

Fred was lying on the bed, holding up his 357 Magnum in front of him. The grip of the revolver lay smoothly and ergonomically in his hand. He was aiming at some spots in the ceiling and occasionally pulled the trigger, the cylinder would turn by sixty degrees, the hammer would bounce back upon the empty chamber and Fred would listen to the precise clicks of the fine mechanism.

A 357 Magnum is an excellent weapon. The cartridges are about the same size and weight as for an ordinary 38 Special, and while a 38 Special will usually do the job for you, killing your man without too much trouble, a jacketed 357 Magnum bullet, though it won't compare with the massive 44 Magnum, will gladly penetrate a car from behind, traverse both rows of seats as well as the driver and then still have enough thrust to go and encrust itself in the motor-block.

Fred turned round in bed, rested his head on his elbow, laid down the gun next to him and admired it. He let a finger glide over the glistening, soothingly cool metal-surface of the six-inch barrel.

Well now, time had come to do something. The box with its contents, doubtlessly worth several millions of euros, was lying on the kitchen-table.

He stood up and walked through his room half naked, holding the gun casually, and went to his desk where he laid it down. Then he got dressed, left for the bathroom and then for the kitchen, leaving his gun on the desk.

When he came back he opened a drawer, took out his holster as well as a box of cartridges, loaded the gun, fastened the holster around his shoulders and slipped the gun into it. The box of cartridges he forcefully drove into his rather too small pocket. He left the room, grabbed and put on his jacket, made sure the holster with the revolver was hidden beneath it, and left the flat.

He drove off to the eastern suburbs on his motorbike.

When he came to the drive-way of Maria's "friend" he didn't hesitate - after all he had spent a whole night on that property. He had no official business there now, but at least it wasn't unknown ground.

He drove up to the house and left his bike next to the garage, on the spot where the Mustang had been some time ago. As he walked to the main door over the lightly crunching pebbles he could see a curtain being drawn aside in one of the windows, and a worried man looking out.

Fred came up to the door and pushed the bell-button. He couldn't hear any ringing-sound. Either the bell was broken, which seemed highly unlikely considering the condition of the whole property, or it was ringing within the hidden, soundproof depths of the house.

The bell had obviously been heard, because very soon the door opened.

There was the gentleman, the guy who had carried the box out of Maria's den, the guy with the smart car who had tried to escape from the motorbike, the guy who had hired a nightwatchman for a single night and thus led the enemy straight into his fortress.

He looked tired, spent, downtrodden. But he was tall, well-groomed and had this competent look which is unbeatable, the look of someone who is above, who has succeeded in securing a higher position for himself and will keep it whatever happens, the look of someone who has the backing of society being a superior member of it.

"What is it?" he asked, tiredly, and looked down upon Fred.

Fred felt himself blushing like a child trying to sell flowers on the doorstep.

"Well now..." he said and didn't know how to continue. He pulled out the little plastic bag with the white powder from his pocket and showed it to the man. The man took it, turned it round in his hand (was it slightly trembling?..) and gave it back.

“Yes?” said the man, very politely, making Fred feel like saying: “Oh nothing, I’m sorry...” and going away with his head on fire.

But Fred remained brave. “Do you want it back? I’ve got the whole box.”

The man remained quiet. Soon it was too late for him to say, in the manner of a slightly impatient gentleman with more important things to do: “What box? Tell me what you want or please leave.”

He said nothing of the sort. He just remained quiet, but the way he looked at Fred was disquieting nonetheless.

Fred didn’t say anything either. He only touched the reassuring bump under his left shoulder and tried to look as unemotional as possible.

It seemed endless, but finally the man deemed it necessary to answer the question.

“How much do you want?” he asked softly.

“No, no,” said Fred, smiling (the worst was over), “I don’t want any money. I want the girl.”

The man was truly astounded. “The girl? Which girl?”

“Her name is Hanna Sedgewick.” said Fred.

“I don’t know her!” said the man and looked angry and scared.

“Of course you do!” said Fred. “Anyway, you hand over the girl to me, and I’ll hand over the powder to you.”

“The whole lot?” asked the man, regaining his calm and his natural superiority.

“Sure...” said Fred, dryly, as if answering a totally irrelevant question.

“I’ll take note. I’ll talk to my friends about this.” said the man, almost in his probably usual, competent manner.

“Now you listen,” said Fred, trying his hardest not to be put off by the reassumed patronizing manner of his opponent, “I’ll be waiting for you tonight at three o’clock in the woods. You take the first woodcutter’s path on your right when you drive from here into the city. I’ll be waiting there with the powder. Make sure you bring the girl.”

“We’ll be there...” answered the man and gave Fred a menacing half-smile. He had obviously totally regained his strength. Fred would have to be very careful.

“Right!” said Fred, turned briskly round and went off to his motorbike.

It was night, about one o’clock, nothing as yet suggested that daylight would ever reappear.

Fred was in the woods, standing beside his car. He had switched off all the lights, and his eyes were getting slowly accommodated to the dark. After a while he managed to make out that the sky above the gravel-path was a deep purple instead of totally black, and the path itself shimmered feebly like a silvery snail-track.

Fred listened for any sounds. At first he could hear nothing, but gradually he became aware of a rustle of leaves here and there, as well as the soft dripping of water somewhere. He knew nothing about these sounds, and would probably never find their origins, even if he went to look for them with his torch. They belonged to the mystery of the forest. Here all kinds of creatures did their own thing, and each of them saw the world in its own way, so that in effect each of them represented a different world, and each of these worlds probably held a paradise as well as a hell. All these worlds were inaccessible to Fred. He could only witness the occasional overlapping with his own realms of experience and try to imagine the rest.

Fred also did his own thing around here - he would occasionally come here to do some shooting. Further down the track there was a big mound of rubble. If Fred switched on the headlights now it would be in sight. Fred would walk the two dozens of meters to the mound and set up tin cans at the foot of it. Then he would walk back,

take up his gun and leaning against the bonnet of his car he would carefully take his aim.

The front and back sights would be in line, the surface of the far-off can shining in the muddy darkness ahead exactly behind them, and he would pull the trigger.

The "Boom!" would seem tremendous in the stillness, but it would quickly be swallowed up by the forest. The tin-can would have taken off like a rocket, and now Fred would hear the hollow clattering as it fell back on the gravel.

And so what?

Well, for a start this was very different from shooting at a club, where some asshole with a drooling voice would yell: "Five rounds -load!"

Then, when all the shooters would be standing at their benches, all in the same, compulsory stance, the asshole would yell: "When you're ready - begin!"

Then all the shooters would start firing with their oversized small-caliber pistols, making tiny, invisible dot-holes on the cardboard-target twenty-five meters away (or missing the target altogether).

After several minutes all the shooters would finally have put down their gun with the barrel exposed and the empty magazine presented openly. Then the range-officer (the asshole, that is to say) would walk from bench to bench, checking that all the guns were safely unloaded, and finally holler out: "Range is clear - move forward and patch!"

And all the little shitters would rush to their targets to count the holes and patch them up after the asshole had come by to comment on their group-size.

This was not Fred's idea of shooting.

Let's be honest about this! For him, whatever it might be down there was the enemy, and unless he missed he wanted to see something happening - he wanted to see the enemy jump, burst or topple over!

To shoot at something that showed no reaction was so boring that Fred's frustrated concentration would quickly fade away, and his bullets would fly anywhere...

Well, here in the depths of the forest Fred had found a spot where he could shoot in just the way that pleased him, where he could do his own thing. Of course this was illegal, but he only came here in the dead of the night, and no human being would ever know about it.

Can something, which is known and felt by nobody (and never will be), except for a single person who gains pleasure out of it, really be considered illegal, immoral, unjust..?

In a philosophical sense Fred guessed the answer was no. This was just like masturbation - nobody else's business unless it is done in public.

What about the forest itself?

Well, the forest is like an expanse of water - if you dip something in, the water will close around the object. If the object sinks, the water will fill in the space above it and close the surface again. The surface will always recover its perfect smoothness, whatever you throw into the water.

Even the commotion made by a swimming creature will eventually flatten out again. In a way this is infuriating, but on the other hand it allows you to do your own thing confidently, knowing that any real progress will be within yourself. Only progress will be recorded - the marks of all your struggles will kindly be wiped out by the world.

So the forest, in its neutral grandness, would peacefully swallow up whatever Fred had to let out of himself, and keep his secret for him, together with all the other mysteries it had in safe-keeping.

Fred opened the door of his car. The light inside went on. It wasn't a very bright light, hardly for map-reading. In fact it illuminated mainly the leg-room. There was another lamp, an adjustable spot-light overhead featuring an individual switch specially for reading inside the car - whatever might be said about American cars, all these little extras and gadgets sure make up for comfort and you miss them in any other car once you've had an American, inadequate though they may be in other ways.

Fred pulled out a shovel from behind the front seats and set himself to work. He dug out a shallow, broad puddle-bed in the gravel-path beside his car.

Then he pulled out a large plastic-sheet from his car and laid out the hole with it, secured its edges and corners with some large stones.

He stood back and looked at his work in the light spilling out from the doorway of the car.

The car, dimly lit from within, looked incongruous in the otherwise profoundly dark forest.

And yet, was it really so much out of place? Its shiny blue body glistened like a pool of fresh water. Its fluid lines all tended towards the grill, suggesting a desire, an aspiration. The nose of the car was outstretched towards new smells, ready to suck in fresh, unknown winds (to cool its motor-block as well as to mix some samples with fuel in the carburetor so as to burn it in the cylinders and spurt out the result from its double exhaust-pipe, polluting the environment).

The car, with its suggestively aggressive looks, might have appeared from among the trees for the first time in the history of life. It was born in the hidden depths of the forest, where Nature still experiments with her creative powers, far from the woodless, easily overruled plains where mankind has settled itself with its well-controlled machinery which leaves no chance to any new form of spirit and life...

The Mustang was born! It was ready to surge forward into the grey world of mankind and attack established norms!

But for its first testing sortie it had chosen the dark hours of night, the time when all mysterious creatures of the woods, never as yet seen by any human eye, will spread out their tender wings for their maiden-flight, to test their freshly created abilities in the harsh world of the outside which won't spare them if they fail and never makes any allowances.

Man himself had once come out of the forest in very much the same way...

Man had left the forest first, but then the Mustang had come to join him...

Fred loved his car..!

What was this bullshit Fred was going on about? That fucking car had been made in a stinking factory in some stinking, crime-ridden town in some state of America which probably still believed in capital "punishment"!

That was many years ago. Now the car was old, and like the mysterious process of fermentation which makes precious wine out of ordinary grape-juice, in this same sense the car had developed a soul of its own, something which was beyond the control of the simple engineers who had originally designed and built it...

Fred loved his car!

What the hell was he going on about? He had better get back to work!

He walked up to the car, unafraid of the two big, as yet lightless eyes and the snarling grill between them, walked past it letting his hand casually brush against the whole length of the coachwork and opened the boot. He took out the big box with the bags full of powder and carried it to the shallow basin he had built. He set the box down in the middle of the basin. Then he took out a huge, full canister from the boot and put it down next to the basin.

There wasn't too much else to do just now.

At three o'clock he opened the canister and poured the fuel into the basin. The boxful of heroin became an island in a sea of petrol.

Fred lit himself a cigarette and waited.

It took only a little while till Fred saw the light of a car. The car was still on the road, far to the left behind the trees, but it was slowing down. Now the light beams were turning towards Fred, and as the car passed over a bump a whole section of tree-tops was illuminated.

Soon Fred could hear the sound of an engine. It was a growling, low-revving engine, probably with plenty of grunt, but certainly not of the elaborate sort.

Now Fred was standing in the blinding light-beam. The high-legged car, doubtlessly a tough four-wheel-drive, was coming closer at a great pace. In front of Fred it stopped short with a quick squeak of tortured brakes and the light switched to low-beam.

As Fred silently sucked on his cigarette the doors opened and three men clambered out. A large, fat bully with a rather bloated, red face came up to Fred while the two others discreetly stayed back, standing on either side of the elbow-high bonnet of their Jeep.

Before the bully had a chance to say anything Fred asked calmly: "Where's the girl?"

"Well now," said the bully. He didn't have an unfriendly face, his expression was merely ironic, because he obviously didn't take Fred seriously as an opponent.

"There's three of us and you're all alone. What do you expect?" His voice was very dry. He made a droll movement of the hand towards Fred's left hip. "I can see that you are armed, but we're well trained. You wouldn't have a chance."

"How do you know that I'm alone?" asked Fred, the light shining in his dark eyes.

"Who would your men be, my friend? Someone hidden among the trees around here?" he laughed "Don't be ridiculous. Just let me take that box here..." he bent down.

"Stop it!" said Fred so sharply that the man looked up.

"Now you wouldn't want to do anything silly, would you?" the man half whispered.

"We'll shoot you!" he added.

Fred blew out some smoke. It whirled away, showing off nicely in the lights of the car.

The bully had caught the smell of spilt petrol. There was no need to explain, but Fred enjoyed this moment of power: "If you shoot or hit me, I'll fall, and if I fall, the cigarette will fall with me and set off the fuel. Your damned box with all its contents will go up with it." He made a pause, sucked on his cigarette, blew out some more smoke and continued: "You'd better hand over the girl. If you haven't got her with you, come back tomorrow."

The bully straightened himself, mumbling. He walked back to his car.

Fred was standing all alone next to his puddle of fuel. Despite all his precautions he was still at the mercy of those three men. He was dependant on the decision they were going to make.

But even for a complete fool there remains some dignity in lighting his own cigarette, something he does only for himself. He can pretend that he isn't here just because of the others - he is also here to smoke his cigarette. He isn't just waiting - he has something of his own to do. That gives him a sense of independence, and thus of sovereignty.

The girl was brought out of the car. Yes, it was her, no doubt about it, the living version of the woman in the fridge! Fred stared at her, completely amazed.

The bully pulled her by the hand, swung her forward and let her go. She caught herself up just before falling into the dirt, and the bully shouted: "Go! go over to that gentleman!"

The girl half turned round. "Why? Who is he? What's happening?"

Her voice, though scared, was fluid and clear.

"Don't ask! Go!" the bully called out, annoyed.

"I'm a friend," Fred said softly. "You're part of a bargain; go and sit in my car."

The girl obeyed.

Fred opened the door on his side and lowered himself into his seat.

"Just a moment!" the bully shouted. He rushed up with a gun in his hand. "Let me check that powder!"

Fred had switched the engine on. He left it idling.

The door was still open, the bully had bent down next to it and was examining the contents of the box. His gun was pointed at Fred.

"Okay, go!" he said after a while and lowered his gun.

Fred put in the first gear, dropped his cigarette and drove violently off, the gravel spurting out from under his rear tyres. The fire blazed up, the bully's yell was drowned in the flames and Fred pulled the door shut.

The Mustang was bouncing up and down on the rough gravel-path. Fred pulled into the next side-track on the left and drove hard. The car was slithering sideways, its wheels spinning and churning up mud, the engine angrily revving higher, as they crossed some puddles. But then they turned into the road, the ride became smooth and Fred quickly shifted through the gears till they reached a high and steady cruising-speed.

The girl half turned round in her seat. "Who the hell are you?!" she asked, an admiring undertone in her voice.

Fred looked sideways at her and wondered when he had had his last female passenger. He couldn't remember. He hardly ever had any passengers at all, and usually the seat next to him was cluttered with maps and various other papers.

"Who are you?" the girl asked again.

"It doesn't matter..." said Fred.

"Come on, tell me your name!"

"Fred Stroehm."

"Well, go on, talk! Tell me about yourself!"

Fred took his eyes off the road and looked at her. He loved her for what she had just said.

"I was a friend of your sister." he said.

"Maria didn't have any friends like you," the girl answered, "were you one of her customers?"

Was there some bitter irony in her voice?

"No." said Fred simply. He didn't add anything.

Hanna remained quiet for a moment. Then she said: "I know who you are - you're the guy with the advertisement photos?"

Fred was completely astounded. "How did you find that out?"

Hanna bit her lower lip. "Maria talked about you a lot, in later years, that is... At first she hadn't mentioned you to anybody, for many years, trying to work out for herself why she wasn't suited for those damned photos. Then she realized the photos were just a bad excuse, and that in reality you were desperately trying to make contact. She still reckoned she had failed and started to hope that she would meet you again to make up for it."

“What??” Fred was astounded.

“I tried to explain to her that you were just a hunter after his prey, but she insisted that, if that were the case, you would have finished the job and not let her go. You were looking for something that you obviously couldn’t find and she felt guilty for it.” Fred was looking at the road in front of him, expertly steering the Mustang around the curves, but he couldn’t believe it.

Hanna was going on: “Maria did very badly at school and she never managed to study. She became a prostitute in the hope of meeting you again...”

This story was getting worse and worse.

“I tried to tell her that you must have forgotten about her, but she felt sure you hadn’t found anybody else and that she ought to help you.”

“She didn’t even hate me?” Fred asked, incredulously.

“Oh yes, she hated you with a passion. But as long as she didn’t know what was wrong with her, why she had failed with you, she couldn’t approach anybody else. I tried to advise her into seeking professional assistance, but she refused.”

“So she became a prostitute...” said Fred softly.

“Yes, and at first she almost liked it, gained some kind of pleasure out of it - you know, a job well done. The men liked her because she was young and pretty. But gradually it started to disgust her, and then she got involved with those drug-dealers. She didn’t have to sleep with her customers any more, not most of them, anyway - she just sold them the dope and still made the same kind of money.”

Fred suddenly had some awful doubt. “You know that she is dead, don’t you?” he asked softly.

“Yes...” she answered distractedly.

They were silent for a while. There was only the hum of the eight cylinders.

Hanna broke the silence first: “Won’t they follow us?”

“They can never catch up with us.” Fred answered with finality.

“So you got me in exchange of the dope?” asked Hanna.

“That’s right.”

“Why did you burn it then? You broke the contract! You might even have killed that fat bully! He wasn’t the worst of them, you know...”

“That fat bully was going to shoot me as soon as I was out of reach of the precious box. They couldn’t afford to lose you. I did the only possible thing. Besides, there isn’t any fairness or ethics in that kind of interaction.”

Hanna didn’t answer.

“What are we doing now?” she asked after a while.

“We’re going to see some gentleman in the eastern suburbs and scare the living shit out of him!” answered Fred.

They had come into town by now. Fred followed the directions to the highway so as to drive back to the eastern suburbs along that other possible way.

“You know you are to blame for Maria’s death, don’t you?” asked Hanna.

“Yes.” said Fred, softly but definitely.

“She always hoped that you would turn up again... Now you finally did, when it was too late.”

“Yes...” said Fred patiently.

“But how did you get mixed up with those drug-dealers?”

Fred told her how he had found Maria in the morgue and how everything had started from there. “That is how I re-entered this unfortunate story.” he concluded.

Now Hanna told her part of the story. Maria had come to visit her in her small flat some evening. She was still wearing her funny prostitute-clothes and wanted to take a

shower before doing anything else. But then she would have something very important to tell Hanna. Just when she was coming out of the shower there was a knock on the door. Without waiting for an answer three men came into the flat. One of them pulled a knife and they went for Maria. Hanna was going to intervene, but they took care of her too. Maria defended herself so vigorously that she got accidentally stabbed and died within seconds. By this time Hanna had become hysterical and was dragged out of the flat. She was bound and gagged inside of a car, and while one man remained with her, the two others wanted to go and fetch Maria's body, but in the meantime the whole house had become alive with bustling people wanting to know what was going on, and so Maria's body had to be abandoned in Hanna's flat.

Fred knew the rest of the story already. Maria's body was mistaken for Hanna, and the drug-dealers wanted this mistake to be kept up so that the police-investigation wouldn't be directed towards Maria's surroundings, which might have been fatal. So they arranged for the corpse to be stolen out of the morgue before formal identification could occur. At this stage Fred had entered the game. Despite Fred's efforts the mistake in identification remained ("that shows a lot about my parents" Hanna commented bitterly).

So all was still going well for the drug-dealers. They kept Hanna as a prisoner, hoping that she might eventually play Maria's part in case Maria's public appearance became indispensable at some stage. They were still working on means to make Hanna into a trustworthy slave when Fred saved her.

"Your sister was probably trying to run away and go into business for herself." Fred commented.

"I reckon so," said Hanna, "and she got herself killed in the process. There couldn't have been another ending to her fucked-up life."

Fred didn't answer to that one. It thrust the whole responsibility upon him, because he had initially fucked up Maria's life.

"Why don't we just denounce the whole bunch to the police?" asked Hanna. "We're two witnesses, and between ourselves we know enough to get them all locked up."

"No, no," said Fred, "the organization would lose some of its members, but it would survive. I think we can find a way of destroying the whole of it."

"And get ourselves killed..." added Hanna.

"There is some risk..." said Fred dreamily. He remained quiet for a little moment, but then he clapped one hand against the steering-wheel and said rather vehemently:

"This is my case! I'm going to see it through to the end! I've been a shitter for long enough!"

"You want to be a hero?" Hanna asked very calmly.

"Yes, probably it's as simple as that." answered Fred just as calmly.

They didn't talk from there on till they reached the house of the rich gentleman.

Fred drove into the driveway hardly slowing down and came to a skidding halt on the gravel in front of the proud mansion.

He jumped out of the car and rushed to the big oak-wood door where he pressed the bell-button with more vigour than was necessary. By the time the door opened, Hanna was standing beside him. After all, she also wished to pay back these people, and since Fred was going on with this so confidently, she went along with him.

The gentleman had a shock when he saw the two of them, and this time he didn't try to hide it.

"You?!" he called out. Then slightly calming down: "What happened?"

"Well," said Fred, "I freed Hanna Sedgewick as you can see, and burnt the dope. Your men will still be lost somewhere in the forest, I guess."

"You burnt the dope?" the man asked incredulously.

"Yeah," said Fred, "and we came here to make you an offer."

"What can you offer me?! you fool!" the man said with real despair. "I'm finished!!"

He seemed ready to bolt off, to disappear in the dark depths of the house behind him.

"Calm down," said Fred, and he pulled the left side of his jacket away from his body, uncovering the grip of his pistol. "I'm quick on the draw." he added rather proudly.

"Even if you don't denounce me to the police..." the man said, and his wrinkled face, with the lines of sternness and competence so deeply embedded that they couldn't fade away altogether, looked very inadequately anguished, "...if I can't pay for the dope the company will kill me!"

He remained quiet for a moment, his face going through the strangest and most unfitting contortions.

Then he added with a whelping voice: "I haven't got that kind of money, and you burnt the dope!"

"Here's my offer," said Fred, feeling stronger and stronger: "we won't denounce you if you will participate in following up the pipeline and destroying the organization.

Once this is done, you will have nothing more to fear from anybody. You will be able to come back here and resume your normal life. You will lose nothing, neither your money nor your standing."

"But who are you?" asked the man, some real curiosity flickering up in his humid eyes.

"I'm just me," said Fred, "I'm not a member of anything, if that's what you mean."

"But you're crazy!" said the man with a certain amount of returning desperation. "You don't know what you're letting yourself in for!"

"I'm eager to find out!" said Fred smiling.

It occurred to him that Hanna might not be going along with this. He looked at her, standing by his side, out of the corner of his eye. She was quite pale, but she was watching the man Fred had in his grip with interest and perhaps some mild cruelty.

"How many men have you got?" asked the gentleman, regaining some of his standing.

"As I say," answered Fred, "there's just me," and he politely half turned towards Hanna, "and possibly her."

Hanna looked up at the gentleman and there was a slight half-smile on the corner of her lips. She nodded slowly. Then she asked, taking initiative for the first time in this interaction: "And how many men have you got?"

The gentleman answered seriously: "I can raise an army of ten men, maybe more."

"Right." said Fred. "When do you meet with your end of the pipeline for the next time?"

"In less than a week..." answered the gentleman, the nervousness showing through his voice again.

"Can you gather your men till then?" asked Fred.

"I hope so..." answered the gentleman.

"We'll keep in touch." said Fred. "By the way, what is your name?"

"Didn't you know?" asked the gentleman, quite astonished. "I'm Wolfensberger."

"Okay," said Fred, "see you, Mr Wolfensberger."

He turned away and walked off to his car. Hanna followed and Wolfensberger slowly shut the big oak-wood door.

As soon as they were in the car, Hanna said to Fred: "You're totally crazy, you know that?"

"Yeah," answered Fred as he drove off, "but I've been sensible for long enough and it didn't do me any good."

"Anyway, I'll be going along with this. I want to see this organization destroyed. But before we start I think we should take some precautions. We have to make sure that the police get all the information we hold in case of our death."

"We can do that." said Fred, rather surprised by Hanna's professional attitude.

"And where are you taking me now?" asked Hanna.

"Wherever you want to go." answered Fred.

"Well, I've got nowhere to go. My flat will have been cleared by this time, I expect, since I'm supposed to be dead, and I could hardly show up at my parents, just like that..."

"You can stay at my place," said Fred, smiled and added: "Don't worry, I won't make any advances."

"I wouldn't care if you did." said Hanna.

"You mean you'd say yes?" asked Fred, talking as unemotionally as possible.

"No." answered Hanna dryly and added nothing.

Fred didn't know what to make out of this and so he remained silent.

The next day, in the afternoon, Fred and Hanna were sitting in the kitchen at the table, eating what would have to be called breakfast.

Hanna was very casually dressed and not feeling uncomfortable in Fred's presence at all.

"You don't have a girl-friend, obviously..." she said.

"No." answered Fred, but didn't elaborate, since indulging in self-pity usually ended in his having a monologue - he had learnt that long ago.

"And you never had one?"

"Never..."

Hanna looked at him sharply. Perhaps she was trying to understand why.

"What about you?" asked Fred. "Do you have a boy-friend?"

"If I did," answered Hanna and looked at Fred over the edge of the cup in her hand, "I wouldn't be here with you, would I? I would have rushed to him as soon as I could."

"Well, you must have some kind of friends," said Fred, "how come you don't make contact with them and just let them continue believing in your death?"

"Obviously none of them were good enough friends to realize that the body wasn't mine at the funeral." said Hanna and frowned at Fred quizzically.

"I reckon only your parents got a proper chance of identifying the body." said Fred.

"It's their fault."

"Maybe..." said Hanna and dismissed the matter. "Anyway, I don't feel like seeing any of my former friends just now."

"But how come you don't have a boy-friend, a pretty girl like you?"

"And how come you don't have a girl-friend?" she asked back. "Though I must say that you have a boring face. That perpetually tired look in your eyes, it's as though you had shutters over your real face."

"This is my real face." said Fred, slightly upset.

"Well, tiredness is only a state. It can't belong to the hardware of a face. Your real face is capable of more than just showing this steady-state mask all the time."

"Aha..." said Fred. This was getting too personal.

"Now you would gladly have sex with me, here and now, wouldn't you?" Hanna asked, perfectly sure of herself.

Fred almost choked on a piece of bread in his mouth. He coughed and it sent tears into his eyes. But he caught himself up, looked straight into Hanna's eyes, gave her a wolfish grin and said: "Yes, here and now!"

"That's what I thought," said Hanna calmly, "you're trying to lead your life upside down. Well, you won't get it from me."

"Are you trying to send me up?" asked Fred with a roaring undertone in his voice.

"What do you mean, leading my life upside down?"

"Why do you think I wouldn't want you?" asked Hanna. "Do you believe I've got no desires?"

"I guess I'm not good enough, that's all..." said Fred.

"You've got a well built body, you're okay. Though I must say that the extinguished, listless air you have around you is not attractive."

"If..." Fred began.

"Don't go any further, I know what you're going to say. But that's not the way. In fact, that's what I call leading a life upside down." She remained quiet for a moment, and Fred had nothing to say either. Then she began to explain a few things: "What I want is someone who knows where he's going, and who is aiming at something which seems worthwhile to me as well. Now this doesn't describe you at all. You're aiming nowhere and whatever you're doing you don't consider worthwhile yourself. And I suppose you have the fantasy that by gaining access to sexual satisfaction this would suddenly change; but believe me, it's the other way round. Once you know where you're heading and happy with it, I know you will find someone."

Fred interrupted her dreamy speech: "Well, suppose I make an inhuman effort to do something that seems worthwhile, and then nobody throws in with me - I'd be worse off than I am now!"

"This is not just an empty, uncommitting piece of general wisdom coming from an unconcerned representative of the female gender. This is something I as a person say to you as a person..."

"You mean it's a promise..?"

"Shut up now, I won't be tricked into saying any more!" This came so suddenly that Fred looked up. She gave him a queer smile containing traces of embarrassment. So Fred said nothing more.

But he kept thinking about this. That talk about finding someone who is aiming at something which seems worthwhile to her as well, seemed too technical to Fred - what about falling in love? something that just happens, catches you unawares and then clings on?

But when this happens you can't just rush forward. You have to make sure the other person deserves you...

The topic wouldn't be brought up again between Hanna and Fred, not for the time being, anyway.

For the next few days Hanna stayed with Fred. She did some shopping and cooking for both of them and spent the rest of the day reading and wondering about her future.

Fred was working again, but when he came home in the early morning she would come out of bed for a while and keep him company as he drank a cup of tea before going to sleep. It was quite a new feeling for him to be greeted by someone he liked and cared for at the end of his lonely round-trip in the dark.

One night he saw a fox sneaking around the courthouse. As Fred flashed his light at him, the fox stood still and looked in his direction with eyes redly glistening in the light. His mane formed an aurora around his pointed face, strong neck and powerful

shoulders, and he was holding his bushy tail proudly off the ground. After a moment he turned his head away and trotted casually off on a business of his own.

Normally this would just have been a random, meaningless occurrence for Fred, but today he made a mental note to mention it to Hanna when he came home, and the occurrence became meaningful, making the whole night into something special. Perhaps Hanna would have something of her own to tell about a fox too, or about some other animal, some pet...

Thoughts of this kind were cruising through Fred's mind all night, and when they got interrupted it didn't matter, because something else would soon remind him of Hanna in some other way, and his thoughts would get started in some new direction just as worthwhile.

So in the next few days Fred got so used to being with Hanna that he could hardly imagine his life without her, aimlessly lounging in his empty flat when he wasn't working...

It was hard to tell what really made everything so different - there were many tiny little things, not one big item on which you could put your finger. Instead of hanging about, nowadays he was chatting, smiling, sometimes talking earnestly and listening actively, and he felt that he was internally evolving again.

But then the day came when it was time to ring up Wolfensberger.

Fred was doing some weight-lifting. This was something he had started doing regularly as a teenager, imagining all kinds of things...

Of course progress had been slow at first, but at that age he still basically believed in himself and had stuck with it. Nowadays Fred continued the work because it was a habit. His muscles didn't grow any bigger anymore, but he maintained what he had, and he was glad for what he had, because it gave him a sense of self-value when he wasn't in his car, or even when he wasn't in his clothes either...

So every second day, usually in the early morning before going to bed, Fred sat down on a chair with the weights on his lap. After breathing carefully and deeply for a moment his mind would be empty of everything except for the desire to contract muscles. Then he would take the weights into one hand, make sure the hand was comfortable on the bar, then lift the weights off the lap and lower them to the full length of his arm, at the side of the chair. From there on the real exercise would begin. He would pull the weights up over his shoulder, then push them up over his head, to the full length of his arm. As he then lowered the weights again he would pantingly whisper "one" and start all over, whispering "two" this time.

After having done this twenty times it would be the turn of the other arm.

This exercise didn't take a lot of time - only a few minutes every second day - but it seemed to make a big difference on Fred's body. He would have been proud, as a little boy, to see what he was going to look like as a man and to see the strength he had, enabling him to lift up his whole body-weight with a single arm, almost far enough for him to touch the bar with his chin.

But while he exercised Fred didn't look at his body, even though he undressed to the waist for freedom of movement and cooling down, but followed with his eyes the movement of the ugly, blackened chunks of metal in his hand.

Thus he didn't know what he looked like when he heard the knock on the door of his bedroom and answered "Yeah..?" rather breathlessly.

Hanna burst into the room and saw his body with knots of concentrated power, moving under the skin, all over it.

She was taken aback. “Sorry..!” she said. But she didn’t leave the room. She just stood there, waiting, watching him.

Fred didn’t disrupt the exercise. It consisted of twenty liftings in a row. If he stopped now, he would have to start from the beginning again, later, while his arm was still tired from what it was doing now. Hanna would just have to wait.

He was breathing regularly and hard, breathing out while lowering the weights and greedily gulping for air while hauling them up. He wasn’t ashamed of the sounds he was making.

In the past he used to be ashamed of these breathing sounds. One day his mother had surprised him in the midst of physical exertion by bursting into the room, and he had almost dropped the weights (they were smaller weights in those days) on his head. Fred had never liked to admit his dreams to his parents. He felt that if they knew about them they would destroy them for him. The dream to become strong was one of them - it had to be hidden.

Of course it was unavoidable that his mother, who cleaned the room for him (not out of kindness, but because she felt responsible for the whole house) or at least directed some hired woman into it for the job, would know about the weights. Of course she didn’t know how regularly he exercised. Maybe she considered them just as a toy, and Fred wouldn’t have wanted her to know that this “toy” exerted him as much as a violent orgasm would.

So today, Fred pondered, was the first time he exercised in full view of somebody, and there seemed to be no cause for embarrassment, so that his muscles were doing the job for him just as well as if he were alone.

“Twenty” gasped Fred and lowered the weights into his lap. “Ah...” he said and smiled up at Hanna.

“I never would have thought...” said Hanna, and seemed almost delighted.

“What?” asked Fred.

“That you were so strong!”

“Did I look weak?” asked Fred with a mocking smile.

“No, not at all...” Hanna had difficulties making herself clear. “Only you seemed not to care...”

“To care for what?” asked Fred slightly puzzled.

“For your own strength, for anything...” Her voice was drifting off.

“You mean I seem more human now?” he asked dryly, seriously.

“Yes!” she answered happily. “I’m glad I saw you do it!”

“Well...” said Fred, smiling again. “And by the way, what did you want?”

“It’s almost useless to ask now.” said Hanna. “I just wanted to make sure that you weren’t entering the game of the drug-dealers because of me, to impress me or something...” She sighed and wobbled her nose comically. “But I can see now that you really have some energy of your own!”

“What about you?” asked Fred. “Are you sure you want to come along?”

“Yes, I am. I want to see the destruction of this organization.”

“Okay,” said Fred, stood up and looked at his watch lying next to the pillow on his bed. “See you in... eight hours then!”

“Good night!” said Hanna.

“Good night.” said Fred, not realizing that for her there wasn’t much of the night left.

When he woke up in the early afternoon it was almost time to start moving. If he stayed in bed much longer, Hanna would come and shake him. He would have liked that, but there was no use in lounging in bed for so much longer, so he got up.

Hanna and Fred had a quick meal together, then they packed a few things into the car and started off.

They arrived at the meeting-point, the parking-lot in front of a disaffected factory-block, a few minutes too early. The truck wasn't there yet, nor was any familiar vehicle, but Fred reckoned they were at the right place because of a dashing, red Volkswagen Golf GTI with spoilers and skirts and over-large tyres incongruously standing among the rubble. He stopped the Mustang somewhere nearby and climbed out of his seat.

There were two men patiently sitting in the Golf. But now they left their car and slammed both doors shut, on either side, in quick succession. They came walking towards Fred, their jackets flapping in the wind, unhurriedly and casually. They were both tall and young and had rather blank faces expressing nothing but a bit of ironical pride. They might have come straight from a catalogue for menswear, and the red car behind them would have fitted into the picture as well, though the desolated surroundings would have been a mark of originality that those catalogue-images usually lack.

Hanna had left the Mustang too by now and come around the long bonnet to stand next to Fred, offering him moral support.

"I think these two were involved in the killing of my sister and in my kidnapping!" she whispered.

"Why can't you be sure?" asked Fred, giving vent to some annoyance, but Hanna didn't answer.

While Hanna and Fred were standing rather closely together the two men were standing widely apart, their hands hanging casually along their hips. Fred was inadvertently reminded of some scene in a spaghetti-western.

"Well now, who have we got here?" asked one of the men in a well-carrying baritone-voice.

"That's the whore's sister and her little boy-friend!" commented the other man, as though he were pleasantly surprised.

"Yeah, it sure is..." said the first man. "The two who got us into this mess!"

It wasn't quite clear what was going to happen next, but they got interrupted because a third car was coming. It was Wolfensberger's smart limousine.

Wolfensberger stopped his car exactly between the two groups and got out. "Hello, everybody." he said taking a quick look around.

"What do we need those two loving doves for?" asked one of the blank men and made a throw-away gesture towards Hanna and Fred.

"If anything happens to them, the police will be after us." said Wolfensberger. "But as far as closing down the pipeline is concerned, they might be of some help." He said all this quite matter-of-factly.

"But why should we close down the pipe-line?" asked the other blank man.

Wolfensberger turned a stern look on him: "I thought we had gone over all of this already. We took the dope but we can't pay for it. How can we avoid breaking the contract?"

"Let's get the money from somewhere else! Let's rob a bank! Why should we obey those two chickens there?!"

"Then you'll be denounced." answered Wolfensberger calmly. But maybe he didn't trust his authority to the full, or maybe he wasn't too sure of his own decision.

Anyway, he felt like adding something, and the tone of his voice suggested that he very much desired for his men to agree with him: "I think we've been part of this organization for far too long and become much too dependant. We've made a lot of

money out of it, but now, before it is too late, the time has come to invest somewhere else.”

The two blank men looked down at their feet and said nothing. Wolfensberger was their master-mind after all.

Then the next car came. It was the battered jeep Fred had met in the forest on that arranged meeting of his when he had daringly delivered Hanna from the gangsters. In some strange way he felt that he and Hanna were progressing backwards again. Men were already leaving the jeep before it had stopped properly, and the doors banged shut as it came to a sudden halt. Now the driver clambered out of the jeep. He had a toad-like figure just like his three mates, and he wore a broad panama-hat just like them. In fact he was the fat bully Fred had almost fried to death that night some time ago.

Fred reflected on wearing hats while driving - there would be no chance of doing such a thing in his low-slung Mustang. Only high-legged four-wheel-drives allow such things.

All of this was slightly ridiculous - Wolfensberger, the gentleman in his limousine, the “thinking” gangster, then the two sleek thugs in the sporty Golf, and finally the jeep full of hat-wearing city-cowboys. It seemed like a slightly over-stylized plot of a cheap gangster-film in the best American tradition.

What about Fred? The guy with uniform-like clothes, a beautiful girl at his side and driving a shining-blue Mustang? What would he represent in such a plot?

The private detective?

No, hardly, because he lacked the tall, good looks, and even more important, the dark sun-glasses.

But how had all of this come about? Was all of this just a played act for Fred’s benefit? These doubts always...!

What this really meant was that there is some truth in cheap American gangster-stories, Fred decided.

By now the fat bully had seen and recognized him.

"Hey!" he hollered out and came towards Fred, "it's the smoker!"

"I don't generally smoke." answered Fred calmly, but he really was impressed by the big mass of flesh moving towards him.

"Let me bash you up!" said the bully and curled his lips into a frightening non-smile.

Then Fred swept the corner of his jacket away from his hip with his left hand and grabbed his Ruger GP-100 with his right.

The bully was taken aback when he suddenly saw the rather large gun appear in Fred's hand.

"Please!" said Wolfensberger and held up his hands in desperation, "none of that!"

"Why shouldn't we fight it out?" asked the bully. His face had never been a pretty sight, but with all the peeling blisters imperfectly covering it up, with rosy fresh skin showing underneath, it looked worse than ever. "If that guy is a real man he'll put away his gun and stand out an honest fist-fight."

"Come on, now!" said Wolfensberger. "You're too heavy!"

Fred was still holding his revolver in his hand. "What about an arm-wrestle?" he suggested.

"Yeah!" answered another of the toad-like men standing behind the bully. "That's the idea!"

The bully drew out his tongue and drove it over his fat lips. Then slowly, maliciously he smiled wetly.

A few big strides brought him to the corner of the Mustang where he kneeled down and hammered his elbow onto the bonnet with a hollow clanking sound.

Fred joined him on the other side of the corner, along the snarling grill of the Mustang.

Across the corner of the bonnet they joined hands. Fred felt his hand disappear in the spongy mass of the bully's palm.

"Ready?" asked the bully in a rough tone full of anticipation.

Fred's field of vision was almost filled by his opponent's strawberry-like nose. He swallowed the excess saliva in his mouth and nodded.

"Ho humpf!" went the bully and tried to bend Fred's arm down, but Fred resisted.

The bully had to take breath and Fred managed to swing both forearms back into the middle-position.

Now they were both steadily pushing hard and nothing was happening.

"Come on, beat him!" It was that inner voice again. "That guy is just a big-mouth. He may be big, but you've got more training than he has. Can you picture a guy like him exerting himself? Never! He just talks. You can beat him! Even if you trained the wrong muscles for this kind of job, you've got self-discipline going for you!"

Fred had almost forgotten about this inner voice of his. Schizophrenics listen to such inner voices and become mass-murderers. Well, why not, if their life was just too boring otherwise? Fred had only ever heard his inner voice once before, and he had followed its advice. Ever since he was having the best time of his life. He would go on listening, however insane that meant he was.

So he pushed harder and was really gradually getting on top of things...

The bully was contorting his huge face and sweating freely.

Fred was massaging his jaws against each other, pressing harder.

Fred sent a telepathic message to his opponent: "You never thought that you'd cop it, eh?" He could feel the other's strength fading away. "You've got big arms, but it's all wobbly fat!"

Yet Fred was reaching the limit of his own strength. If he wanted to win, he'd better win now. So he leaned forward a bit, stared at the two hands intimately joined in a sticky embrace, one of which was his, and with a sudden burst of concentration he flung them both down!

"Ouch!" the bully called out and looked at Fred out of watery eyes. Fred let go and stood up.

The bully was still crouching next to the car, massaging his arm with his other hand.

"Come on, stand up!" said one of his friends, jokingly, coming up behind him.

"He beat me..." said the bully meekly.

"Well, maybe he isn't that weak, after all." said his friend. "But never mind, you survived it!"

Despite a surge of pride that sent some colour into his face, Fred wondered if he had just made himself a new enemy. Would the bully wait for an appropriate moment to kill Fred?

Well, hopefully not. There would be no honour in doing that and the bully wouldn't be admired for it. His friends might even despise him for doing such a thing, not out of ethical reasons of course, but because somebody who cannot afford fair-play must logically be weak. As long as Fred lived, the bully would still have the chance of winning a return-match, and he would look stronger if he pretended to believe in that than if he quietly got rid of Fred.

If the bully started showing off his weakness too much, he would lose his authority over his men. Somebody else would suddenly feel confident about taking over his place.

The toad-like men were hauling their beaten boss away from Fred's Mustang, and Fred was glad for it.

Now the truck was coming.

Fred had always loved trucks, as might be expected from anybody who likes power and torque, specially those with a huge bonnet in front. Of course they need more space on the road and they are also less aerodynamic than trucks with a flat front, but they look so much more stimulating..., like the head of some vicious animal. A twofold windscreen stands for the eyes, the headlights for the nostrils and the grill for the gnarled teeth of the beast.

This truck was just like that. It had a windshield on the roof of its cabin full of fancy lights. At night it must look like a lit-up Christmas-tree.

The truck came to a stop in front of the group of people with a purging puff of compressed air being let out, releasing the spring-coils that hold the brakes in place when the hand-brake is pulled.

The driver's door swung open and the driver came out, clambered along the front mud-guard and jumped over the bumper. Then he remained standing there, in front of his truck, resting one hand on the bumper and grinning.

He was a fattish guy with a very round, white face full of darker spots topped by an unkempt mop of hay-coloured hair. He had a boyish grin showing rather small teeth in his otherwise wide mouth.

"Well, what's the matter?" he asked gaily. "Why are there so many of you today?"

"Bad news," said Wolfensberger, putting himself forward. "There's no money."

"Have you written a letter for our boss?" asked the driver, his face reddening a bit.

"No letter." said Wolfensberger.

"But that's impossible!" said the driver and his face was now brightly red, almost glowing. He wasn't leaning against his truck anymore but bracing back and forth on his short legs.

"You just take back today's consignment of drugs to him and tell him that we're finished with him."

"He'll think that I kept the money for myself! He'll kill me! And if I don't show up at all, I'll be tracked down and killed all the same!"

"That's your problem now..." said Wolfensberger, pretending to be regretful.

The driver's round face seemed to have inflated as he suddenly came forward like a charging bull, unclear words spilling from his foaming mouth. "...you filthy bastard!.."

But the toad-like men and the two thugs from the sporty Volkswagen all made one or two steps forward, and the driver stopped short.

"We have a proposition," said Wolfensberger calmly. "We'll come with you to the meeting, all of us."

"But that's highly irregular." said the driver, his flabby lower lip trembling as he spoke. "I'm not supposed to show the meeting-place to anybody..."

"Yes, what we're doing is highly irregular. We intend to follow up the pipeline, closing it down as we go, and kill the boss at the end. Now you can either join our army or die..."

"You can't do that!" said the driver looking like a kid about to burst into tears.

"You're not going to stop us." said Wolfensberger, obviously enjoying his power in the same way Fred had enjoyed his when he had got this mess started.

“All I ever asked for were some extra earnings through carrying hidden boxes back and forth. I needn’t even know that these boxes contain dope and money. I don’t want to be involved with your internal struggles. Just write a letter for me to hand over and leave me out of your mess!”

Wolfensberger looked at the driver, standing there like a sick puppy, with stern, unyielding eyes.

“You carried your part of the responsibility all along.” he said in an almost friendly tone. “You can’t be disinvolved. Thanks to you - among others, I agree, but it wouldn’t have worked without someone like you - young people in a momentary fit of depression have found momentary relief, which swept them into a deep abyss much more permanent than anything they had witnessed before...”

“But I never encouraged anybody to take drugs..!” yelled the driver.

“Not explicitly...” agreed Wolfensberger.

Hanna nudged Fred. He looked at her. She gave him a meaningful frown. Fred nodded thoughtfully.

Wolfensberger walked away. He came back from his car a moment later, carrying a flat holster with thin shoulder straps and a slim semi-automatic hand-gun.

“Slip this on.” he told the driver and handed it over. He helped the fat boy into the thin shoulder-straps, then slapped him on the back as he was examining the gun. The driver’s eyes were glistening wetly, but he almost had a pleased smile on his face. “You’ll feel better about your whole life after having done this!” said Wolfensberger with fatherly firmness and the driver nodded shyly.

As he joined his men, Wolfensberger said to Hanna: “I’ve got one for you too.”

“Thanks.” said Hanna.

Fred was astounded when he saw all these guns. So while conditions to get guns legally are becoming tougher and tougher, gangsters aren’t worried in the least because they obviously have their own bottomless means of getting as many guns as they like.

So while the common population is being gradually disarmed, gangsters keep arming themselves happily and totally unhindered. In the end it will be easier for anybody to get guns illegally than to buy them legally.

“Well now, let’s get down to business!” said Wolfensberger as the boss of all men present.

It turned out the truck-driver first had to deliver his pay-load here in this town and pick up some new merchandise. Then he would head off to the meeting-point a few days’ journey from here. The cars of his new friends could of course just follow him, but perhaps they would rather like to meet him at his favourite trucker’s restaurant at the sea-shore and then they would proceed to the meeting-point all together from there.

They all agreed to this, and after making a few cheering jokes they all set off in their various vehicles.

"Wolfensberger is a good man." Hanna said to Fred when they were alone.

"Yes," said Fred, "he knew how to handle that truck-driver."

"Do you think it was just tactics? Doesn't he believe in what he said?"

"Believe in what?" asked Fred, puzzled.

"That thing about young people falling into an abyss when seeking momentary relief..."

"Well," said Fred, "everybody knows that. It's part of any drug-dealer's job to get new customers by trapping unsuspecting (or momentarily careless) youths."

"But the words he used... an abyss more permanent than anything previously experienced..."

"This is not something you choose to believe or not. It's a fact. Wolfensberger was describing a fact."

"The way he talked about it suggested that he had thought about it, from the point of view of the victims."

"Maybe he has." said Fred.

"Yes," he added after a silent minute, "Maybe he is a better man than I would have suspected."

"Then why did he start dealing with drugs in the first place?" mumbled Hanna. She didn't ask Fred. She just dribbled the question into emptiness.

"There's probably a sad story that put him on the wrong track somewhere in his life." said Fred, "Failure in love, perhaps. I never noticed any evidence of there being a woman in his life."

"And now he tries to make amends, not only by exiting the organization, but by destroying it." said Hanna dreamily.

"This is quite a romantic vision." said Fred.

"Let's believe in it." said Hanna.

Later on, as they were cruising down the highway at a steady speed, Hanna said: "Did you notice that all we've seen of the organization so far consists solely of men?"

"What about your sister?" asked Fred.

"She wasn't really in control. She was just a lesser employee, a slave almost."

"I don't see in which way the rest of Wolfensberger's men are in a nobler position than your sister was."

"Well, he listens to them."

"Only these days, because he brought them to the edge of mutiny. Anyway, what are you trying to say?"

"What about the victims? Are they only male?"

"Definitely not. Are you trying to say that the whole organization is patriarchal and putting down the female gender?"

"Something like that..."

"Forget it." said Fred. "We're going to destroy the organization, so you needn't worry anymore about it being patriarchal - it will cease to exist anyway."

"Let's hope so." said Hanna.

After having spent the first night in a hotel (in separate rooms) they were on their way again. They had decided to leave the highway and follow the more interesting national roads to see some of the country-side. They had plenty of time, because the truck wouldn't be going very fast.

Fred was driving pretty hard and competently, changing gears before tight curves and accelerating smoothly out of them, overtaking slow-moving vehicles with quick bursts of power, all this while comfortably leaning back in his seat, his shoulders relaxed, his big, gnarled hands holding onto the wheel with calm firmness, his eyes professionally scanning the road ahead.

Hanna was watching him with pleasure. He was so absorbed that he didn't notice.

While he was driving he struck Hanna as a perfect human machinery, and while she liked him very much as a person also, it was this very physical aspect of him which made him attractive as a male.

Hanna was enjoying the ride.