

Stephen King - Big wheels - A Tale of The Laundry Game (Milkman #2)  
Big wheels: A Tale of The Laundry Game (Milkman #2)  
by Stephen King

Rocky and Leo, both drunk as the last lords of creation, cruised slowly down Culver Street and then out along Balfour Avenue toward Crescent. They were ensconced in Rocky's 1957 Chrysler. Between them, balanced with drunken care on the monstrous hump of the Chrysler's drive shaft, sat a case of Iron City beer. It was their second case of the evening -- the evening had actually begun at four in the afternoon, which was punch-out time at the laundry.

"Shit on a shingle!" Rocky said, stopping at the red blinker-light above the intersection of Balfour Avenue and Highway 99. He did not look for traffic in either direction, but did cast a sly glance behind them. A half-full can of I.C., emblazoned with a colorful picture of Terry Bradshaw, rested against his crotch. He took a swig and then turned left on 99. The universal joint made a thick grunting sound as they started chuggingly off in second gear. The Chrysler had lost its first gear some two months ago.

"Gimme a shingle and I'll shit on it," Leo said obligingly.

"What time is it?"

Leo held his watch up until it was almost touching the tip of his cigarette and then puffed madly until he could get a reading. "Almost eight."

"Shit on a shingle!" They passed a sign, which read PITTSBURGH 44.

"Nobody is going to inspect this here Detroit honey," Leo said. "Nobody in his right mind, at least."

Rocky fetched third gear. The universal moaned to itself, and the Chrysler began to have the automotive equivalent of a petit mal epileptic seizure. The spasm eventually passed, and the speedometer climbed tiredly to forty. It hung there precariously.

When they reached the intersection of Highway 99 and Devon Stream Road (Devon Stream formed the border between the townships of Crescent and Devon for some eight miles), Rocky turned onto the latter almost upon a whim -- although perhaps even then some memory of ole stiff socks had begun to stir deep down in what passed for Rocky's subconscious.

He and Leo had been driving more or less at random since leaving work. It was the last day of June, and the inspection sticker on Rocky's Chrysler would become invalid at exactly 12:01 AM tomorrow. Four hours from right now. Less than four hours from right now. Rocky found this eventuality almost too painful to contemplate, and Leo didn't care. It was not his car. Also, he had drunk enough Iron City beer to reach a state of deep cerebral paralysis.

Devon Road wound through the only heavily wooded area of Crescent. Great bunches of elms and oaks crowded in on both sides, lush and alive and full of moving shadows as night began to close over southwestern Pennsylvania. The area was known, in fact, as The Devon Woods. It had attained capital-letter status after the torture-murder of a young girl and her boyfriend in 1968. The couple had been parking out here and were found in the boyfriend's 1959 Mercury. The Merc had real leather seats and a large chrome hood ornament. The occupants had been found in the back seat. Also in the front seat, the trunk, and the glove compartment. The killer had never been found.

"Jughumper better not stall out here," Rocky said. "We're ninety miles from no place."

"Bunk." This interesting word had risen lately to the top forty of Leo's vocabulary.

"There's town, right over there."

Rocky sighed and sipped from his can of beer. The glow was not really town, but the kid was close enough to make argument worthless. It was the new shopping center. Those high-intensity arc sodium lights really threw a glare. While looking in that direction, Rocky drove the car over to the left side of the road, looped back, almost went into the right-hand ditch, and finally got back in his lane again.

"whoops," he said.

Leo burped and gurgled.

They had been working together at the New Adams Laundry since September, when Leo had been hired as Rocky's washroom helper. Leo was a rodent-featured young man of twenty-two who looked as if he might have quite a lot of jail-time in his future. He claimed he was saving twenty dollars a week from his pay to buy a used Kawasaki motorcycle. He said he was going west on this bike when cold weather came. Leo had held a grand total of twelve jobs since he and the world of academics had parted

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company at the minimum age of sixteen. He liked the laundry fine. Rocky was teaching him the various wash cycles, and Leo believed he was finally Learning a Skill, which would come in handy when he reached Flagstaff.

Rocky, an older hand, had been at New Adams for fourteen years. His hands, ghostlike and bleached as he handled the steering wheel, proved it. He had done a four-month bit for carrying a concealed weapon in 1970. His wife, then puffily pregnant with their third child, announced 1) that it was not his, Rocky's, child but the milkman's child; and 2) that she wanted a divorce, on grounds of mental cruelty. Two things about this situation had driven Rocky to carry a concealed weapon: 1) he had been cuckolded; and 2) he had been cuckolded by the fa chrissakes milkman, a trout-eyed long-haired piece of work named Spike Milligan. Spike drove for Cramer's Dairy.

The milkman, for God's sweet sake! The milkman, and could you die? Could you just fucking flop down into the gutter and die? Even to Rocky, who had never progressed much beyond reading the Fler's Funnies that came wrapped around the bubble gum he chewed indefatigably at work, the situation had sonorous classical overtones. As a result, he had duly informed his wife of two facts: 1) no divorce; and 2) he was going to let a large amount of daylight into Spike Milligan. He had purchased a .32-caliber pistol some ten years ago, which he used occasionally to shoot at bottles, tin cans, and small dogs. He left his house on Oak Street that morning and headed for the dairy, hoping to catch Spike when he finished his morning deliveries. Rocky stopped at the Four Corners Tavern on the way to have a few beers -- six, eight, maybe twenty. It was hard to remember. While he was drinking, his wife called the cops. They were waiting for him on the corner of Oak and Balfour. Rocky was searched, and one of the cops plucked the .32 from his waistband.

"I think you are going away for a while, my friend," the cop who found the gun told him, and that was just what Rocky did. He spent the next four months washing sheets and pillowcases for the State of Pennsylvania. During this period his wife got a Nevada divorce, and when Rocky got out of the slam she was living with Spike Milligan in a Dakin Street apartment house with a pink flamingo on the front lawn. In addition to his two older children (Rocky still more or less assumed they were his), the couple were now possessed of an infant who was every bit as trout-eyed as his daddy. They were also possessed of fifteen dollars a week in alimony.

"Rocky, I think I'm gettin carsick," Leo said. "Couldn't we just pull over and drink?"

"I gotta get a sticker on my wheels," Rocky said. "This is important. A man's no good without his wheels."

"Nobody in his right mind is gonna inspect this -- I told you that. It ain't got no turn signals."

"They blink if I step on the brake at the same time, and anybody who don't step on his brakes when he's makin a turn is lookin to do a rollover."

"Window on this side's cracked."

"I'll roll it down."

"What if the inspectionist asks you to roll it up so he can check it?"

"I'll burn that bridge when I come to it," Rocky said coolly. He tossed his beer can out and got a refill. This new one had Franco Harris on it. Apparently the Iron City company was playing the Steelers' Greatest Hits this summer. He popped the top. Beer splurged.

"Wish I had a woman," Leo said, looking into the dark. He smiled strangely.

"If you had a woman, you'd never get out west. What a woman does is keep a man from getting any further west. That's how they operate. That is their mission. Dint you tell me you wanted to go out west?"

"Yeah, and I'm going, too."

"You'll never go," Rocky said. "Pretty soon you'll have a woman. Next you'll have abalone. Alimony. You know. Women always lead up to alimony. Cars are better. Stick to cars."

"Pretty hard to screw a car."

"You'd be surprised," Rocky said, and giggled.

The woods had begun to straggle away into new dwellings. Lights twinkled up on the left and Rocky suddenly slammed on the brakes. The brake lights and turn signals both went on at once; it was a home wiring job. Leo lurched forward, spilling beer on the seat. "What? What?"

"Look," Rocky said. "I think I know that fella."

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There was a tumorous, ramshackle garage and Citgo filling station on the left side of the road. The sign in front said:

BOB'S GAS & SERVICE

BOB DRISCOLL, PROP.

FRONT END ALIGNMENT OUR SPECIALTY

DEFEND YOUR GOD-GIVEN RIGHT TO BEAR ARMS!

And, at the very bottom:

STATE INSPECTION STATION #72

"Nobody in his right mind -- " Leo began again.

"It's Bobby Driscoll!" Rocky cried. "Me an Bobby Driscoll went to school together! We got it knocked! Bet your fur!"

He pulled in unevenly, headlights illuminating the open door of the garage bay. He popped the clutch and roared toward it. A stoop-shouldered man in a green coverall ran out, making frantic stopping gestures.

"ThassBob!" Rocky yelled exultantly. "Heyyy, StiffSocks!"

They ran into the side of the garage. The Chrysler had another seizure, grand mat this time. A small yellow flame appeared at the end of the sagging tailpipe, followed by a puff of blue smoke. The car stalled gratefully. Leo lurched forward, spilling more beer. Rocky keyed the engine and backed off for another try.

Bob Driscoll ran over, profanity spilling out of his mouth in colorful streamers. He was waving his arms. " -- the hell you think you're doing, you goddam sonofa -- "

"Bobby!" Rocky yelled, his delight nearly orgasmic. "Hey Stiff Socks! whatchoo say, buddy?"

Bob peered in through Rocky's window. He had a twisted, tired face that was mostly hidden in the shadow thrown by the bill of his cap. "Who called me Stiff Socks?"

"Me!" Rocky fairly screamed. "It's me, you ole finger-diddler! It's your old buddy!"

"Who in the hell -- "

"Johnny Rockwell! You gone blind as well as foolish?"

Cautiously: "Rocky?"

"Yeah, you sombitch!"

"Christ Jesus." Slow, unwilling pleasure seeped across Bob's face. "I ain't seen you since... well... since the Catamounts game, anyway -- "

"Shoosh! wa'n't that some hot ticket?" Rocky slapped his thigh, sending up a gusher of Iron City. Leo burped.

"Sure it was. Only time we ever won our class. Even then we couldn't seem to win the championship. Say, you beat hell out of the side of my garage, Rocky. You -- "

"Yeah, same ole Stiff socks. Same old guy. You ain't changed even a hair." Rocky belatedly peeked as far under the visor of the baseball cap as he could see, hoping this was true. It appeared, however, that ole Stiff Socks had gone either partially or completely bald. "Jesus! Ain't it somethin, runnin into you like this! Did you finally marry Marcy Drew?"

"Hell, yeah. Back in '70. where were you?"

"Jail, most probably. Lissen, muhfuh, can you inspect this baby?"

Caution again: "You mean your car?"

Rocky cackled. "No -- my ole hogleg! Sure, my car! Canya?"

Bob opened his mouth to say no.

"This here's an old friend of mine. Leo Edwards. Leo, wantcha to meet the only basketball player from Crescent High who dint change his sweatsocks for four years."

"Pleesdameetcha," Leo said, doing his duty just as his mother had instructed on one of the occasions when that lady was sober.

Rocky cackled. "Want a beer, Stiffy?"

Bob opened his mouth to say no.

"Here's the little crab-catcher!" Rocky exclaimed. He popped the top. The beer, crazied up by the headlong run into the side of Bob Driscoll's garage, boiled over the top and down Rocky's wrist. Rocky shoved it into Bob's hand. Bob sipped quickly, to keep his own hand from being flooded.

"Rocky, we close at -- "

"Just a second, just a second, lemme back up. I got somethin crazy here."

Rocky dragged the gearshift lever up into reverse, popped the clutch, skinned a gas pump, and then drove the Chrysler jerkily inside. He was out in a minute, shaking Bob's free hand like a politician. Bob looked dazed. Leo sat in the car, tipping a fresh beer. He was also farting. A lot of beer always made him fart.

"Hey!" Rocky said, staggering around a pile of rusty hubcaps. "You member Diana

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Rucklehouse?"

"Sure do," Bob said. An unwilling grin came to his mouth. "She was the one with the -- " He cupped his hands in front of his chest.

Rocky howled. "Thass her! You got it, muhfuh! She still in town?"

"I think she moved to -- "

"Figures," Rocky said. "The ones who don't stay always move. You can put a sticker on this pig, cantcha?"

"Well, my wife said she'd wait supper and we close at -- "

"Jesus, it'd sure put a help on me if you could. I'd sure predate it. I could do some personal laundry for your wife. Thass what I do. Wash. At New Adams."

"And I am learning," Leo said, and farted again.

"Wash her dainties, whatever you want. Whatchoo say, Bobby?"

"Well, I s'pose I could look her over."

"Sure," Rocky said, clapping Bob on the back and winking at Leo. "Same ole stiff Socks. What a guy!"

"Yeah," Bob said, sighing. He pulled on his beer, his oily fingers mostly obscuring Mean Joe Green's face. "You beat hell out of your bumper, Rocky."

"Give it some class. Goddam car needs some class. But it's one big motherfuckin set of wheels, you know what I mean?"

"Yeah, I guess -- "

"Hey! Wantcha to meet the guy I work with! Leo, this is the only basketball player from -- "

"You introduced us already," Bob said with a soft, despairing smile.

"Howdy doody," Leo said. He fumbled for another can of Iron City. Silvery lines like railroad tracks glimpsed at high noon on a hot clear day were beginning to trace their way across his field of vision.

" -- Crescent High who dint change his --"

"Want to show me your headlights, Rocky?" Bob asked.

"Sure. Great lights. Halogen or nitrogen or some fucking gen. They got class. Pop those little crab-catchers right the fuck on, Leo."

Leo turned on the windshield wipers.

"That's good," Bob said patiently. He took a big swallow of beer. "Now how about the lights?"

Leo popped on the headlights.

"High beam?"

Leo tapped for the dimmer switch with his left foot. He was pretty sure it was down there someplace, and finally he happened upon it. The high beams threw Rocky and Bob into sharp relief, like exhibits in a police lineup.

"Fucking nitrogen headlights, what'd I tell you?" Rocky cried, and then cackled.

"Goddam, Bobby! Seein you is better than gettin a check in the mail!"

"How about the turn signals?" Bob asked.

Leo smiled vaguely at Bob and did nothing.

"Better let me do it," Rocky said. He bumped his head a good one as he got in behind the wheel. "The kid don't feel too good, I don't think." He cramped down on the brake at the same time he flicked up the turn-blinker

"Okay," Bob said, "but does it work without the brake?"

"Does it say anyplace in the motor-vehicle-inspection manual that it hasta?" Rocky asked craftily.

Bob sighed. His wife was waiting dinner. His wife had large floppy breasts and blond hair that was black at the roots. His wife was partial to Donuts by the Dozen, a product sold at the local Giant Eagle store. When his wife came to the garage on Thursday nights for her bingo money her hair was usually done up in large green rollers under a green chiffon scarf. This made her head look like a futuristic AM/FM radio. Once, near three in the morning, he had wakened and looked at her slack paper face in the soulless graveyard glare of the streetlight outside their bedroom window. He had thought how easy it could be -- just jackknife over on top of her, just drive a knee into her gut so she would lose her air and be unable to scream, just screw both hands around her neck. Then just put her in the tub and whack her into prime cuts and mail her away someplace to Robert Driscoll, c/o General Delivery. Any old place. Lima, Indiana. North Pole, New Hampshire. Intercourse, Pennsylvania. Kunkle, Iowa. Any old place. It could be done. God knew it had been done in the past.

"No," he told Rocky, "I guess it doesn't say anyplace in the regs that they have to

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work on their own. Exactly. In so many words." He upended the can and the rest of the beer gurgled down his throat. It was warm in the garage and he had had no supper. He could feel the beer rise immediately into his mind.

"Hey, stiff socks just came up empty!" Rocky said. "Hand up a brew, Leo."

"No, Rocky, I really..."

Leo, who was seeing none too well, finally happened on a can. "Want a wide receiver?" he asked, and passed the can to Rocky. Rocky handed it to Bob, whose demurrals petered out as he held the can's cold actuality in his hand. It bore the smiling face of Lynn Swann. He opened it. Leo farted homily to close the transaction.

All of them drank from football-player cans for a moment.

"Horn work?" Bob finally asked, breaking the silence apologetically.

"Sure." Rocky hit the ring with his elbow. It emitted a feeble squeak. "Battery's a little low, though."

They drank in silence.

"That goddam rat was as big as a cocker spaniel!" Leo exclaimed.

"Kid's carrying quite a load," Rocky explained.

Bob thought about it. "Yuh," he said.

This struck Rocky's funnybone and he cackled through a mouthful of beer. A little trickled out of his nose, and this made Bob laugh. It did Rocky good to hear him, because Bob had looked like one sad sack when they had rolled in.

They drank in silence awhile more.

"Diana Rucklehouse," Bob said meditatively.

Rocky sniggered.

Bob chuckled and held his hands out in front of his chest.

Rocky laughed and held his own out even further.

Bob guffawed. "You member that picture of Ursula Andress that Tinker Johnson pasted on ole lady Freemantle's bulletin board?"

Rocky howled. "And he drew on those two big old jaheobies -- "

"-- and she just about had a heart-attack --"

"You two can laugh," Leo said morosely, and farted.

Bob blinked at him. "Huh?"

"Laugh," Leo said. "I said you two can laugh. Neither of you has got a hole in your back."

"Don't lissen to him," Rocky said (a trifle uneasily). "Kid's got a skinful."

"You got a hole in your back?" Bob asked Leo.

"The laundry," Leo said, smiling. "We got these big washers, see? Only we call 'em wheels. They're laundry wheels. That's why we call 'em wheels. I load 'em, I pull 'em, I load 'em again. Put the shit in dirty, take the shit out clean. That's what I do, and I do it with class." He looked at Bob with insane confidence. "Got a hole in my back from doing it, though."

"Yeah?" Bob was looking at Leo with fascination. Rocky shifted uneasily.

"There's a hole in the roof," Leo said. "Right over the third wheel. They're round, see, so we call 'em wheels. When it rains, the water comes down. Drop drop drop. Each drop hits me -- whap! -- in the back. Now I got a hole there. Like this." He made a shallow curve with one hand. "Wanna see?"

"He don't want to see any such deformity!" Rocky shouted. "We're talkin about old times here and there ain't no effing hole in your back anyway!"

"I wanna see it," Bob said.

"They're round so we call it the laundry," Leo said.

Rocky smiled and clapped Leo on the shoulder. "No more of this talk or you could be walking home, my good little buddy. Now why don't you hand me up my namesake if there's one left?"

Leo peered down into the carton of beer, and after a while he handed up a can with Rocky Blier on it.

"Atta way to go!" Rocky said, cheerful again.

The entire case was gone an hour later, and Rocky sent Leo stumbling up the road to Pauline's Superette for more. Leo's eyes were ferret-red by this time, and his shirt had come untucked. He was trying with myopic concentration to get his Camels out of his rolled-up shirt sleeve. Bob was in the bathroom, urinating and singing the school song.

"Doan wanna walk up there," Leo muttered.

"Yeah, but you're too fucking drunk to drive."

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Leo walked in a drunken semicircle, still trying to coax his cigarettes out of his shirtsleeve. "'Z dark. And cold."

"You wanna get a sticker on that car or not?" Rocky hissed at him. He had begun to see weird things at the edges of his vision. The most persistent was a huge bug wrapped in spider-silk in the far corner.

Leo looked at him with his scarlet eyes. "Ain't my car," he said with bogus cunning.

"And you'll never ride in it again, neither, if you don't go and get that beer,"

Rocky said. He glanced fearfully at the dead bug in the corner. "You just try me and see if I'm kidding."

"Okay," Leo whined. "Okay, you don't have to get pissy about it."

He walked off the road twice on his way up to the corner and once on the way back.

When he finally achieved the warmth and light of the garage again, both of them were singing the school song. Bob had managed, by hook or by crook, to get the Chrysler up on the lift. He was wandering around underneath it, peering at the rusty exhaust system.

"There's some holes in your stray' pipe," he said.

"Ain no stray pipes under there," Rocky said. They both found this spit-sprayingly funny.

"Beer's here!" Leo announced, put the case down, sat on a wheel rim, and fell immediately into a half-doze. He had swallowed three himself on the way back to lighten the load.

Rocky handed Bob a beer and held one himself.

"Race? Just like ole times?"

"Sure," Bob said. He smiled tightly. In his mind's eye he could see himself in the cockpit of a low-to-the-ground, streamlined Formula One racer, one hand resting cockily on the wheel as he waited for the drop of the flag, the other touching his lucky piece -- the hood ornament from a '59 Mercury. He had forgotten Rocky's straight pipe and his blowsy wife with her transistorized hair curlers.

They opened their beers and chugged them. It was a dead heat; both dropped their cans to the cracked concrete and raised their middle fingers at the same time. Their belches echoed off the walls like rifle shots.

"Just like ole times," Bob said, sounding forlorn. "Nothing's just like ole times, Rocky."

"I know it," Rocky agreed. He struggled for a deep, luminous thought and found it.

"We're gettin older by the day, Stiffy."

Bob sighed and belched again. Leo farted in the corner and began to hum "Get Off My Cloud."

"Try again?" Rocky asked, handing Bob another beer.

"Mi' as well," Bob said; "mi' jus' as well, Rocky m'boy."

The case Leo had brought back was gone by midnight, and the new inspection was affixed on the left side of Rocky's windshield at a slightly crazy angle. Rocky had made out the pertinent information himself before slapping the sticker on, working carefully to copy over the numbers from the tattered and greasy registration he had finally found in the glove compartment. He had to work carefully, because he was seeing triple. Bob sat cross-legged on the floor like a yoga master, a half-empty can of I.C. in front of him. He was staring fixedly at nothing.

"Well, you sure saved my life, Bob," Rocky said. He kicked Leo in the ribs to wake him up. Leo grunted and whoofed. His lids flickered briefly, closed, then flew open wide when Rocky footed him again.

"We home yet, Rocky? We -- "

"You just shake her easy, Bobby," Rocky cried cheerfully. He hooked his fingers into Leo's armpit and yanked. Leo came to his feet, screaming. Rocky half-carried him around the Chrysler and shoved him into the passenger seat. "We'll stop back and do her again sometime."

"Those were the days," Bob said. He had grown wet-eyed. "Since then everything just gets worse and worse, you know it?"

"I know it," Rocky said. "Everything has been refitted and beshitted. But you just keep your thumb on it, and don't do anything I wouldn't d -- "

"My wife ain't laid me in a year and a half," Bob said, but the words were blanketed by the coughing misfire of Rocky's engine. Bob got to his feet and watched the Chrysler back out of the bay, taking a little wood from the left side of the door. Leo hung out the window, smiling like an idiot saint. "Come by the laundry sometime, skinner. I'll show you the hole in my back. I'll show you my wheels! I'll show y -- "

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"Rocky's arm suddenly shot out like a vaudeville hook and pulled him into the dimness.

"Bye, fella!" Rocky yelled.

The Chrysler did a drunken slalom around the three gas-pump islands and bucketed off into the night. Bob watched until the taillights were only flickerflies and then walked carefully back inside the garage. On his cluttered workbench was a chrome ornament from some old car. He began to play with it, and soon he was crying cheap tears for the old days. Later, some time after three in the morning, he strangled his wife and then burned down the house to make it look like an accident.

"Jesus," Rocky said to Leo as Bob's garage shrank to a point of white light behind them. "How about that? Ole Stiffy." Rocky had reached that stage of drunkenness where every part of himself seemed gone except for a tiny, glowing coal of sobriety somewhere deep in the middle of his mind.

Leo did not reply. In the pale green light thrown by the dashboard instruments, he looked like the dormouse at Alice's tea party.

"He was really bombarded," Rocky went on. He drove on the left side of the road for a while and then the Chrysler wandered back. "Good thing for you -- he prob'ly won't remember what you tole him. Another time it could be different. How many times do I have to tell you? You got to shut up about this idea that you got a fucking hole in your back."

"You know I got a hole in my back."

"well, so what?"

"It's my hole, that's so what. And I'll talk about my hole whenever I -- "

He looked around suddenly.

"Truck behind us. Just pulled out of that side road. No lights."

Rocky looked up into the rearview mirror. Yes, the truck was there, and its shape was distinctive. It was a milk truck. He didn't have to read CRAMER'S DAIRY on the side to know whose it was, either.

"It's Spike," Rocky said fearfully. "It's Spike Milligan! Jesus, I thought he only made morning deliveries!"

"who?"

Rocky didn't answer. A tight, drank grin spread over his lower face. It did not touch his eyes, which were now huge and red, like spirit lamps.

He suddenly floored the Chrysler, which belched blue oil smoke and reluctantly creaked its way up to sixty.

"Hey! You're too drunk to go this fast! You're..." Leo paused vaguely, seeming to lose track of his message. The trees and houses raced by them, vague blurs in the graveyard of twelve-fifteen. They blew by a stop sign and flew over a large bump, leaving the road for a moment afterwards. When they came down, the low-hung muffler struck a spark on the asphalt. In the back, cans clinked and rattled. The faces of Pittsburgh Steeler players rolled back and forth, sometimes in the light, sometimes in shadow.

"I was fooling!" Leo said wildly. "There ain't no truck!"

"It's him and he kills people!" Rocky screamed. "I seen his bug back in the garage! God damn!"

They roared up Southern Hill on the wrong side of the road. A station wagon coming in the other direction skidded crazily over the gravel shoulder and down into the ditch getting out of their way. Leo looked behind him. The road was empty.

"Rocky -- "

"Come and get me, Spike!" Rocky screamed. "You just come on and get me!"

The Chrysler had reached eighty, a speed which Rocky in a more sober frame of mind would not have believed possible. They came around the turn, which leads onto the Johnson Flat Road, smoke spurting up from Rocky's bald tires. The Chrysler screamed into the night like a ghost, lights searching the empty road ahead.

Suddenly a 1959 Mercury roared at them out of the dark, straddling the centerline. Rocky screamed and threw his hands up in front of his face. Leo had just time to see the Mercury was missing its hood ornament before the crash came. pulled out and began to move toward the pillar of flame and the twisted blackening hulks in the center of the road. It moved at a sedate speed. The transistor dangling by its strap from the meathook played rhythm and blues.

"That's it," Spike said. "Now we're going over to Bob Driscoll's house. He thinks he's got gasoline out in his garage, but I'm not sure he does. This has been one very long day, wouldn't you agree?" But when he turned around, the back of the truck

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was empty. Even the bug was gone.  
Half a mile behind, lights flickered on at a side crossing, and a milk truck with  
CRAMER'S DAIRY written on the side