

Mute

-1-

There were three confession booths. The light over the door of the middle one was on. No one was waiting. The church was empty. Colored light came in through the windows and made squares on the central aisle. Monette thought about leaving and didn't. Instead he walked to the booth that was open for business and went inside. When he closed the door and sat down, the little slider on his right opened. In front of him, tacked to the wall with a blue pushpin, was a file card. Typed on it was FOR ALL HAVE SINNED AND FALLEN SHORT OF GOD'S GLORY. It had been a long time, but Monette didn't think that was standard equipment. He didn't even think it was Baltimore Catechism.

From the other side of the mesh screen, the priest spoke. "How you doing, my son?"

Monette didn't think that was standard, either. But it was all right. Just the same, he couldn't reply at first. Not a word. And that was sort of funny, considering what he had to say.

"Son? Cat got your tongue?"

Still nothing. The words were there, but they were all blocked up. Absurd or not, Monette had a sudden image of a clogged toilet.

The blur beyond the screen shifted. "Been a while?"

"Yes," Monette said. It was something.

"Want me to give you a hint?"

"No, I remember. Bless me, Father, for I have sinned."

"Uh-huh, and how long has it been since your last confession?"

"I don't remember. A long time. Not since I was a kid."

"Well, take it easy—it's like riding a bike."

But for a moment he could still say nothing. He looked at the typed message on the pushpin and his throat worked. His hands were kneading themselves, tighter and tighter, until they made a big fist that was rocking back and forth between his thighs.

"Son? The day is rolling by, and I have company coming for lunch. Actually, my company is *bringing* lu—"

"Father, I may have committed a terrible sin."

Now the priest was silent for a while. *Mute*, Monette thought. There was a white word if there ever was one. Type it on a file card and it ought to disappear.

When the priest on the other side of the screen spoke again, his voice was still friendly but more grave. “What’s your sin, my son?”

And Monette said, “I don’t know. You’ll have to tell me.”

–2–

It was starting to rain when Monette came up on the northbound entrance ramp to the turnpike. His suitcase was in the trunk, and his sample cases—big boxy things, the kind lawyers tote when they’re taking evidence into court—were in the backseat. One was brown, one black. Both were embossed with the Wolfe & Sons logo: a timber wolf with a book in its mouth. Monette was a salesman. He covered all of northern New England. It was Monday morning. It had been a bad weekend, very bad. His wife had moved out to a motel, where she was probably not alone. Soon she might go to jail. Certainly there would be a scandal, and infidelity was going to be the least of it.

On the lapel of his jacket, he wore a button reading, ASK ME ABOUT THE BEST FALL LIST EVER!!

There was a man standing at the foot of the ramp. He was wearing old clothes and holding up a sign as Monette approached and the rain grew stronger. There was a battered brown knapsack between feet dressed in dirty sneakers. The Velcro closure of one sneaker had come loose and stuck up like a cockeyed tongue. The hitchhiker had no cap, let alone an umbrella.

At first all Monette could make out of the sign were crudely drawn red lips with a black slash drawn diagonally through them. When he got a little closer, he saw the words above the slashed mouth read I AM

MUTE! Below the slashed mouth was this: WILL YOU GIVE ME A RIDE???

Monette put on his blinker to make his turn onto the ramp. The hitchhiker flipped the sign over. On the other side was an ear, just as crudely drawn, with a slash through it. Above the ear: I AM DEAF! Below it: PLEASE MAY I HAVE A RIDE???

Monette had driven millions of miles since he was sixteen, most of them in the dozen years he had been repping for Wolfe & Sons, selling one best fall list ever after another, and during that time he had never picked up a single hitchhiker. Today he swerved over at the edge of the ramp with no hesitation and came to a stop. The St. Christopher’s medal looped over the rearview mirror was still swinging back and forth when he used the button on his door to pop open the locks. Today he felt he had nothing to lose.

The hitchhiker slid in and put his battered little pack between his damp and dirty sneakers. Monette had thought, looking at him, that the fellow would smell bad, and he wasn’t wrong. He said, “How far you going?”

The hitchhiker shrugged and pointed up the ramp. Then he bent and carefully put his sign on top of his pack. His hair was stringy and thin. There was some gray in it.

“I know which way, but...” Monette realized the man wasn’t hearing him. He waited for him to straighten up. A car blew past and up the ramp, honking even though Monette had left him

plenty of room to get by. Monette gave him the finger. This he *had* done before, but never for such minor annoyances.

The hitchhiker fastened his seat belt and looked at Monette, as if to ask what the holdup was. There were lines on his face, and stubble. Monette couldn't even begin to guess his age. Somewhere between old and not old, that was all he knew.

"How far are you going?" Monette asked, this time enunciating each word, and when the guy still only looked at him—average height, skinny, no more than a hundred and fifty pounds—he said, "Can you read lips?" He touched his own.

The hitchhiker shook his head and made some hand gestures.

Monette kept a pad in the console. While he wrote *How far?* on it, another car cruised past, now pulling up a fine rooster tail of moisture. Monette was going all the way to Derry, a hundred and sixty miles, and these were the kind of driving conditions he usually loathed, second only to heavy snow. But today he reckoned it would be all right. Today the weather—and the big rigs, pulling up their secondary storms of flying water as they droned past—would keep him occupied.

Not to mention this guy. His new passenger. Who looked at the note, then back at Monette. It occurred to Monette later that maybe the guy couldn't read, either—learning to read when you're a deaf-mute had to be damn hard—but understood the question mark. The man pointed through the windshield and up the ramp. Then he opened and closed his hands eight times. Or maybe it was ten. Eighty miles. Or a hundred. If he knew at all.

"Waterville?" Monette guessed.

The hitchhiker looked at him blankly.

"Okay," Monette said. "Whatever. Just tap me on the shoulder when we get where you're going."

The hitchhiker looked at him blankly.

"Well, I guess you will," Monette said. "Assuming you've even got a destination in mind, that is." He checked his rearview, then got rolling. "You're pretty much cut off, aren't you?"

The guy was still looking at him. He shrugged and put his palms over his ears.

"I know," Monette said, and merged. "Pretty much cut off. Phone lines down. But today I almost wish I was you and you were me." He paused. "Almost. Mind some music?"

And when the hitchhiker just turned his head away and looked out the window, Monette had to laugh at himself. Debussy, AC/DC, or Rush Limbaugh, it was all the same to this guy.

He had bought the new Josh Ritter CD for his daughter—it was her birthday in a week—but hadn't remembered to send it to her yet. Too many other things going on just lately. He set the cruise control once they'd cleared Portland, slit the wrapping with his thumb, and stuck the CD in the player. He supposed it was now technically a used CD, not the kind of thing you

give your beloved only child. Well, he could always buy her another one. Assuming, that was, he still had money to buy one with.

Josh Ritter turned out to be pretty good. Kind of like early Dylan, only with a better attitude. As he listened, he mused on money. Affording a new CD for Kelsie's birthday was the least of his problems. The fact that what she really wanted—and needed—was a new laptop wasn't very high on the list either. If Barb had done what she said she had done—what the SAD office *confirmed* that she'd done—he didn't know how he was going to afford the kid's last year at Case Western. Even assuming he still had a job himself. *That* was a problem.

He turned the music up to drown the problem out and partially succeeded, but by the time they reached Gardiner, the last chord had died out. The hitchhiker's face and body were turned away to the passenger window. Monette could see only the back of his stained and faded duffle coat, with too-thin hair straggling down over the collar in bunches. It looked like there had been something printed on the back of the coat once, but now it was too faded to make out.

That's the story of this poor schmo's life, Monette thought.

At first Monette couldn't decide if the hitchhiker was dozing or looking at the scenery. Then he noted the slight downward tilt of the man's head and the way his breath was fogging the glass of the passenger window, and decided dozing was more likely. And why not? The only thing more boring than the Maine Turnpike south of Augusta was the Maine Turnpike south of Augusta in a cold spring rain.

Monette had other CDs in the center console, but instead of rummaging through them, he turned off the car's sound system. And after he'd passed through the Gardiner toll station—not stopping, only slowing, the wonders of E-ZPass—he began to talk.

–3–

Monette stopped talking and checked his watch. It was quarter to noon, and the priest had said he had company coming for lunch. That the company was bringing lunch, actually.

“Father, I'm sorry this is taking so long. I'd speed it up if I knew how, but I don't.”

“That's all right, son. I'm interested now.”

“Your company—”

“Will wait while I'm doing the Lord's work. Son, did this man rob you?”

“No,” Monette said. “Unless you count my peace of mind. Does that count?”

“Most assuredly. What *did* he do?”

“Nothing. Looked out the window. I thought he was dozing, but later I had reasons to think I was wrong about that.”

“What did *you* do?”

“Talked about my wife,” Monette said. Then he stopped and considered. “No, I didn’t. I *vented* about my wife. I *ranted* about my wife. I *spewed* about my wife. I...you see...” He struggled with it, lips pressed tightly together, looking down at that big twisting fist of hands between his thighs. Finally he burst out, “He was a *deaf-mute*, don’t you see? I could say anything and not have to listen to him make an analysis, give an opinion, or offer me sage advice. He was *deaf*, he was *mute*, hell, I thought he was probably *asleep*, and I could say any fucking thing I wanted to!”

In the booth with the file card pinned to the wall, Monette winced.

“Sorry, Father.”

“What exactly did you say about her?” the priest asked.

“I told him she was fifty-four,” Monette said. “That was how I started. Because that was the part...you know, that was the part I just couldn’t swallow.”

–4–

After the Gardiner tolls, the Maine Turnpike becomes a free road again, running through three hundred miles of fuck-all: woods, fields, the occasional house trailer with a satellite dish on the roof and a truck on blocks in the side yard. Except in the summer, it is sparsely traveled. Each car becomes its own little world. It occurred to Monette even then (perhaps it was the St. Christopher’s medal swinging from the rearview, a gift from Barb in better, saner days) that it was like being in a rolling confessional. Still, he started slowly, as so many confessors do.

“I’m married,” he said. “I’m fifty-five and my wife is fifty-four.”

He considered this while the windshield wipers ticked back and forth.

“Fifty-four, Barbara’s fifty-four. We’ve been married twenty-six years. One kid. A daughter. A lovely daughter. Kelsie Ann. She goes to school in Cleveland, and I don’t know how I’m going to keep her there, because two weeks ago, with no warning, my wife turned into Mount St. Helens. Turns out she’s got a boyfriend. Has had a boyfriend for almost two years. He’s a teacher—well, of course he is, what else would he be?—but she calls him Cowboy Bob. Turns out a lot of those nights I thought she was at Cooperative Extension or Book Circle, she was drinking tequila shooters and line dancing with Cowboy Fucking Bob.”

It was funny. Anyone could see that. It was sitcom shit if there had ever been sitcom shit. But his eyes—although tearless—were stinging as if they were full of poison ivy. He glanced to his right, but the hitchhiker was still mostly turned away, and now his forehead was leaning against the glass of the passenger window. Sleeping for sure.

Almost for sure.

Monette hadn’t spoken of her betrayal aloud. Kelsie still didn’t know, although the bubble of her ignorance would pop soon. The straws were flying in the wind—he’d hung up on three different reporters before leaving on this trip—but there was nothing they could print or broadcast yet. That would change soon, but Monette would go on getting by with *No comment* for as long as possible, mostly to spare himself embarrassment. In the meantime, though, he

was commenting plenty, and doing so brought a great, angry relief. In a way it was like singing in the shower. Or vomiting there.

“She’s fifty-four,” he said. “That’s what I can’t get over. It means she started up with this guy, whose real name is Robert Yandowsky—how’s that for a cowboy name—when she was fifty-two. Fifty-*two*! Would you say that’s old enough to know better, my friend? Old enough to have sowed your wild oats, then ripped them up again and planted a more useful crop? My God, she wears *bifocals*! She’s had her gallbladder out! And she’s boffing this guy! In the Grove Motel, where the two of them have set up housekeeping! I gave her a nice house in Buxton, a two-car garage, she’s got an Audi on long lease, and she threw it all away to get drunk on Thursday nights in Range Riders, then shag this guy until the dawn’s early light—or however long they can manage—and she’s fifty-four! Not to mention Cowboy Bob, *who is fucking sixty!*”

He heard himself ranting, told himself to stop, saw the hitchhiker hadn’t moved (unless he’d sunk a little deeper into the collar of his duffle coat—that might have happened), and realized he didn’t *have* to stop. He was in a car. He was on I-95, somewhere east of the sun and west of Augusta. His passenger was a deaf-mute. He could rant if he wanted to rant.

He ranted.

“Barb spilled everything. She wasn’t defiant about it, and she wasn’t ashamed. She seemed...serene. Shell-shocked, maybe. Or still living in a fantasy world.”

And she’d said it was partly his fault.

“I’m on the road a lot, that much is true. Over three hundred days last year. She was on her own—we only had the one chick, you know, and that one finished with high school and flown the coop. So it was my fault. Cowboy Bob and all the rest of it.”

His temples were throbbing, and his nose was almost shut. He sniffed back hard enough to make black dots fly before his eyes and got no relief. Not in his nose, anyway. In his head he finally felt better. He was very glad he’d picked the hitchhiker up. He could have spoken these things aloud in the empty car, but—

–5–

“But it wouldn’t have been the same,” he told the shape on the other side of the confessional wall. He looked straight ahead as he said it, right at FOR ALL HAVE SINNED AND FALLEN SHORT OF GOD’S GLORY. “Do you understand that, Father?”

“Of course I do,” the priest replied—and rather cheerfully. “Even though you’ve clearly fallen away from Mother Church—except for a few superstitious remnants like your St. Christopher’s medal—you shouldn’t even have to ask. Confession is good for the soul. We’ve known that for two thousand years.”

Monette had taken to wearing the St. Christopher’s medal that had once upon a time swung from his rearview mirror. Perhaps it was just superstition, but he had driven millions of miles in all kinds of shit weather with that medal for company and had never so much as dented a fender.

“Son, what else did she do, your wife? Besides sinning with Cowboy Bob?”

Monette surprised himself by laughing. And on the other side of the screen, the priest laughed, too. The difference was the quality of the laughter. The priest saw the funny side. Monette supposed he was still trying to ward off insanity.

“Well, there was the underwear,” he said.

–6–

“She bought underwear,” he told the hitchhiker, who still sat slumped and mostly turned away, with his forehead against the window and his breath fogging the glass. Pack between his feet, sign resting on top with the side reading I AM MUTE! facing up. “She showed me. It was in the guest room closet. It damn near *filled* the guest room closet. Bustiers and camisoles and bras and silk stockings still in their packages, dozens of pairs. What looked like about a thousand garter belts. But mostly there were panties, panties, panties. She said Cowboy Bob was ‘a real panty man.’ I think she would have gone on, told me just how that worked, but I got the picture. I got it a lot better than I wanted to. I said, ‘Of course he’s a panty man, he grew up jerking off to PLAYBOY, he’s fucking *sixty*.’”

They were passing the Fairfield sign now. Green and smeary through the windshield, with a wet crow hunched on top.

“It was the good stuff, too,” Monette said. “A lot was Victoria’s Secret from the mall, but there was also stuff from a high-priced underwear boutique called Sweets. In Boston. I didn’t even know there *were* underwear boutiques, but I have since been educated. Had to’ve been thousands of dollars’ worth piled up in that closet. Also shoes. High heels, for the most part. You know, stilettos. She had that hot-babe thing down pat. Although I imagine she took off her bifocals when she put on her latest Wonderbra and tap pants. But—”

A semi droned by. Monette had his headlights on and automatically flicked his high beams for a moment when the rig was past. The driver flicked a thank-you with his taillights. Sign language of the road.

“But a lot of it hadn’t even been *worn*. That was the thing. It was just...just pack-ratted away. I asked her why she’d bought so goddam much, and she either didn’t know or couldn’t explain. ‘We just got into the habit,’ she said. ‘It was like foreplay, I guess.’ Not ashamed. Not defiant. Like she was thinking, *This is all a dream I’ll wake up from soon*. The two of us standing there are looking at that rummage sale of slips and skivvies and shoes and God knows what else piled in the back. Then I asked her where she got the money—I mean, I see the credit-card slips at the end of each month, and there weren’t any from Sweets of Boston—and we got to the real problem. Which was embezzlement.”

–7–

“Embezzlement,” the priest said. Monette wondered if the word had ever been spoken in this confessional before and decided it probably had been. *Theft* for sure.

“She worked for MSAD 19,” Monette said. “MSAD stands for Maine School Administrative District. It’s one of the big ones, just south of Portland. Based in Dowrie, as a matter of fact,

home of both Range Riders—the line-dancing joint—and the historic Grove Motel, just down the road from there. Convenient. Get your dancing and your fuh... your lovemaking all in the same area. Why, you wouldn't even have to drive your car if you happened to have a snootful. Which on most evenings they did have. Tequila shooters for her, whiskey for him. Jack, naturally. She told me. She told me everything.”

“Was she a teacher?”

“Oh no—teachers don't have access to that kind of money; she never could have embezzled over a hundred and twenty thousand dollars if she'd been a teacher. We've had the district superintendent and his wife over to the house for dinner, and of course I saw him at all the end-of-school-year picnics, usually at the Dowrie Country Club. Victor McCrea. University of Maine graduate. Played football. Majored in phys ed. Crew cut. Probably floated through on gift Cs, but a nice man, the kind who knows fifty different guy-walks-into-a-bar jokes. In charge of a dozen schools, from the five elementaries to Muskie High. Very large annual budget, might be able to add four and four on his own in a pinch. Barb was his executive secretary for twelve years.”

Monette paused.

“Barb had the checkbook.”

–8–

The rain was getting heavier. Now it was just short of a downpour. Monette slowed to fifty without even thinking about it, while other cars buzzed blithely past him in the left lane, each dragging up its own cloud of water. Let them buzz. He himself had had a long and accident-free career selling the best fall list ever (not to mention the best spring list ever and a few Summer Surprise lists, which mostly consisted of cookbooks, diet books, and *Harry Potter* knockoffs), and he wanted to keep it that way.

On his right, the hitchhiker stirred a little.

“You awake, buddy?” Monette asked. A useless question, but natural.

The hitchhiker uttered a comment from the end of him that apparently wasn't mute: *Phweeet*. Small, polite, and—best of all—odorless.

“I take that as a yes,” Monette said, returning his attention to his driving. “Where was I?”

The underwear, that's where he was. He could still see it. Piled up in the closet like a teenager's wet dream. Then the confession of the embezzlement: that staggering figure. After he'd taken time to consider the possibility that she might be lying for some crazy reason (but of course it was *all* crazy), he had asked her how much was left, and she said—in that same calm and dazed manner—that there was nothing left, really, although she supposed she could get more. For a while, at least.

“‘But they're going to find out soon now,’ she said. ‘If it was just poor old clueless Vic, I suppose I could go on forever, but the state auditors were in last week. They asked too many questions, and they took copies of the records. It won't be long now.’”

“So I asked her how she could spend well over a hundred thousand dollars on knickers and garter belts,” Monette told his silent companion. “I didn’t feel angry—at least not then, I guess I was too shocked—but I was honestly curious. And she said—in that same way, not ashamed, not defiant, like she was sleep-walking: ‘Well, we got interested in the lottery. I suppose we thought we could make it back that way.’”

Monette paused. He watched the windshield wipers go back and forth. He briefly considered the idea of twisting the wheel to the right and sending the car into one of the concrete overpass supports just ahead. He rejected the idea. He would later tell the priest part of the reason was that ancient childhood prohibition against suicide, but mostly he was thinking he’d like to hear the Josh Ritter album at least one more time before he died.

Plus, he was no longer alone.

Instead of committing suicide (and taking his passenger with him), he drove beneath the overpass at that steady, moderate fifty (for maybe two seconds the windshield was clear, then the wipers once more found work to do) and resumed his story.

“They must have bought more lottery tickets than anyone in history.” He thought it over, then shook his head. “Well...probably not. But they bought ten thousand for sure. She said that last November—I was in New Hampshire and Massachusetts almost that whole month, plus the sales conference in Delaware—they bought over two thousand. Powerball, Megabucks, Paycheck, Pick 3, Pick 4, Triple Play, they hit them all. At first they chose the numbers, but Barb said after a while that took too long and they went to the EZ Pick option.”

Monette pointed to the white plastic box glued to his windshield, just below the stem of the rearview mirror.

“All these gadgets speed up the world. Maybe that’s a good thing, but I sort of doubt it. She said, ‘We went the EZ Pick route because the people standing in line behind you get impatient if you take too long to pick your own numbers, especially when the jackpot’s over a hundred million.’ She said sometimes she and Yandowsky split up and hit different stores, as many as two dozen in an evening. And of course they sold them right there at the place where they went to line dance.

“She said, ‘The first time Bob played, we won five hundred dollars on a Pick 3. It was so romantic.’” Monette shook his head. “After that, the romance stayed, but the winning pretty much stopped. That was what she said. She said once they won a thousand, but by then they were already thirty thousand in the bucket. *In the bucket* is what she called it.

“One time—this was in January, while I was out on the road trying to earn back the price of the cashmere coat I got her for Christmas—she said they went up to Derry and spent a couple of days. I don’t know if they’ve got line dancing up there or not, I never checked, but they’ve got a place called Hollywood Slots. They stayed in a suite, ate high off the hog—she said *high off the hog*—and dropped seventy-five hundred playing video poker. But, she said, they didn’t like that so much. Mostly they just stuck to the lottery, plugging in more and more of the SAD’s dough, trying to get even before the state auditors came and the roof fell in. And every now and then, of course, she’d buy some new underwear. A girl wants to be fresh when she’s buying Powerball tix at the local 7-Eleven.

“You all right, buddy?”

There was no response from his passenger—of course not—so Monette reached out and shook the man’s shoulder. The hitcher lifted his head from the window (his forehead had left a greasy mark on the glass) and looked around, blinking his red-rimmed eyes as if he had been asleep. Monette didn’t think he’d been asleep. No reason why, just a feeling.

He made a thumb-and-forefinger circle at the hitchhiker, then raised his eyebrows.

For a moment the hitcher only looked blank, giving Monette time to think the guy was bull-stupid as well as deaf-mute. Then he smiled and nodded and returned the circle.

“Okay,” Monette said. “Just checking.”

The man leaned his head back against the window again. In the meantime, the guy’s presumed destination, Waterville, had slid behind them and into the rain. Monette didn’t notice. He was still living in the past.

“If it had been just lingerie and the kind of lottery games where you pick a bunch of numbers, the damage might have been limited,” he said. “Because playing the lottery that way takes time. It gives you a chance to come to your senses, always presuming you have any to come to. You have to stand in line and collect the slips and save them in your wallet. Then you have to watch TV or check the paper for the results. It might still have been okay. If, that is, you can call anything okay about your wife catting around with a stoneboat-dumb history teacher and flushing thirty or forty thousand dollars’ worth of the school district’s money down the shitter. But thirty grand I might have been able to cover. I could have taken out a second mortgage on the house. Not for Barb, no way, but for Kelsie Ann. A kid just starting out in life doesn’t need a stinking fish like that around her neck. Restitution is what they call it. I would have made restitution even if it meant living in a two-bedroom apartment. You know?”

The hitchhiker obviously *didn’t* know—not about beautiful young daughters just starting out in life, or second mortgages, or restitution. He was warm and dry in his dead-silent world, and that was probably better.

Monette plowed forward nonetheless.

“Thing is, there are quicker ways to chuck your money, and it’s as legal as...as buying underwear.”

–9–

“They moved on to scratch tickets, didn’t they?” the priest asked. “What the Lottery Commission calls instant winners.”

“You speak like a man who’s had a flutter himself,” Monette said.

“From time to time,” the priest agreed, and with an admirable lack of hesitation. “I always tell myself that if I should ever get a real golden ticket, I’d put all the money into the church. But I never risk more than five dollars a week.” This time there *was* hesitation. “Sometimes ten.”

Another pause. “And once I bought a twenty-dollar scratch, back when they were new. But that was a momentary madness. I never did it again.”

“At least not so far,” Monette said.

The priest chuckled. “The words of a man who has truly had his fingers burned, son.” He sighed. “I’m fascinated by your story, but I wonder if we could move it along a bit faster? My company will wait while I do the Lord’s work, but not forever. And I believe we’re having chicken salad, heavy on the mayo. A favorite of mine.”

“There’s not much more,” Monette said. “If you’ve played, you’ve got the gist of it. You can buy the scratch tickets at all the same places you can buy the Powerball and Megabucks tickets, but you can also buy them at a lot of other places, including turnpike rest stops. You don’t even need to do business with a clerk; you can get them from a machine. The machines are always green, the color of money. By the time Barb came clean—”

“By the time she confessed,” the priest said, with what might have been a touch of actual slyness.

“Yes, by the time she *confessed*, they’d pretty much settled on the twenty-dollar scratch-offs. Barb said she never bought any when she was on her own, but when she was with Cowboy Bob, they’d buy a lot. Hoping for that big score, you know. Once she said they bought a hundred of those puppies in a single night. That’s two thousand dollars’ worth. They got back eighty. They each had their own little plastic ticket scratcher. They look like snow scrapers for elves and have MAINE STATE LOTTERY written on the handle. They’re green, like the vending machines that sell the tickets. She showed me hers—it was under the guest room bed. You couldn’t make out anything except TERY on it. Could have been MYSTERY instead of LOTTERY. The sweat from her palm had wiped out all the rest.”

“Son, did you strike her? Is that why you’re here?”

“No,” Monette said. “I wanted to *kill* her for it—the money, not the cheating, the cheating part just seemed unreal, even with all that fuh...all that underwear right in front of my eyes. But I didn’t lay so much as a finger on her. I think it was because I was too tired. All that information had just tired me out. What I wanted to do was take a nap. A long one. Maybe a couple of days long. Is that strange?”

“No,” the priest said.

“I asked her how she could do something like that to me. Did she care so little? And *she* asked—”

–10–

“She asked me how come I didn’t know,” Monette told the hitchhiker. “And before I could say anything, she answered herself, so I guess it was a whatchacallit, a rhetorical question. She said, ‘You didn’t know because you didn’t care. You were almost always on the road, and when you weren’t on the road, you *wanted* to be on the road. It’s been ten years since you cared what underwear I have on—why would you, when you don’t care about the woman inside it? But you care now, don’t you? You do now.’”

“Man, I just looked at her. I was too tired to kill her—or even slap her—but I was mad, all right. Even through the shock, I was mad. She was trying to make it my fault. You see that, don’t you? Trying to lay it all off on my fucking *job*, as if I could get another one that paid even half as much. I mean, at my age what else am I qualified for? I guess I could get a job as school crossing guard—I don’t have any morals busts in my past—but that would be about it.”

He paused. Far down the road, still mostly hidden by a shifting camisole of rain, was a blue sign.

He considered, then said, “But even that wasn’t the real point. You want to know the point? Her point? I was supposed to feel guilty for *liking* my job. For not drudging through my days until I found the right person to go *absolutely fucking bombers* with!”

The hitcher stirred a little, probably only because they’d hit a bump (or run over some roadkill), but it made Monette realize he was shouting. And hey, the guy might not be completely deaf. Even if he was, he might feel vibrations in the bones of his face once sounds passed a certain decibel level. Who the fuck knew?

“I didn’t get into it with her,” Monette said in a lower voice. “I *refused* to get into it with her. I think I knew that if I did, if we really started to argue, anything might happen. I wanted to get out of there while I was still in shock...because that was protecting her, see?”

The hitchhiker said nothing, but Monette saw for both of them.

“I said, ‘What happens now?’ and she said, ‘I suppose I’ll go to jail.’ And you know what? If she’d started to cry then, I might have held her. Because after twenty-six years of marriage, things like that get to be a reflex. Even when most of the feeling’s gone. But she didn’t cry, so I walked out. Just turned around and walked out. And when I came back, there was a note saying she’d *moved* out. That was almost two weeks ago, and I haven’t seen her since. Talked to her on the phone a few times, that’s all. Talked to a lawyer, too. Froze all our accounts, not that it’ll do any good once the legal wheels start turning. Which will be soon. The caca is going to clog the air-cooling system, if you take my meaning. Then I suppose I’ll see her again. In court. Her and Cowboy Fucking Bob.”

Now he could read the blue sign: PITTSFIELD REST AREA 2 MI.

“Ah, shit!” he cried. “Waterville’s fifteen miles back thataway, partner.” And when the deaf-mute didn’t stir (of course not), Monette realized he didn’t know the guy had been going to the Ville anyway. Not for sure. In any case, it was time to get this straightened out. The rest area would do for that, but for a minute or two longer they would remain enclosed in this rolling confessional, and he felt he had one more thing to say.

“It’s true that I haven’t felt much for her in a very long time,” he said. “Sometimes love just runs out. And it’s also true that I haven’t been entirely faithful—I’ve taken a little road comfort from time to time. But does *that* warrant *this*? Does it justify a woman blowing up a life the way a kid would blow up a rotten apple with a firecracker?”

He pulled into the rest area. There were maybe four cars in the lot, huddled up against the brown building with the vending machines in the front. To Monette the cars looked like cold children left out in the rain. He parked. The hitchhiker looked at him questioningly.

“Where are you going?” Monette asked, knowing it was hopeless.

The deaf-mute considered. He looked around and saw where they were. He looked back at Monette as if to say, *Not here*.

Monette pointed back south and raised his eyebrows. The deaf-mute shook his head, then pointed north. Opened and closed his fists, showing his fingers six times...eight...ten. Same as before, basically. But this time Monette got it. He thought life might have been simpler for this guy if someone had taught him the sideways figure-eight symbol that means *infinity*.

“You’re basically just rambling, aren’t you?” Monette asked.

The deaf-mute only looked at him.

“Yeah you are,” Monette said. “Well, I tell you what. You listened to my story—even though you didn’t know you were listening to it—and I’ll get you as far as Derry.” An idea struck him. “In fact, I’ll drop you at the Derry Shelter. You can get a hot and a cot, at least for one night. I have to take a leak. You need to take a leak?”

The deaf-mute looked at him with patient blankness.

“A leak,” Monette said. “A *piss*.” He started to point at his crotch, realized where they were, and decided a road bum would think he was signing for a blowjob right here beside the Hav-A-Bite machines. He pointed toward the silhouettes on the side of the building instead—black cutout man, black cutout woman. The man had his legs apart, the woman had hers together. Pretty much the story of the human race in sign language.

This his passenger got. He shook his head decisively, then made another thumb-and-forefinger circle for good measure. Which left Monette with a delicate problem: leave Mr. Silent Vagabond in the car while he did his business or turn him out into the rain to wait...in which case the guy would almost certainly know why he was being put out.

Only it wasn’t a problem at all, he decided. There was no money in the car, and his personal luggage was locked in the trunk. There were his sample cases in the backseat, but he somehow didn’t think the guy was going to steal two seventy-pound cases and go trotting down the rest area’s exit ramp with them. For one thing, how would he hold up his I AM MUTE! sign?

“I’ll be right back,” Monette said, and when the hitchhiker only looked at him with those red-rimmed eyes, Monette pointed to himself, to the restroom icons, then back to himself. This time the hitchhiker nodded and made another thumb-and-forefinger circle.

Monette went to the toilet and pissed for what felt like twenty minutes. The relief was exquisite. He felt better than he had since Barb had dropped her bombshell. It occurred to him for the first time that he was going to get through this. And he would help Kelsie get through

it. He remembered a quote from some old German (or maybe a Russian, it certainly sounded like the Russian view of life): Whatever does not kill me makes me stronger.

He went back to his car, whistling. He even gave the coin-op lottery-ticket machine a comradely slap as he went by. At first he thought maybe he couldn't see his passenger because the guy was lying down...in which case, Monette would have to shoo him upright again so he could get behind the wheel. But the hitchhiker wasn't lying down. The hitchhiker was gone. Had taken his pack and his sign and decamped.

Monette checked the backseat and saw his Wolfe & Sons cases undisturbed. Looked into the glove compartment and saw the paltry identification kept within—registration, insurance card, AAA card—was still there. All that was left of the bum was a lingering smell, not entirely unpleasant: sweat and faint pine, as if the guy had been sleeping rough.

He thought he'd see the guy at the foot of the ramp, holding up his sign and patiently switching it from side to side so that potential Good Samaritans got the complete lowdown on his defects. If so, Monette would stop and pick him up again. The job didn't feel done, somehow. Delivering the guy to the Derry Shelter—that would make the job feel done. That would close the deal, and close the book. Whatever other failings he might have, he liked to finish things.

But the guy wasn't at the foot of the ramp; the guy was completely AWOL. And it wasn't until Monette was passing a sign reading DERRY 10 MI. that he looked up at the rearview mirror and saw that his St. Christopher's medal, companion of all those millions of miles, was gone. The deaf-mute had stolen it. But not even that could break Monette's new optimism. Maybe the deaf-mute needed it more than he did. Monette hoped it would bring him good luck.

Two days later—by then he was selling the best fall list ever in Presque Isle—he got a call from the Maine State Police. His wife and Bob Yandowsky had been beaten to death in the Grove Motel. The killer had used a piece of pipe wrapped in a motel towel.

–11–

“My...dear...*God!*” the priest breathed.

“Yes,” Monette agreed, “that's pretty much what I thought.”

“Your daughter...?”

“Heartbroken, of course. She's with me, at home. We'll get through this, Father. She's tougher than I thought. And of course, she doesn't know about the other. The embezzlement. With luck, she never will. There's going to be a very large insurance payment, what they call double indemnity. Given everything that went on before, I think I would be in moderate to serious trouble with the police now if I didn't have a cast-iron alibi. And if there hadn't been...developments. As it is, I've been questioned several times.”

“Son, you didn't pay someone to—”

“I’ve been asked that, too. The answer is no. I’ve thrown my bank accounts open to anyone who wants a look. Every penny is accounted for, both in my half of the wedded partnership and in Barb’s. She was financially very responsible. At least in the sane part of her life.

“Father, can you open up on your side? I want to show you something.”

Instead of replying, the priest opened his door. Monette slipped the St. Christopher’s medal from around his neck, then reached around from his side. Their fingers touched briefly as the medal and its little pile of steel chain passed from hand to hand.

There was silence for five seconds as the priest considered it. Then he said, “This was returned to you when? Was it at the motel where—”

“No,” Monette said. “Not the motel. The house in Buxton. On the dresser in what used to be our bedroom. Next to our wedding picture, actually.”

“Dear God,” the priest said.

“He could have gotten the address from my car registration when I was in the john.”

“And of course you mentioned the name of the motel...and the town...”

“Dowrie,” Monette agreed.

For the third time the priest invoked the name of his Boss. Then he said, “The fellow wasn’t deaf-mute at all, was he?”

“I’m almost positive he was mute,” Monette said, “but he sure wasn’t deaf. There was a note beside the medal, on a piece of paper he tore off the phone pad. All this must have happened while my daughter and I were at the funeral home, picking out a casket. The back door was open but not jimmied. He might have been smart enough to trig the lock, but I think I just forgot and left it open when we went out.”

“The note said what?”

“Thank you for the ride,” Monette said.

“I’ll be damned.” Thoughtful silence, then a soft knocking just outside the door of the confessional in which Monette sat, contemplating FOR ALL HAVE SINNED AND FALLEN SHORT OF GOD’S GLORY. Monette took back his medal. “Have you told the police?”

“Yes, of course, the whole story. They think they know who the guy is. They’re familiar with the sign. His name is Stanley Doucette. He’s spent years rambling around New England with that sign of his. Sort of like me, now that I think of it.”

“Prior crimes of violence on his record?”

“A few,” Monette said. “Fights, mostly. Once he beat a man pretty badly in a bar, and he’s been in and out of mental institutions, including Serenity Hill, in Augusta. I don’t think the police told me everything.”

“Do you want to know everything?”

Monette considered, then said, “No.”

“They haven’t caught this fellow.”

“They say it’s only a matter of time. They say he’s not bright. But he was bright enough to fool me.”

“*Did* he fool you, son? Or did you know you were speaking to a listening ear? It seems to me that is the key question.”

Monette was quiet for a long time. He didn’t know if he had honestly searched his heart before, but he felt he was searching it now, and with a bright light. Not liking everything he found there but searching, yes. Not overlooking what he saw there. At least not on purpose.

“I did not,” he said.

“And are you glad your wife and her lover are dead?”

In his heart, Monette instantly said *yes*. Aloud he said, “I’m relieved. I’m sorry to say that, Father, but considering the mess she made—and how it’s apt to work out, with no trial and quiet restitution made out of the insurance money—I am relieved. Is that a sin?”

“Yes, my son. Sorry to break the news, but it is.”

“Can you give me absolution?”

“Ten Our Fathers and ten Hail Marys,” the priest said briskly. “The Our Fathers are for lack of charity—a serious sin but not mortal.”

“And the Hail Marys?”

“Foul language in the confessional. At some point the adultery issue—yours, not hers—needs to be addressed, but now—”

“You have a lunch date. I understand.”

“In truth, I’ve lost my appetite for lunch, although I should certainly greet my company. The main thing is, I think I’m a little too...too overwhelmed to go into your so-called road comfort just now.”

“I understand.”

“Good. Now son?”

“Yes?”

“Not to belabor the point, but are you *sure* you didn’t give this man permission? Or encourage him in any way? Because then I think we’d be talking mortal sin instead of venial. I’d have to check with my own spiritual advisor to make sure, but—”

“No, Father. But do you think...is it possible that God put that guy in my car?”

In his heart, the priest instantly said *yes*. Aloud he said, “That’s blasphemy, good for ten more Our Fathers. I don’t know how long you’ve been outside the doors, but even you should know better. Now do you want to say something else and try for more Hail Marys, or are we done here?”

“We’re done, Father.”

“Then you’re shriven, as we say in the trade. Go your way and sin no more. And take care of your daughter, son. Children only have one mother, no matter how she may have behaved.”

“Yes, Father.”

Behind the screen, the form shifted. “Can I ask you one more question?”

Monette settled back, reluctantly. He wanted to be gone. “Yes.”

“You say the police think they will catch this man.”

“They tell me it’s only a matter of time.”

“My question is, do you *want* the police to catch this man?”

And because what he really wanted was to be gone and say his atonement in the even more private confessional of his car, Monette said, “Of course I do.”

On his way back home, he added two extra Hail Marys and two extra Our Fathers.

from his little wine closet. He had gained a whole new perspective on life. He only hoped he would live to enjoy it. And if The Motherfucker just intended to lock him in, maybe he would.

He thought (it was as random and as unprompted as his thought about the bread): *If I get out of this, I’m going to start giving money to Save the Children.*

“Get in there, Johnson.”

“I tell you it’ll fall over!”

“Who’s the construction guy here? It won’t fall over if you’re careful. Get in.”

“I don’t understand why you’re doing this!”

Grunwald laughed unbelievably. Then he said, “You get your ass in there or I will blow it off, so help me God.”