).

He would also pack his portable TV-video-set together with a few stimulating tapes into the car.

Then he would spend a quiet, rather boring night, with nothing but the hourly radio-messages to worry about, but at least every one of these idly spent hours would mean a net-sum of fifteen euros coming into his pocket.

The early-morning hours would be the worst - the pictures in the comics would be flickering in front of his tired eyes, and even the simplest bullshit-story would be hard to follow.

Driving back to the office and then home in that state wasn't very clever, of course, but probably he would manage to get home before the morning rush-hours, and then he would take a quick shower to get rid of the uniform-smell, crawl into his bed and gratefully forget about the awakening world outside his window.

Shortly before seven Fred drove up in front of the Securitas main office. On the seat beside him were several bags with all the stuff he would need tonight to spend a pleasant and extended evening.

He entered the office and looked around. "Mister Stroehm?" said the girl behind the bullet-proof window.

"Yeah?" answered Fred non-committedly. She was a pretty girl, really, but Fred had no idea what kind of conversation he could possibly ever have with her. She called most of the men working here by their first names, but had made an exception for Fred who always treated her very formally and avoided talk when she handed out the keys and radio to him in the evenings.

"Inspector Dupertuis will take you there." she said.

"Thanks." answered Fred.

She was talking into a microphone beside her, telling Dupertuis that Stroehm had arrived, no doubt.

Then Fred was approached by a superior. "Mister Stroehm?"

"Yes, good evening."

"Inspector Dupertuis." and he stretched out his hand.

Fred grabbed and shook it, unsmilingly. He didn't like the inspector very much. He was friendly enough, but that friendliness was so constant that it obviously could have no meaning.

"You've got a car?" he asked Fred as he led him out.

"Yes, the blue one there..." said Fred.

The inspector didn't comment on it. "You follow me." he said, taking out the key for one of the company-cars.

He didn't take off his cap in the car and drove off at a rather quick rate. By the time Fred had started his Mustang and maneuvered out of the parking-slot he was almost out of sight, down the road.

The Mustang wasn't warm yet, since Fred lived quite close to the Securitas office.

"That fool can bloody well wait a moment!" Fred muttered with shut teeth to himself as he calmly motored down the road towards his superior.

When he had caught up, the inspector accelerated again and was smoothly gaining distance over Fred.

The double-exhaust of the Mustang was bubbling with a thunderous undertone. "You just wait till I'm hot, then I'll show you!" muttered Fred.

It took less than a minute, and the needle was beyond the blue mark. "Now I'll be sticking to your fucking rear-bumper!" said Fred.

He hated the inspector. There was a correctness about him which was exceedingly tiring. The well-groomed, black moustaches above his colourless, paper-thin lips seemed to monitor whatever he said, filtering out any possible emotions in his voice. Even jokes coming out of this mouth would have a robotic quality which might appeal to some people, specially to those who basically believed in his authority, but which made Fred feel tired and bored.

What the jokes were all about were people who had dropped out of the natural ways of things, people who had stepped out of line (and had consequently got caught in the most ridiculous situations).

Fred didn't believe in such a "natural" way of things. The rules had been made up arbitrarily and without foundations (they actually themselves served as foundations for further rules), and if people stepping out of line got caught in embarrassing situations, this wasn't a proof of the validity of the rules at all - it only happened because some shitters made sure it did.

So this inspector's sense of humour, meant to convey a powerful feeling of belonging together and being strong (we're the ones who know the rules), made Fred feel weak and helpless (I'm the one caught in the labyrinth).

Fred suspected that this inspector would treat anybody at least as an equal. All professions work along the same principles. Even scientists and doctors are basically the same as a high-ranked nightwatchman - they're involved with another set of rules, that's all the difference.

This man would never understand that some things can actually be discovered and understood, not just learned by heart.

Fred was helpless in front of such a man - all he could do was repeat "yes" as often as he was expected to, and assure him that he had really got the message whenever he was told one of those jokes meant to emphasize a point.

But now the Mustang was warm.

The road led up a hill, and the Mustang growled as it kept close to the company-car. But why did the Mustang growl so much when the other car managed to make the same effort without a sound?

They stopped at some red lights. When the lights turned green the company-car swiftly accelerated, and when Fred drove off a microsecond later he didn't have to check his Mustang as he would have expected, but was kept busy shifting through the gears in order to keep up.

So! This conventional four-cylinder car was actually competing against a Mustang and not even doing badly!

They entered the highway. At least on a long, straight stretch the Mustang would eventually beat the company-car, no doubt about it. Its top-speed was 200.

Barely 200... while the company-car, without making the slightest claim of being a sports-car, could probably better 180...

This was upsetting.

At least the Mustang had plenty of torque - no four-cylinder would beat it there. It would gladly climb up a hill with four loaded trailers behind it which would make any of those swift little Japanese runners stall even on flat country.

But who cares about trailers? Fred didn't even have a tow-bar on his Mustang...

Torque isn't only good for towing. But if it improves neither top-speed nor acceleration, what can it be good for?

But of course the Mustang was also much heavier. In an accident it would squash any of those little modern cars like an egg while hardly getting a scratch itself on its massive bumpers...

Fred watched the speedometer carefully and realized that his superior was obviously not very respectful of speed-limits.

Of course Securitas company-cars wouldn't usually get fined - they were always in a hurry. The police and Securitas covered each other in an unclean brotherhood-way. Fred had heard a story about an occurrence at a National Exhibition. Some security-guard watching an entrance had noticed three men bashing up an elderly drunk. He

immediately ran to find some policemen standing on duty further off to seek help. The policemen told him it wasn't their business to get mixed up in those things, and the drunk was finally left behind, unconscious, by the three guys who left unapprehended. The security-guard, working for Securitas, was ordered by his superiors to shut his mouth about what had happened, or else he would be sacked on account of having left his position unattended.

So what was the use of security-guards and policemen when people could be bashed up in front of their noses?

Never mind that now...

Perhaps Fred's speedometer was fucked. Perhaps it was drastically overestimating speed.

That would mean that on the few occasions when he had been in a racing-fit and had pushed the Mustang towards 200 he wasn't actually going that fast...

200, being a nice, round number, is the limit between a shitter-car and a real car. Fred would have a sleepless night (or rather day) if he suddenly doubted that his car could reach at least 200, as the speedometer kindly suggested...

These doubts were becoming unbearable! Fred would have to buy another vehicle. A real racer!

What about a super-motorbike, since he already had a car? A Yamaha V-max, one of those things which leave steaming rubber-bands behind their wheels when they drive off. No street-legal car can beat a Yamaha V-max on acceleration..!

But what about the winter? Surely a Yamaha V-max wasn't very good in the snow.

Besides Fred had never seen any on the road except in sunshine. They were the toys of the rich, for those people who already had a powerful car.

So Fred would have to continue using the Mustang in the snow. He would in effect sacrifice it to the motorbike...

That was unthinkable! The Mustang was part of his image. If he let it rust away under him he would end up with a blob-shaped modern car and lose the very last of his distinctiveness!

The company-car was still in front of him, with that fucking inspector at the wheel. If only Fred had not had to follow him! He would have been spared all these unworthy, unfruitful doubts about nothing!

Why hadn't they just given him the keys and the address of the place instead of actually leading him there? He would have enjoyed the ride in his wonderful car instead of mumbling to himself!

The company-car was leaving the highway now. So, they were heading towards those eastern suburbs, where Fred had chased a car only yesterday. It would be funny if...

Well, no, these things never happen.

The company-car was going this way and that way, along familiar routes. And here was the drive-way to Maria's "friend"...

Sure enough, the company-car put out its blinker and entered the drive-way!

It drove up to the house and stopped in front of it, Fred's superior making no effort to park it in any usual, tidy sense. He stepped out of the car and stood beautifully upright, looking grand in his well-cut uniform in front of the white car with blue lettering, with the elegant mansion in the background. Securitas, the guardians of law and order!

Fred parked his Mustang next to the double-garage in an orderly fashion and clambered out of the seat. He demurely walked up to his superior and let himself be flooded by explanations about the alarm-system, the doors, windows and keys, as well as more general things that any nightwatchman knew anyway.

He was very glad when the tiring superior finally left, because he was eager to explore the house.

Fred had always liked to see other people's houses when he had them to himself. He would examine their stereo-equipment, check through the magazine-stands and book-shelves, have a look at their bed-rooms and kitchens and try to picture their lives. In that sense, if only there had been more diversity, being a nightwatchman would not have been totally unsuited to him.

In this house there was something in particular to discover - the cardboard-box. Fred remembered the box, a big, solid box with red lettering all over it. He had all night to find it.

He started with the garage, which was so tidy it contained virtually nothing more than the smart car.

So the gentleman hadn't left with his car. That meant he had probably taken a taxi to the airport and was flying. If he was flying the chances that he had taken the huge cardboard-box with all its mysteries with him were very small. That was good news. Fred checked out the boot of the smart car - the box wasn't in there any more.

And if the gentleman was actually delivering the box somewhere? That would explain why he was away so shortly after having found it.

Fred dismissed this depressing idea. Something else had occurred to him - if the gentleman required a security-guard in his house tonight while never having needed one before, that might mean that he had something very valuable to protect and was feeling threatened.

Perhaps it was because of those motor-bikes which had chased him that he was scared.

Fred felt that he was getting close to solving a case all on his own. How was this possible? Through sheer, highly improbable luck?

No, everything that had happened so far made sense. When somebody died violently in town it was within a reasonable range of probability that Fred, being one of the few men who shared the job of watching over the morgue at night throughout the week, would see the corpse. So when Maria, living in this town, was killed, it wasn't so absurd that Fred would discover her body in the fridge.

Then Fred had made a few sensible assumptions and acted upon them. He had freaked out the gentleman by chasing him at night, and it was logical for the gentleman to be worried over his precious box. Whoever wanted a security-guard at his home would contact Securitas, the most known name in this business, and whenever Securitas needed a man on short notice in this town, they would ask Fred, since he was their odd-job-man.

So the whole thing wasn't just a huge streak of luck - it was perfectly logical for Fred to be here tonight and have a chance of finding that box. It was as if he had planned for this to happen.

But then again he might not find the box. Somewhere or other his careful examination of this case might still stall, and then he would regret that he hadn't gone to the police earlier.

Well, for the time being he would look for the box.

He found the stairways to the basement. It was like the entrance to a bunker, strangely alien to the rest of the house, which was comfortably kept in a rather neutral, but pleasant style, like the living-room in an embassy which also serves reception-purposes.

The basement consisted of a dark hall with grey concrete-walls. Part of it was organized into a cellar with a couple of large, softly buzzing fridges, their little

control-diodes dimly (macabrely, Fred thought) glowing, a wide stand for wine-bottles and boxes of food that would last for many months.

Further off there were several filing-cabinets. The keys of some of them were sticking in the locks, but others were closed. Fred opened whatever could be opened, but found nothing of interest.

Wouldn't there be a safe somewhere? Well, if there was, it would certainly be locked. An unpleasant idea came to Fred - what if the gentleman had unpacked the cardboard-box, and locked up the precious contents in a safe, for instance? Fred would never get behind the mystery then...

This gentleman didn't seem the kind to be keeping things in boxes, except for his food...

There it was, the box with red lettering, two other boxes piled on top of it! Or maybe it was just a similar box to the one Fred had seen him carrying that evening. Perhaps it was the same box, but with different contents...

Well, Fred checked it out anyway. He lifted off the two other boxes, the top one containing lettuce, the lower one various tin-cans (it was very heavy), and tore the box with the red lettering open, not knowing what to expect.

It contained many identical and sealed plastic-bags full of some white powder. Flour, what else could it be?..

But Fred, keeping his own house-hold, knew about flour - it is sold in the supermarkets within paper-bags full of fancy print. You cannot buy it within blank, transparent plastic-bags...

Fred took out his pocket-knife and made a small hole into one of the bags, then squeezed out some of the powder and carefully tasted it.

It had a rich, sickeningly sweet aroma.

This definitely wasn't flour!

It must be heroin, like in the films...

Fred's heart was thumping fast! So finally he had found something, something definite!

Calm down now! What is there to do next?

Fred decided not to leave the box here. He lifted it up and carried it away, out of the house and towards his car. He put it into the boot of the Mustang, on top of the spare tyre.

Well now, was this a good idea?

A superior might come here any time of the night to see how Fred was working, to check out his vigilance (Fred hoped he would someday surprise one of his superiors by hitting him over the head with his torch; he would then claim that he hadn't been able to identify the guy as a superior, but that he was obviously behaving in a very suspicious, threatening way, so that Fred had done what had seemed best in the circumstances).

The superior, after discreetly watching over Fred for a while, would then come out of cover and ask Fred to empty his pockets and would also want to have a look inside Fred's car. Then he would write a huge report about Fred, and Fred would have to read through it, nodding his head several times, the superior would make him sign it and would then finally, after having given Fred a big smile, leave him alone to go and bully somebody else.

The superior would see the video-recorder in Fred's car: "Is that your video-recorder?"

"Yes."

So then the superior would write in his report: "carries a video-recorder in his car." Of course there can be no law against this. Fred might have been using the car for other things during the day, and he might have forgotten to take out the video-recorder. Then the superior would see the box in Fred's car.

"What is this?"

"Flour."

"Aha..." The superior would have to accept that. Fred wouldn't come up with any stuttering explanations. It is no good to become embarrassed in front of superiors, it makes them suspicious. If they want to know more, let them ask.

Fred had been given some similar piece of advice about girls, long ago, by a friend he hardly remembered now, when he was a boy:

"When you go and see a girl, never make up any stupid excuses for doing so. If you do, your interaction with her will remain stuck within that fake purpose. Just let her wonder about you for a while, and if you then manage to make her comfortable and you both have a good time, the question why you came in the first place will never pop up again."

Yeah, that's how it works for other people. But Fred was so uncomfortable with girls that the question why he had come would naturally reappear. The girl would insist, and Fred would have nothing to say...

Well, Fred was uncomfortable with everybody, not just superiors and girls. The only reason why these two classes of people stood out from among the rest of the shitters was that he had some basic need to interact with them...

So Fred had found the box, had made an important discovery, and yet he managed just now to sadden and depress himself! That was stupid!

He took the TV-video-set together with his bag of tapes out of his car and carried them to the house where he settled down to watch some thoughtless film and spend a pleasantly empty evening.