

**S t e p h e n**  
**KING**

**BLIND WILLE**

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6:15 A.M.

He wakes to music, always to music; the shrill *beep-beep-beep* of the clock-radio's alarm is too much for his mind to cope with during those first blurry moments of the day. It sounds like a dump truck backing up. The radio is bad enough at this time of year, though; the easy-listening station he keeps the clock-radio tuned to is wall-to-wall Christmas carols, and this morning he wakes up to one of the two or three on his Most Hated List, something full of breathy voices and phony wonder. The Hare Krishna Chorale or the Andy Williams Singers or some such. Do you hear what I hear, the breathy voices sing as he sits up in bed, blinking groggily, hair sticking out in every direction. Do you see what I see, they sing as he swings his legs out, grimaces his way across the cold floor to the radio, and bangs the button that turns it off. When he turns around, Sharon has assumed her customary defensive posture — pillow folded over her head, nothing showing but her creamy curve of one shoulder, a lacy nightgown strap, and a fluff of blonde hair.

He goes into the bathroom, closes the door, slips off the pajama bottoms he sleeps in, drops them into the hamper, clicks on his electric razor. As he runs it over his face he thinks, Why not run through the rest of the sensory catalogue while you're at it, boys? Do you smell what I smell, do you taste what I taste, do you feel what I feel. I mean, hey, go for it.

'Humbug,' he says as he turns on the shower. 'All humbug.'

Twenty minutes later, while he's dressing (the dark grey suit from Paul Stuart this morning, plus his favorite Sulka tie), Sharon wakes up a little. Not enough for him to fully understand what she's telling him, though.

'Come again?' he asks. 'I got eggnog, but the rest was just ugga-wugga.'

'I asked if you'd pick up two quarts of eggnog on your way home,' she says. 'We've got the Allens and the Dubrays coming over tonight, remember?'

'Christmas,' he says, checking his hair carefully in the mirror. He no longer looks like the glaring, bewildered man who sits up in bed to the sound of music five mornings a week — sometimes six. Now he looks like all the other people who will ride into New York with him on the 7:40, and that is just what he wants.

'What about Christmas?' she asks with a sleepy smile. 'Humbug, right?'

'Right,' he agrees. 'All humbug.'

'If you remember, get some cinnamon too — '

'Okay.'

' — but if you forget the eggnog, I'll *slaughter* you, Bill.'

'I'll remember.'

'I know. You're very dependable. Look nice too.'

'Thanks.'

She flops back down, then props herself up on one elbow as he makes a final minute adjustment to the tie, which is a dark blue. He has never worn a red tie in his life, and hopes he can go to his grave untouched by that particular virus. 'I got the tinsel you wanted,' she says.

'Mmmmm?'

'the *tinsel*,' she says. 'It's on the kitchen table.'

'Oh.' Now he remembers. 'Thanks.'

'Sure.' She's back down and already starting to drift off again. He doesn't envy the fact that she can stay in bed until nine — hell, until eleven, if she wants — but he envies that ability of hers to

wake up, talk, then drift off again. She says something else, but now she's back to ugga-wugga. He knows what it is just the same, though: have a good day hon.

'Thanks,' he says, kissing her cheek. 'I will.'

'Look very nice,' she mumbles again, although her eyes are closed. 'Love you, Bill.'

'Love you too,' he says and goes out.

His briefcase — Mark Cross, not quite top of the line but almost — is standing in the front hall, by the coat tree where his topcoat (from Barney's on Madison) hangs. He grabs the case on his way by and takes it into the kitchen. The coffee is all made — God bless solid state electronics and microchips — and he pours himself a cup. He opens the briefcase, which is entirely empty, and picks up the ball of tinsel on the kitchen table. He holds it up for a moment, watching the way it sparkles under the light of the kitchen fluorescents, then puts it in his briefcase.

'Do you hear what I hear,' he says to no one at all and snaps the briefcase shut.

8:15 A.M.

Outside the dirty window to his left, he can see the city drawing closer. The grime on the glass makes it look like some filthy, gargantuan ruin — Atlantis, maybe, just heaved back to the surface. It's a grey day with a load of snow caught in its throat, but that doesn't worry him much; it's just eight days until Christmas, and business will be good.

The car reeks of morning coffee, morning deodorant, morning aftershave, morning perfume, and morning stomachs. There is a tie in almost every seat — even the women wear them these days it seems. The faces have that puffy eight o'clock look, the eyes both introspective and defenseless, the conversations halfhearted. This is the hour at which even people who don't drink look hung over. Most people just stick to their newspapers. He himself has the *Times* crossword open in front of him, and although he's filled in a few squares, it's mostly a defensive measure. He doesn't like to talk to people on the train, doesn't like loose conversation of any sort, and the last thing in the world he wants is a commuter buddy. When he starts seeing the same faces in any given car, when people start to nod to him or say 'How you doin today?' as they go to their seats, he changes cars. It's not that hard to remain unknown, just another commuter, one who is conspicuous only in his adamant refusal to wear a red tie. Not that hard at all.

'All ready for Christmas?' the man in the aisle seat asks him.

He looks up, almost frowning, then decides it's not a substantive remark, but only the sort of empty time-passer some people seem to feel compelled to make. The man beside him is fat and will undoubtedly stink by noon no matter how much Speed Stik he used this morning . . . but he's hardly even looking at his seatmate, so that's all right.

'Yes, well, you know,' he says, looking down at the briefcase between his shoes — the briefcase that contains a ball of tinsel and nothing else. 'I'm getting in the spirit, little by little.'

8:40 A.M.

He comes out of Penn Station with a thousand other topcoated commuters and commuterettes, mid-level executives for the most part, sleek gerbils who will be running full tilt on their exercise wheels by noon. He stands still for a moment, breathing deep of the cold grey air. Madison Square

Garden has been tricked out with greenery and Christmas lights, and a little distance away a Santa Claus who looks Puerto Rican is ringing a bell. He's got a pot for contributions with an easel set up beside it. HELP THE HOMELESS THIS CHRISTMAS, the sign on the easel says, and the man in the blue tie thinks, How about a little truth in advertising, Santa? How about a sign that says, HELP ME SUPPORT MY CRACK HABIT THIS CHRISTMAS? Nevertheless, he drops a couple of dollar bills into the pot as he walks past. He has a good feeling about today. He's glad Sharon remembered the tinsel — he would have forgotten, himself; he always forgets stuff like that, the grace notes.

He walks five short blocks and then comes to his building. Standing outside the door is a young black man — a youth, actually, surely no more than seventeen — wearing black jeans and a dirty red sweater with a hood. He jives from foot to foot, blowing puffs of steam out of his mouth, smiling frequently, showing a gold tooth. In one hand he holds a partly crushed Styrofoam coffee cup. There's some change in it, which he rattles constantly.

'Spare a little?' he asks the passersby as they stream toward the revolving doors. 'Spare a little, sir? Spare a little, ma'am? Just trying to get lil spot of breffus. Than you, gobless you, merry Christmas. Spare a little, sir? Quarter, maybe? Than you. Spare a little, ma'am?'

As he passes, Bill drops a nickel and two dimes into the young black man's cup.

'Thank you, sir, gobless, merry Christmas.'

'You, too,' he says.

The woman next to him frowns. 'You shouldn't encourage them,' she says.

He gives her a shrug and a small, shamefaced smile. 'It's hard for me to say no to anyone at Christmas,' he tells her.

He enters the lobby with a stream of others, stares briefly after the opinionated bitch as she heads for the newsstand, then goes to the elevators with their old-fashioned floor dials and their art deco numbers. Here several people nod to him, and he exchanges a few words with a couple of them as they wait — it's not like the train, after all, where you can change cars. Plus, the building is an old one, only fifteen stories high, and the elevators are cranky.

'How's the wife, Bill?' a scrawny, constantly grinning man from the fifth floor asks.

'Andi? She's fine.'

'Kids?'

'Both good.' He has no kids, of course — he wants kids about as much as he wants a hiatal hernia — and his wife's name isn't Andi, but those are things the scrawny, constantly grinning man will never know.

'Bet they can't wait for the big day,' the scrawny man says, his grin widening and becoming unspeakable. Now he looks like an editorial cartoonist's conception of Famine, all big eyes and huge teeth and shiny skin.

'That's right,' he says, 'but I think Sarah's getting kind of suspicious about the guy in the red suit.' Hurry up, elevator he thinks, Jesus, hurry up and save me from these stupidities.

'Yeah, yeah, it happens,' the scrawny man says. His grin fades for a moment, as if they are discussing cancer instead of Santa. 'How old's she now?'

'Eight.'

'Boy, the time sure flies when you're having fun, doesn't it? Seems like she was just born a year or two ago.'

'You can say that again,' he says, fervently hoping the scrawny man *won't* say it again. At that moment one of the four elevators finally gasps open its doors and they herd themselves inside.

Bill and the scrawny man walk a little way down the fifth floor hall together, and then the scrawny man stops in front of a set of old-fashioned double doors with the words CONSOLIDATED INSURANCE written on one frosted-glass panel and ADJUSTORS OF AMERICA on the other. From behind these doors comes the muted clickety-click of computer keyboards and the slightly louder sound of ringing phones.

'Have a good day, Bill.'

'You too.'

The scrawny man lets himself into his office, and for a moment Bill sees a big wreath hung on the far side of the room. Also, the windows have been decorated with the kind of snow that comes in a spray can. He shudders and thinks, God save us, every one.

*9:05 A.M*

His office — one of two he keeps in this building — is at the far end of the hall. The two offices up from it are dark and vacant, a situation that has held for the last six months and one he likes just fine. Printed on the frosted glass of his own office door are the words WESTERN STATES LAND ANALYSTS. There are three locks on the door: the one that was on it when he moved into the building nine years ago, plus two he has put on himself. He lets himself in, closes the door, turns the bolt, then engages the police lock.

A desk stands in the center of the room, and it is cluttered with papers, but none of them mean anything; they are simply window dressing for the cleaning service. Every so often he throws them all out and redistributes a fresh batch. In the center of the desk is a telephone on which he makes occasional random calls so that the phone company won't register the line as totally inactive. Last year he purchased a fax, and it looks very businesslike over in its corner by the door to the office's little second room, but it has never been used.

'Do you hear what I hear, do you smell what I smell, do you taste what I taste,' he murmurs, and crosses to the door leading to the second room. Inside are shelves stacked high with more meaningless paper, two large file cabinets (there is a Walkman on top of one, his excuse on the few occasions when someone knocks on the locked door and gets no answer), a chair, and a stepladder.

Bill takes the stepladder back to the main room and unfolds it to the left of the desk. He puts his briefcase on top of it. Then he mounts the first three steps of the ladder, reaches up (the bottom half of his coat bells out around his legs as he does), and carefully moves aside one of the suspended ceiling panels.

Above is a dark area which cannot quite be called a utility space, although a few pipes and wires do run through it. There's no dust up here, at least not in this immediate area, and no rodent droppings, either — he uses D-Con Mouseprufe once a month. He wants to keep his clothes nice as he goes back and forth, of course, but that's not really the important part. the important part is to respect your work and your field. This he learned in the Marines, and he sometimes thinks it is the most important thing he did learn there. He stayed alive, of course, but he thinks now that was probably more luck than learning. Still, a person who respects his work and his field — the place where the work is done, the tools with which it is done — has a leg up in life. No doubt about that.

Above this narrow space (a ghostly, gentle wind hoots endlessly through it, bringing a smell of dust and the groan of the elevators) is the bottom of the sixth floor, and here is a square trap door

about thirty inches on a side. Bill installed it himself; he's handy with tools, which is one of the things Sharon most appreciates about him.

He flips the trap door up, letting in muted light from above, then grabs his briefcase by the handle. As he sticks his head into the space between the floors, water rushes gustily down the fat bathroom conduit twenty or thirty feet north of his present position. An hour from now, when the people in the building start their coffee breaks, that sound will be as constant and as rhythmic as waves breaking on a beach. Bill hardly notices this or any of the other interfloor sounds; he's used to them.

He climbs carefully to the top of the stepladder, then boosts himself through into his sixth floor office, leaving Bill down on five. Up here he is Willie. This office has a workshop look, with coils and motors and vents stacked neatly on metal shelves and what looks like a filter of some kind squatting on one corner of the desk. It *is* an office, however; there's a computer terminal, an IN/OUT basket full of papers (also window dressing, which he periodically rotates like a farmer rotating crops), and file cabinets. On one wall is a framed Norman Rockwell print showing a family praying over Thanksgiving dinner. Next to it is a blowup of his honorable discharge from the marines, also framed; the name on the sheet is William Teale, and his decorations, including the Bronze Star, are duly noted. On another wall is a poster from the sixties. It shows the peace sign. Below it, in red, white, and blue, is this punchline: TRACK OF THE GREAT AMERICAN CHICKEN.

Willie puts Bill's briefcase on the desk, then lies down on his stomach. He pokes his head and arms into the windy, oil-smelling darkness between the floors and replaces the ceiling panel of the fifth-floor office. It's locked up tight, he doesn't expect anyone anyway (he never does; Western States Land Analysts has never had a single customer), but it's better to be safe. Always safe, never sorry.

With his fifth floor office set to rights, Willie lowers the trapdoor in this one. Up here the trap is hidden by a small rug which is Superglued to the wood, so it can go up and down without too much flopping or sliding around.

He gets to his feet, dusts off his hands, then turns to the briefcase and opens it. He takes out the ball of tinsel and puts it on top of the laser printer which stand next to the computer terminal.

'Good one,' he says, thinking again that Sharon can be a real peach when she sets her mind to it . . . and she often does. He relatches the briefcase and then begins to undress, doing it carefully and methodically, reversing the steps he took at six-thirty, running the film backward. He strips off everything, even his undershorts and his black, knee-high socks. Naked, he hangs his topcoat, suit jacket, and shirt carefully in the closet where only one other item hangs — a bulky red thing, a little too bulky to be termed a briefcase. Willie puts his mark Cross case next to it, then places his slacks in the pants press, taking pains with the crease. The tie goes on the rack screwed to the back of the closet door, where it hangs all by itself like a long blue tongue.

He pads barefoot-naked across to one of the file cabinets. On top of it is an ashtray embossed with a pissed-off-looking eagle and the Marine motto. In it are a pair of dogtags on a chain. Willie slips the chain over his head, then slides out the bottom drawer of the cabinet stack. Inside are underclothes. Neatly folded on top are a pair of khaki boxer shorts. He slips them on. Next come white athletic socks, followed by a white cotton T-shirt — roundneck, not strappy. The shapes of his dog-tags stand out against it as do his biceps and quads. They aren't as good as they were in '67, under the triple canopy, but they aren't bad. As he slides the drawer back in and opens the next, he begins to hum under his breath — not 'Do You Hear What I Hear' but the Doors, the one about how the day destroys the night, the night divides the day.

He slips on a plain blue chambray shirt, then a pair of fatigue pants. He rolls this middle drawer back in and opens the top one. Here there is a pair of black boots, polished to a high sheen and looking as if they might last until the trump of judgement. Maybe even longer. They aren't standard Marine issue, not these — these are jumpboots, 101st Airborne stuff. But that's all right. He isn't actually trying to dress like a soldier. If he wanted to dress like a soldier, he would.

Still, there is no more reason to look sloppy than there is to allow dust to collect in the pass-through, and he's careful about the way he dresses. He does not tuck his pants into his boots, of course — he's headed for Fifth Avenue in December, not the Mekong in August — but he intends to look squared away. Looking good is as important to him as it is to Bill, maybe even more important. Respecting one's work and one's field begins, after all, with respecting one's self.

The last two items are in the back of the top drawer: a tube of makeup and a jar of hair gel. He squeezes some of the makeup into the palm of his left hand, then begins applying it, working from forehead to the base of his neck. He moves with the unconcerned speed of long experience, giving himself a moderate tan. With that done, he works some of the gel into his hair and then recombs it, getting rid of the part and sweeping it straight back from his forehead. It is the last touch, the smallest touch, and perhaps the most telling touch. There is no trace of the commuter who walked out of Penn Station an hour ago; the man in the mirror mounted on the back of the door to the small storage annex looks like a washed-up mercenary. There is a kind of silent, half-humbled pride in the tanned face, something people won't look at too long. It hurts them if they do. Willie knows this is so; he has seen it. He doesn't ask why it should be so. He has made himself a life pretty much without questions, and that's the way he likes it.

'All right,' he says, closing the door to the storage room. 'Lookin good, trooper.'

He goes back to the closet for the red jacket, which is the reversible type, and the boxy case. He slips the jacket over his desk chair for the time being and puts the case on the desk. He unlatches it and swings the top up on sturdy hinges; now it looks a little like the cases the street salesmen use to display their cheap watches and costume jewelry. There are only a few items in Willie's, one of them broken down into two pieces so it will fit. He takes out a pair of gloves (he will want them today, no doubt about that), and then a sign on a length of stout cord. The cord has been knotted through holes in the cardboard at either side, so Willie can hang the sign over his neck. He closes the case again, not bothering to latch it, and puts the sign on top of it — the desk is so cluttery, it's the only good surface he has to work on.

Humming (we chased our pleasure here, dug our treasures there), he opens the wide drawer above the kneehole, paws past the pencils and Chapsticks and paper clips and memo pads, and finally finds his stapler. He then unrolls the ball of tinsel, places it carefully around the rectangle of his sign, snips off the extra, and staples the shiny stuff firmly into place. He holds it up for a moment, first assessing the effect, then admiring it.

'Perfect!' he says. 'Wonderful! Sharon, you're a geni —'

The telephone rings and he stiffens, turning to look at it with eyes which are suddenly very small and hard and totally alert. One ring. Two. Three. On the fourth, the machine kicks in, answering in his voice — the version of it that goes with this office, anyway.

'Hi, you've reached Midtown Heating and Cooling,' Willie Teale says. 'No one can take your call right now, so leave a message at the beep.'

*Bee-eep*

He listens tensely, standing over his just-decorated sign with his hands balled into fists.

'Hi, this is Ed, from the Nynex Yellow Pages,' the voice from the machine says, and Willie lets out breath he hasn't known he was holding. His hands begin to loosen. 'Please have your company

rep call me at 555-1000 for information on how you can increase your ad space in both versions of the Yellow Pages, and at the same time save big money on your yearly bill. Thanks.'

*Click*

Willie boks at the answering machine a moment longer, almost as if he expects it to speak again — to threaten him, perhaps, or to accuse him of some crime — but nothing happens.

'Squared away,' he murmurs, putting the decorated sign back into the case. This time when he closes it, he latches it. Across the front is a bumper sticker, its message flanked by small American flags. I WAS PROUD TO SERVE, it reads. And below that: SEMPER FI.

'Squared away, baby, you better believe it.'

He leaves the office, dosing the door with MIDTOWN HEATING AND COOLING printed on the frosted-glass panel behind him, and turning all three of the locks.

9:40 A.M.

Halfway down the hall, he sees Ralph Williamson, one of the tubby accountants from Garowicz Financial Planning (all the accountants at Garowicz are tubby, from what Willie has been able to observe). There's a key chained to an old wooden paddle in one of Ralph's pink hands, and from this Willie deduces that he is looking at an accountant in need of a wee. Key on a paddle, just like in grade school, he thinks, and you know what? That's probably a comfort to him.

'Hey, Ralphie, what's doin?'

Ralph turns, sees Willie, brightens. 'Hey, hi, merry Christmas!' Willie grins at the look in Ralph's eyes. Tubby little fucker worships him, and why not? Just why the fuck not? If I were Ralph, I'd worship me too. Last of the fucking pioneers.

'Same to you, bro.' He holds out his hand (now gloved so he doesn't have to worry about it not matching his face), palm up. 'Gimme five!'

Smiling shyly, Ralph does.

'Gimme ten!'

Ralph turns his pink, pudgy hand over and allows Willie to slap it.

'So goddamn good I gotta do it again!' Willie exclaims, and give Ralph five more. 'Got your Christmas shopping done, Ralphie?'

'Almost,' Ralph says, grinning and jingling the bathroom key. 'Yes, almost. How about you, Willie?'

Willie tips him a wink. 'Oh, you know how it is, brother-man; I got two-three women, and I just let each of em buy me a little keep-sake.'

Ralph's admiring smile suggest he does not, in fact, know how it is, but rather wishes he did. 'Got a service call?'

'A whole day's worth,' Willie says. 'Tis the season, you know.'

'Seems like it's always the season for you. Business must be good. You're hardly ever in your office.'

'That's why God gave us answering machines, Ralphie-baby. Believe it. You better go on, now, or you're gonna be dealin with a wet spot on your best gabardine slacks.'

Laughing (blushing a little too), Ralph heads for the men's room.

Willie goes on down to the elevators, carrying his case in one hand and checking to make sure his glasses are still in his jacket pocket with the other. They are. The envelope is in there, too, thick and crackling with twenty-dollar bills. Fifteen of them. It's time for a little visit from Officer



Wheelock; Willie expected him yesterday. Maybe he won't show until tomorrow, but Willie is betting on today . . . not that he likes it. He knows it's the way of the world, you have to grease the wheels if you want your wagon to roll, but he still has a resentment. There are lots of days when he thinks about how pleasant it would be to put a bullet in Jasper Wheelock's head. Rip his tongue out as a trophy, too, maybe — he could hang it in the closet next to Bill Teale's tie.

When the elevator comes, Willie gets in with a smile.

It doesn't stop on five, but the thought of that happening no longer makes him nervous. He has ridden down to the lobby many times with people who work on the same floor as Bill Teale — including the scrawny drink of water from Consolidated insurance — and they don't recognize him. They should, he knows they *should*, but they don't. He used to think it was the change of clothes and the makeup, then he decided it was the hair, but in his heart he knows that none of those things can account for it. Not even their droning, numb-hearted insensitivity to the world they live in can account for it. What he's doing just isn't that radical — fatigue pants, billyhop boots, and a little brown makeup don't make a disguise. No way to they make a disguise. He doesn't know exactly how to explain it, and so mostly leaves it alone. He learned this technique, as he learned so many other things, in the Nam.

The young black man is still standing outside the lobby door (he's flipped up the hood of his grungy old sweater now), and he shakes his crumpled Styrofoam cup at Willie. He sees that the dude carrying the Mr. Repairman case in one hand is smiling, and so his own smile widens.

'Spare a little?' he asks Mr. Repairman. 'What do you say, my man?'

'Get the fuck out of my way, you worthless, lazy dickhead, that's what I say,' Willie tells him, still smiling. The young man falls back a step, the Styrofoam cup still at last, looking at Willie with shocked, wide eyes. Before he can think of anything to say, Mr. Repairman is halfway down the block and almost lost in the throngs of shoppers, his big, blocky case swinging from one gloved hand.

9:55 A.M

He goes into the Whitmore Hotel, crosses the lobby, and takes the escalator up to the mezzanine, where the public restrooms are. This is the only part of the day he ever feels nervous about, and he can't say why; certainly nothing has ever happened before, during, or after one of his hotel bathroom stops (he rotates among roughly two dozen of them in the midtown area), but he is somehow certain that if things every *do* turn dinky-dau on him, it will happen in a hotel shithouse. Because it's not like transforming from Bill Teale to Willie Teale; that feels clean and perfectly normal. The workday's final transformation, however — from Willie Teale to Blind Willie — has never felt that way. The last morph always feels murky and furtive, and until it's done and he's back on the street again, tapping his white cane in front of him, he feels as a snake must feel after it has shed its old skin and before the new one has grown back.

He looks around and sees the restroom is empty except for a pair of feet under the door of the second stall in a long row of them — a dozen in all. A throat clears softly. A newspaper rattles. There is the *fff* sound of a polite little midtown fart.

Willie goes all the way down the line to the last stall. He puts down his case, latches the door shut, and takes off his red jacket. He turns it inside-out as he does so, reversing it. The other side is olive green. It has become an old soldier's field jacket with a single pull of the arms. Sharon, who

really does have a touch of genius, bought this side of his coat in an army surplus store and tore out the lining so she could sew it easily into the red jacket. Before sewing, however, she put a staff sergeant's stripes on it, plus black strips of cloth where the name-and-unit slugs would have gone. She then washed the garment thirty or forty times. The stripes and the rest are gone now, of course, but the places where they were stand out clearly — the cloth is greener on the sleeves and the left breast, fresher in patterns any veteran of the armed services must recognize at once.

Willie hangs the coat on the hook, drops trou, sits, then picks up his case and settles it on his thighs. He opens it, takes out the two pieces of his cane, and quickly screw them together. Holding it far down the shaft, he reaches up from his sitting position and hooks the handle over the top of his jacket. Then he relatches the case, pulls a little paper off the roll in order to create the proper business-is-finished sound effect (probably unnecessary, but always safe, never sorry), and flushes the john.

Before stepping out of the stall he takes his glasses from the jacket pocket which also holds the payoff envelope. They're big wraparounds, retro shades he associates with lava lamps and outlaw biker movies starring Peter Fonda. They're good for business, though, partly because they somehow say veteran to people, and partly because no one can peek in at his eyes, even from the sides.

Willie Teale stays behind in the mezzanine restroom of the Whitmore just as Bill Teals stays behind in the fifty-floor office of Western States Land Analysts. The man who comes out — a man wearing an old fatigue jacket, shades, and tapping a white cane lightly before him — is Blind Willie, a Fifth avenue fixture since Reagan's first term.

As he crosses the smaller upstairs lobby toward the stairs (unaccompanied blind men never use escalators), he sees a woman in a red blazer coming toward him. With the heavily tinted lenses between them, she looks like some sort of exotic fish swimming in muddy waters. And of course it is not just the glasses; he is Blind Willie now, and by two this afternoon he really *will* be blind, just as he was blind when he and Bernard Hogan, his best friend, were medivacked out of the DMZ back in '67. Only then he had been damned near deaf too. I'm blind, he kept telling the guy who was kneeling between him and Bernard. He could hear himself talking, but faintly, as if his mind had come loose from his head and blown like a balloon into another room while his stupid mouth just went on quacking. I'm blind, oh Christ, kid, the whole world blew up in our fucking faces and now I'm blind. The kid had cheek. You look okay around the eyes to me, he said. If you're lucky, maybe it's just concussion blindness. And that was what it turned out to be, although it hadn't worn off for nearly a week (well, three days, but he'd never let on until he was back in the States). Bernard hadn't been so lucky. Bernard had died, and so far as Willie knows, that doesn't wear off.

'Can I help you, sir?' the woman in the red blazer asks him.

'No, ma'am,' Blind Willie says. The ceaselessly moving cane stops tapping floor and quests over emptiness. It pendulums back and forth, tapping the sides of the staircase. Blind Willie nods, then moves carefully but confidently forward until he can touch the railing with the hand which holds the bulky case. He switches the case to his cane-hand so he can grasp the railing, then turns toward the woman. He's careful not to smile directly at her but a little to her left. 'No, thank you — I'm fine.'

He starts downstairs, tapping ahead of him as he goes, big case held easily in spite of the cane — it's light, almost empty. Later, of course, it will be a different story.

*10:10 A.M.*

Fifth Avenue is dressed up and decked out for the holiday season — glitter and finery he can only see dimly. Streetlamps wear garlands of holly. Trump Tower has become a garish Christmas package, complete with gigantic red bow. A wreath which must be forty feet across graces the staid grey facade of Bonwit Teller. Lights twinkle in show windows. In the Warner Brothers store, the Tasmanian Devil which usually sits astride the Harley-Davidson has been temporarily replaced by a Santa Claus in a black leather jacket. Bells jingle. Somewhere nearby, carolers are singing 'Silent Night,' not exactly Blind Willie's favorite tune, but a good deal better than 'Do You Hear What I Hear.'

He stops where he always stops, in front of St. Patrick's across the street from Saks, allowing the package-laden shoppers to flood past in front of him. His movements now are simple and dignified. His discomfort in the men's room — that feeling of gawky and undignified nakedness about to be exposed — has passed. Now he feels like a man in the heart of some ritual, a private mass for both the living and the dead.

He squats, unlatches the case, and turns it so those approaching from uptown will be able to read the sticker on the top. He takes out the sign with its brave skirting of tinsel, and ducks under the string. The sign comes to rest against the front of his field jacket.

S/SGT WILLIAM J. TEALE, USMC RET  
SERVED DMZ, 1966-1967  
LOST MY SIGHT CON THIEN, 1967  
ROBBED OF BENEFITS BY A GRATEFUL GOVERNMENT, 1979  
LOST HOME, 1985  
ASHAMED TO BEG BUT HAVE A SON IN SCHOOL  
THINK WELL OF ME IF YOU CAN

He raises his head so that the white light of this cold, almost-ready-to-snow day slides across the blind bulbs of his dark glasses. Now the work begins, and it is harder work than anyone will ever know. There is a way to stand, not quite the military posture which is called parade rest, but close to it. The head must stay up, looking both at and through the people who pass back and forth in their thousands and tens of thousands. The hands must hang straight down in their black gloves, never fiddling with the sign or with the fabric of his pants or with each other. The feeling he projects must continue to be that sense of hurt and humbled pride. There must be no cringing, no sense of shame or shaming, and most of all no taint of insanity. He never speaks unless spoken to, and only then when he is spoken to in kindness. He does not respond to people who ask him angrily why he doesn't get a real job, or ask him what he means about being robbed of his benefits, or accuse him of faking, or what to know what kind of son allows his father to put him through school by begging on a street corner. He remembers breaking this ironclad rule only once, on a sweltering summer afternoon in 1990. What school does your son go to? a woman asked him angrily. He doesn't know what she looked like, by then it was almost four and he had been as blind as a bat for three hours, but he had felt anger exploding out of her in all directions, like bedbugs exiting an old mattress. Tell me which one, I want to mail him a dog turd. Don't bother, he replied, turning toward the sound of her voice. If you've got a dog turd you want to mail somewhere send it to LBJ. Federal express must deliver to hell, they deliver everywhere else.

'God bless you, man,' a guy in a cashmere overcoat says, and his voice trembles with surprising emotion. Except Blind Willie is not surprised. He's heard it all, he reckons, and if he hasn't, he soon will. The guy in the cashmere coat drops a bill into the open case. A five. The workday has begun.

10:45 A.M.

So far, so good. He lays his cane down carefully behind the case, drops to one knee, and sweeps a hand back and forth through the bills, although he can still see them pretty well. He picks them up — there's four or five hundred dollars in all, which puts him on the way to a three-thousand-dollar day, not great for this time of year, but not bad, either — then rolls them up and slips a rubber band around them. He then pushes a button on the inside of the case, and the false bottom drops down on springs, dumping the load of change all the way to the bottom. He adds the roll of bills, making no attempt to hide what he's doing, but feeling no qualms about it either; in all the years he has been doing this his case has never been stolen. God help the asshole who ever tries.

He lets go of the button, allowing the false bottom to snap back into place, and stands up. A hand immediately presses into the small of his back.

'Merry Christmas, Willie,' the owner of the hand says. Blind Willie recognizes him by the smell of his cologne.

'Merry Christmas, Officer Wheelock,' Willie responds. His head remains tilted upward in a faintly questioning posture; his hands hang at his sides; his feet in their brightly polished jumpboots remain apart in a stance not quite wide enough to be parade rest but nowhere near tight enough to pass as attention. 'How are you today, sir?'

'In the pink, motherfucker,' Wheelock says. 'You know me, always in the pink.'

Here comes a man in a topcoat hanging open over a bright red ski sweater. His hair is short, black on top, gray on the sides. His face has got a stern, carved look Blind Willie recognizes at once. He's got a couple of handle-top bags — one from Saks, one from Bally — in his hands. He stops and reads the sign.

'Con Thien?' he asks suddenly, speaking not as a man does when naming a place but as one does when recognizing an old acquaintance on a busy street.

'Yes, sir,' Blind Willie says.

'Who was your CO?'

'Lieutenant Bob Grissum — with a 'u,' not an 'o' — and above him, Colonel Andrew Shelf, sir.'

'I heard of Shelf,' says the man in the open coat. His face suddenly looks different. As he walked toward the man on the corner, it looked as if it belonged on Fifth Avenue. Now it doesn't. 'Never met him, though.'

Blind Willie says nothing. He can smell Wheelocks' cologne, though, stronger than ever, and the man is practically panting in his ear, sounding like a horny kid at the end of a hot date. Wheelock has never bought his act, and although Blind Willie pays for the privilege of being left alone on this corner, and quite handsomely by going rates, he knows that part of Wheelock is still cop enough to hope he'll fuck up. Part of Wheelock is actively rooting for that. But what the Wheelocks of the world never understand is that what looks fake isn't always fake. Sometimes the issues are a little more complicated than they look at first glance. That was something else the Nam had to teach him, back in the years before it became a political joke and a crutch for hack filmwriters.

'Sixty-seven was a hard year,' the gray-haired man says. He speaks in a slow, heavy voice. 'I was at Loc Ninh when the regulars tried to overrun the place. Up by the 'Bodian border. Do you remember Loc Ninh?'

'Ah, yes, sir,' Blind Willie says. 'I lost two friends on Tory Hill.'

'Tory Hill,' the man in the open coat says, and all at once he looks a thousand years old, the bright red ski sweater an obscenity, like something hung on a museum mummy by vandals who believe they are exhibiting a sense of humor. His eyes are off over a hundred horizons. Then they come back here, to this street where a nearby carillon is playing the one that goes I hear those sleighbells jingling, ring-ting tingling too. He sets his bags down between his expensive shoes and takes a pigskin wallet out from an inner pocket. He opens it, riffles through a neat thickness of bills.

'Son all right, Teale?' he asks. 'Making good grades?'

'Yes sir.'

'How old?'

'Twenty one, sir.'

'God willing, he'll never know what it's like to see his friends die and then get spit on in an airport concourse,' the man in the open top-coat says. He takes a bill out of his wallet. Blind Willie feels as well as hears Wheelock's little gasp and hardly has to look at the bill to know it is a hundred.

'Yes, sir, God willing, sir.'

The man in the topcoat touches Willie's hand with the bill, looks surprised when the gloved hand pulls back, as if it were bare and had been touched by something hot.

'Put it in my case, sire, if you would,' Blind Willie says.

The man in the topcoat looks at him for a moment, eyebrows raised, frowning slightly, then seems to understand. He stoops, puts the bill in the case, then reaches into his front pocket and brings out a small handful of change. This he scatters across the face of old Ben Franklin, in order to hold the bill down. Then he stands up. His eyes are wet and bloodshot.

'Do you any good to give you my card?' he asks Blind Willie. 'I can put you in touch with several veterans' organizations.'

'Thank you, sir, I'm sure you could, but I must respectfully decline.'

'Tried most of them?'

'Tried some, yes sir.'

'Where'd you V.A.?'

'San Francisco, sir.' He hesitates, then adds, 'The Pussy Palace, sir.'

The man in the topcoat laughs heartily at this, and when his face crinkles, the tears which have been standing in his eyes run down his weathered cheeks. 'Pussy Palace! he cries. 'I haven't heard that in fifteen years! Christ! A bedpan in every bed, and a naked nurse to hold it in place, right? Except for the lovebeads, which they left on.'

'Yes, sir, that about covers it, sir.'

'Or uncovers it. Merry Christmas, soldier.' The man in the top-coat ticks off a little one-finger salute.

'Merry Christmas to you, sir.'

The man in the topcoat picks up his bags again and walks off. He doesn't look back. Blind Willie would not have seen him do so if he had; his vision is now down to ghosts and shadows.

'That was beautiful,' Wheelock murmurs. The feeling of Wheelocks freshly used air puffing into the cup of his ear is hateful to Blind Willie — gruesome, in fact — but he will not give the man the pleasure of moving his head so much as an inch. 'The old fuck was actually *crying*. As I'm sure you saw. But can talk the talk, Willie, I'll give you that much.'

Willie said nothing.

'Some V.A. hospital called the Pussy Palace, huh?' Wheelock asks. 'Sounds like my kind of place. Where'd you read about it, *Soldier of Fortune*?'

The shadow of a woman, a dark shape in a darkening day, bends over the open case and drops something in. A gloved hand touches Willie's gloved hand and squeezes briefly. 'God bless you,' she says.

'Thank you, ma'am.'

The shadow moves off. The little puffs of breath in Blind Willie's ear do not.

'You got something for me, pal?' Wheelock asks.

Blind Willie reaches into his jacket pocket. He brings out the envelope and holds it out, jabbing the chilly, unseen air with it. It is snatched from his fingers as soon as Wheelock can track it down and get hold of it.

'You asshole!' There's a touch of panic as well as anger in the cop's voice. 'How many times have I told you, palm it, *palm* it!'

Blind Willie says a lot more nothing — he is giving a sermon of silence this morning.

'How much?' Wheelock asks after a moment.

'Three hundred.' Blind Willie says. 'Three hundred dollars, Officer Wheelock.'

This is greeted by a little thinking silence, but he takes a step back from Blind Willie, and the puffs of breath in his ear diffuse a little. Blind Willie is grateful for small favors.

'That's okay,' Wheelock says at last. '*This* time. But a new year's coming, pal, and your friend Jasper the Police-Smurf has a piece of land in upstate New York that he wants to build a little cabaña on. You understand? The price of poker is going up.'

Blind Willie says nothing, but he is listening very, very carefully now. If this were all, all would be well. But Wheelock's voice suggests it isn't all.

'Actually, the cabaña isn't the important part,' Wheelock goes on, confirming Blind Willie's assessment of the situation. 'The important thing is I need a little better compensation if I have to deal with a lowlife fuck like you.' Genuine anger is creeping into his voice. 'How you can do this every day — even at *Christmas* — man, I don't know. People who beg, that's one thing, but a guy like you . . . you're no more blind than I am.'

Oh, you're *lots* blinder than me, Blind Willie thinks, but still he holds his peace.

'And you're doing okay, aren't you? Probably not as good as that PTL fuck they busted and sent to the *callabozo*, but you must clear what? A grand a day, this time a year? Two grand?'

He is way low, but Blind Willie does not, of course, correct him. The miscalculation is actually music to his ears. It means that his silent partner is not watching him too closely or frequently . . . not yet, anyway. But he doesn't like the anger in Wheelock's voice. Anger is like a wild card in a poker game.

'And you're no more blind than I am,' Wheelock repeats. Apparently this is the part that really gets him. 'Hey, pal, you know what? I ought to follow you some night when you get off work, you know? See what you do.' He pauses. 'Who you turn into.'

For a moment Blind Willie actually stops breathing . . . then he starts again.

'You wouldn't want to do that Officer Wheelock,' he says.

I wouldn't, huh? Why not, Willie? Why not? You lookin out for my welfare, is that it? Afraid I might kill the shitass who lays the golden turds? Hey, thirty six hundred a year ain't all that much when you weigh it against a commendation, maybe a promotion.' He pauses. When he speaks again, his voice has a dreamy quality which Willie finds especially alarming. 'I could be in the *Post*. HERO COP BUSTS HEARTLESS SCAM ARTIST ON FIFTH AVENUE.'

'You'd be in the *Post* all right, but there wouldn't be any commendation,' Blind Willie says. 'No promotion, either. In fact, you'd be out on the street, Officer Wheelock, looking for a job. You

could skip applying for one with the security companies, though — a man who'll take a payoff can't be bonded.'

It is Wheelock's turn to stop breathing. When he starts again, the puffs of breath in Blind Willie's ear have become a hurricane; the cop's moving mouth is almost on his skin. 'What do you mean?' he whispers. A hand settles on the arm of Blind Willie's field jacket. 'You just tell me what the fuck you mean.'

But Blind Willie is silent, hands at his sides, head slightly raised, looking attentively into the darkness that will not clear until daylight is almost gone, and on his face is that lack of expression which so many passersby read as ruined pride, bruised grace, courage brought low but still somehow intact. It is that, not the sign or the dark glasses, which has allowed him to do so well over the years . . . and Wheelock is wrong: he *is* blind. They both are blind.

The hand on his arm shakes him slightly. It is almost a claw now. 'You got a friend? Is that it, you son of a bitch? Is that why you hold the envelope out that way half the damned time? You got a friend taking my picture? Is that it?'

Blind Willie says nothing, has to say nothing. People like Jasper Wheelock will always think the worst if you let them. You only have to give them time to do it.

'You don't want to fuck with me, pal' Wheelock says viciously, but there is a subtle undertone of worry in his voice, and the hand on Blind Willie's jacket loosens. 'We're going up to four hundred a month starting next week, and if you try playing any games with me, I'm going to show you where the real playground is. You understand me?'

Blind Willie says nothing. The puffs of air stop hitting his ear, and he knows Wheelock is going. But not yet; the nasty little puffs come back.

'You'll burn in hell for what you're doing,' Wheelock tells him. He speaks with great, almost fervent, sincerity. 'What I'm doing when I take your dirty money is a venial sin — I asked the priest, so I'm sure — but yours is mortal. You're going to hell, see how many handouts you get down there.'

He walks away then, an Willie's thought — that he is glad to see him go — causes a rare smile to touch his face. It comes and goes like an errant ray of sunshine on a cloudy day.

*1:40 P.M.*

Three times he has banded the bills into rolls and dumped the change into the bottom of the case (this is really a storage function, and not an effort at concealment), now working completely by touch. He can no longer see the money, doesn't know a one from a hundred, but he senses he is having a very good day, indeed. There is no pleasure in the knowledge, however. There's never very much, pleasure is not what Blind Willie is about, but even the sense of accomplishment he might have felt on another day has been muted by his conversation with Officer Wheelock.

At quarter to twelve, a young woman with a pretty voice — to Blind Willie she sounds like Whitney Houston — comes out of Saks and gives him a cup of hot coffee, as she does most days at this time. At quarter past, another woman — this one not so young, and probably white — brings him a cup of steaming chicken noodle soup. He thanks them both. The white lady kisses his cheek, calls him Will instead of Willie, and wishes him the merriest of merry Christmases.

There is a counterbalancing side to the day, though; there almost always is. Around one o'clock a teenage kid with his unseen posse laughing and joking and skylarking all around him speaks out of the darkness to Blind Willie's left, says he is one ugly motherfuck, then asks if he wears those

gloves because he burned his fingers off trying to read the waffle iron. He and his friends charge off, howling with laughter at this ancient jape. Fifteen minutes or so later, someone kicks him, although that might have been an accident. Every time he bends over to the case, however, the case is right there. It is a city of hustlers, muggers, and thieves, but the case is right there, just as it has always been right there.

And through it all, he thinks about Wheelock.

The cop before Wheelock was easy; the one who comes when Wheelock either quits the force or gets moved out of Midtown North may also be easy. Wheelock will not last forever — something else he has learned in the Nam — and in the meantime, he, Blind Willie, must bend like a reed in a windstorm. Except that sometimes even the reed that bends is broken . . . if the wind blows hard enough.

Wheelock wants more money, but that isn't what bothers the man in the dark glasses and the army coat. Sooner or later they *all* want more money: when he started on this corner, he paid Officer Hanratty a hundred and a quarter, and although Hanratty was easy, he had Blind Willie up to two hundred a month by the time he retired in 1989. But Wheelock was angry this morning, *angry*, and Wheelock talked about having consulted a priest. These things worry him, but what worries him most of all is what Wheelock said about following him. *See what you do. Who you turn into.*

It would be easy, God knows — what could be simpler than shadowing a blind man, or even one who can see little more than shadows? Watching him turn into some hotel (one on the uptown side, this time), watching him go into the public men's room, watching him go into a stall? Watching him change from Blind Willie into plain old Willie, maybe even from Willie into Bill?

Thinking this brings back his morning jitters, his feeling of being a snake between skins. The fear that he has been photographed taking a bribe will hold Wheelock for a while, but if he is angry enough, there is no predicting what he may do. And that is scary.

'God love you, soldier,' says a voice out of the darkness. 'I wish I could do a few bucks more.'

'Not necessary, sir,' Blind Willie says, but his mind is still on Jasper Wheelock, who smells of cheap cologne and talked to a priest about the blind man with the sign, the blind man who is not, Wheelock thinks, blind at all. What had he said? *You're going to hell, see how many handouts you get down there.* 'Have a very merry Christmas, sir, thank you for helping me.'

And the day goes on.

4:25 P.M.

His sight has started to resurface — dim, distant, but there. It is his cue to pack up and go.

He kneels, back ramrod stiff, and lays his cane behind the case again. He bands the last of the bills, dumps them and the last coins into the bottom of the case one more time, then puts the tinsel-decorated sign inside. He latches the case and stands up, holding his cane in the other hand. Now the case is heavy, dragging at his arm with the dead-weight of well-meant metal. There is a heavy rattling crunch as the coins avalanche into a new position, and then they are as still as ore plugged deep in the ground..

He sets off down Fifth, dangling the case at the end of his left arm like an anchor (after all these years he's used to the weight of it, could carry it much further than he'll need to this afternoon, if circumstances demanded), holding the cane in his right hand and tapping it delicately on the paving in front of him. The cane is magic, opening a pocket of empty space before him on the crowded,



jostling sidewalk in a teardrop shaped wave. By the time he gets to Fifth and Forty-third, he can actually see this space. He can also see the DON'T WALK sign at Forty-second stop flashing and hold solid, but he keeps walking anyway, letting a well-dressed man with long hair and gold chains reach out and grasp his shoulder to stop him.

'Watch it, big fella,' the longhair says. 'Traffic in a sec.'

'Thank you, sir,' Blind Willie says.

'Don't mention it — merry Christmas.'

Blind Willie crosses, goes down two more blocks, then turns toward Broadway. No one accosts him; no one has loitered, watching him collect all day long, and then followed, waiting for the opportunity to bag the case and run (not that many thieves *could* run with it, not *this* case). Once, back in the summer of '91, two or three young guys, maybe black (he couldn't say for sure; they *sounded* black, but his vision had been slow coming back that day, it was always slower in warm weather, when the days stayed bright longer), had accosted him and began talking to him in a way he didn't quite like. It wasn't like the kids this afternoon, with their jokes about reading ~~he~~ the waffle iron and what does a *Playboy* centerfold look like in braille. It was softer than that, and in some weird fashion almost kind — questions about how much he took in by St. Pat's back there, and would he perchance be generous enough to make a contribution to something called the Polo Recreational League and did he want a little protection getting to his bus stop or train station or whatever. One, perhaps a budding sexologist, had asked if he liked a little young pussy once in a while. 'It pep you up,' the voice on his left said softly, almost longingly. 'Yessir, you must believe *that* shit.'

He had felt the way he imagined a mouse must feel when the cat is still just pawing at it, claws not out yet, curious about what the mouse will do, and how fast it can run, and what sorts of noises it will make as its terror grows. Blind Willie had not been terrified, however. He is *never* terrified. That is his advantage, and it had been their mistake. He had simply raised his voice, speaking as a man might speak to a large room filled with old friends. 'Say!' he had exclaimed to the shadowy phantoms all around him on the sidewalk. 'Say, does anyone see a policeman? I believe these young fellow here mean to take me off.' And that did it, easy as pulling a segment off a peeled orange; the fellows who had been bracketing him were suddenly gone like a cool breeze.

He only wishes he could solve the problem of Officer Wheelock that easily.

4:40 P.M.

The Sheraton Gotham, at Fortieth and Broadway, is one of the largest first-class hotels in the world, and in the cave of its lobby thousands of people school back and forth beneath the gigantic chandelier. They chase their pleasures here, and dig their treasures there, oblivious of the Christmas music flowing from the speakers, of the chatter from three different restaurants and five bars, of the scenic elevators sliding up and down in their notched shafts like pistons powering some exotic glass engine . . . and of the blind man who taps among the, working his way toward a public men's room almost the size of a subway station. He walks with the sticker on the case turned inward now, and he is as anonymous as a blind man can be. In this city, that's very anonymous.

Still, he thinks as he enters one of the stalls and takes off his jacket turning it inside-out as he does so, how is it that in all these years no one has *ever* followed me? No one has *ever* noticed that the blind man who goes in and the sighted man who comes out are the same size, and carrying the same case?

Well, in New York, hardly anyone notices anything that isn't his or her own business — in their own way, they are all as blind as Blind Willie. Out of their offices, flooding down the sidewalks, thronging in the subway stations and cheap restaurants, there is something both repulsive and sad about them; they are like nests of moles turned up by a farmer's harrow. He has seen this blindness over and over again, and he knows that this is one reason for his success . . . but surely not the only reason. They are not *all* moles, and he has been rolling the dice for a long time now. He takes precautions, of course he does, many of them, but there are still those moments (like now, sitting here with his pants down, unscrewing the white cane and stowing it back in his case) when he would be easy to catch, easy to rob . . . easy to expose. Wheelock is right about the *Post*; they would love him. The *News* would too. They would hang him higher than Haman, higher than O.J. Simpson. They would never understand, never even *want* to understand, or hear his side of it. *What side?*

He leaves the stall, leaves the bathroom, leaves the echoing confusion of the Sheraton Gotham, and no one walks up to him and says, 'Excuse me, sir, but weren't you just blind?' No one looks at him twice as he walks out into the street, carrying the bulky case as if it weighed twenty pounds instead of a hundred. It has started to snow.

He walks slowly, Willie Teale again now, switching the case frequently from hand to hand, just one more tired guy at the end of the day. He continues to think about his inexplicable success as he goes. There's a verse from the Book of Matthew which he has committed to memory. They be blind leaders of the blind, it goes. And if the blind lead the blind, both shall fall into the ditch. Then there's the old saw that says that in the kingdom of the blind, the one-eyed man is king. Is *he* the one-eyed man? Has that been the secret of his success all these years?

He doesn't think so. In his heart of hearts he believes he has been protected. Not by God, exactly (he doesn't think he quite believes in God, certainly not the one advertised by the church in front of which he stands most days), but maybe by some half-sentient force that has *always* seen him as Blind Willie. Fate, you could call it that if you liked, or you could call it a higher power — Generic Brand God — as the alkies do. Or maybe it's only blind justice, balancing her scales. Most likely it doesn't matter. All he knows for sure is that he has never been caught or taken off.

Of course, there has never been a Jasper Wheelock in his life, either..

*Maybe I ought to follow you some night*, Officer Wheelock whispers in his ear as Willie shifts the increasingly heavy case from one hand to the other. Both arms ache now; he will be glad to reach his building. *See what you do. See who you turn into.*

What, exactly, was he going to do about Officer Wheelock? What *could* he do?

He doesn't know.

5:15 P.M.

The young panhandler in the dirty red sweatshirt is long gone. His place taken by yet another streetcorner Santa. Willie has no trouble recognizing the tubby young fellow currently dropping a dollar into Santa's pot.

'Hey, Ralphie!' he cries.

Ralph Williamson turns, and his face lights up when he sees Willie, and he raises one gloved hand. It's snowing harder now; with the bright lights around him and Santa Claus beside him, Ralph looks suspiciously like the central figure in a holiday greeting card. Or maybe a modern-day Bob Cratchet.

'Hey, Willie! How's it goin?'

'Goin like a house afire,' he says, approaching the other man with an easy grin on his face. He sets his case down with a grunt, feels in his pants pocket, and finds a buck for Santa's pot. Probably just another crook, and he looks like shit, but what the hell.

'What you got in there?' Ralph asks, looking down at Willie's case as he fiddles with his scarf. 'Sounds like you busted open some little kid's piggy bank.'

'Nah, just heating coils,' Willie says. "Bout a damn thousand of 'em.'

'You working right up until Christmas?'

'Yeah,' he says, and suddenly knows what he is going to do about Wheelock. Not how, not yet, but that's okay; how is just a technicality. What is where the creative work is done. There's no burst of revelation, no feeling of eureka; it is as if part of him knew all along. He supposes part of him did. 'Yeah, right up until Christmas. No rest for the wicked, you know.'

Ralph's wide and pleasant face creases in a smile. 'I doubt if you're very wicked, though.'

Willie smiles back. 'You don't know what evil lurks in the heart of the heatin-n-coolin man, that's all. I'll probably take a few days off after Christmas, though. I'm thinking that might be a really good idea.'

'Go south?'

'South?' Willie looks startled, then laughs. 'Oh, no,' he says. 'Not *this* kid. Plenty to do around my house, you know. A person's got to keep their house in order, Ralphie. Else it might just come down around their ears some day.'

'I suppose.' Ralph bundles the scarf higher around his ears. 'See you tomorrow?'

'You bet,' Willie says and holds out his gloved hand. 'Gimme five.'

Ralphie gives him five, then turns his hand over. His smile is shy but eager. 'Give me ten, Willie.'

Willie gives him ten. 'How good is that, Ralphie-baby?'

The man's shy smile becomes a gleeful boy's grin. 'So goddamn good I gotta do it again!' he cries, and slaps Willie's hand with real authority.

Willie laughs. 'You the man, Ralph.'

'You the man, too, Willie,' Ralph replies, speaking with a prissy earnestness that's really sort of funny. 'Merry Christmas.'

'Right back atcha.'

He stands where he is for a moment, watching Ralph trudge off into the snow. Beside him, the streetcorner Santa rings his bell monotonously. Willie picks up his case and starts for the door of his building. Then something catches his eye, and he pauses.

'Your beard's on crooked,' he says to the Santa. 'If you want people to believe in you, fix your goddamn beard.'

He goes inside.

5:25 P.M.

There's a big carton in the storage annex of Midtown Heating and Cooling. It is full of the cloth bags, the sort banks use to hold loose coins. Such bags usually have various banks' names printed on them, but these don't — Willie orders them direct from the company in Moundsville, West Virginia, that makes them.

He opens the case, quickly sets aside the rolls of bills (these he will carry home in his Mark Cross briefcase), then fills four bags with coins. In a far corner of the storage room is a battered old

metal cabinet simply marked PARTS. Willie swings it open — there is no lock to contend with — and reveals another two or three hundred coin-stuffed bags. A dozen times a year he and Sharon tour the midtown churches, pushing these bags through the contribution slots where they will fit, simply leaving them by the door where they won't. The lion's share always goes to St. Pat's, the vast church in front of which Blind Willie can be found most days, wearing his dark glasses and his sign.

But not *every* day, he thinks, I don't have to be there *every* day, and he thinks again that maybe both Blind Willie and Willie Teale will take the week after Christmas off. There might be work for Bill, though, and why not? Bill has it easy, as a rule. He wakes up to the clock radio, shaves, dresses, goes into the city . . . and then disappears until it's time to go home. Maybe it's time for Bill to do a little work, pitch in and do his share. There is stuff he could do in the week or so before New Year's Eve, when he and Sharon will once more tour the churches, leaving off the coins that are too bulky and troublesome to deal with.

*I ought to follow you some night . . . see what you do. Who you turn into.*

But maybe, he thinks, taking off Willie and putting on Bill (Paul Stuart, J. Press, Mark Cross, Sulka, Bally), maybe it's I who ought to follow *you* Officer Wheelock. The part of me you'd never recognize in a million years, any more than Ralph Williamson would recognize Bill . . . or Blind Willie, for that matter. Maybe Bill needs to follow *you*, see what *you* do, who *you* turn into when you go home and take off your day along with your uniform.

Yes, I could do that, Bill thinks. He's used cold cream to remove his makeup and now steps carefully through the trap door and finds his footing on top of the stepladder. He takes the handle of his briefcase and pulls it through. He descends to the third step, then lowers the trap door into place and slides the ceiling panel back where it belongs. Yes, I could do that very easily. And . . .

Well, accidents sometimes happen. Sad but true. Even to big, brave fellows like Jasper the Police-Smurf, accidents sometimes happen.

'Do you hear what I hear,' he sings softly as he folds the stepladder and puts it back, 'do you smell what I smell, do you taste what I taste?'

Five minutes later he closes the door of Western States Land Analysts firmly behind him and triple locks it. Then he goes down the hallway. When the elevator comes and he steps in, he thinks, Eggnog. Don't forget. The Allens and the Dubrays.

'Also cinnamon,' he says out loud. The three people in the elevator car with him look around, and Bill Teale grins self-consciously.

Outside, he turns toward Penn Station, registering only one thought as the snow beats full into his face and he flips up his coat collar: the Santa outside the building has fixed his beard.

*11:35 P.M.*

'Share?'

'Hmmm?'

Her voice is sleepy, distant. They have made long, slow love after the Dubrays finally left at eleven o'clock, and now she is drifting way That's all right, though; he is drifting too. He has a feeling that all of his problems are solving themselves . . . or that the higher power upon whom he sometimes speculates, that savior of temporarily skinless snakes, is solving them for him.

'I may take a week or so off after Christmas. Do some inventory. Poke around some new sites. I'm thinking about changing locations.' There is no need for her to know what he may really doing

in the week before New Year's, he reasons; she couldn't do anything but worry and — perhaps, perhaps not, he sees no reason to find out for sure — feel guilty.

'Good,' she says. 'See a few movies while you're at it, why don't you?' Her hand gropes out of the dark and touches his arm briefly. 'You work so hard.' Pause. 'Also, you remembered the eggnog. I really didn't think you would. I'm very pleased with you.'

He grins in the dark at that, helpless not to. It is so perfectly Sharon.

'The Allens are all right, but the Dubrays are boring, aren't they?' she asks.

'A little,' he allows.

'If that dress of hers had been cut any lower, she could have gotten a job in a topless bar.'

He says nothing to that, but grins again.

'It was good tonight, wasn't it?' she asks him. It's not their little party that she's talking about.

'Yes, excellent.'

'Did you have a good day? I didn't have a chance to ask.'

'Fine day, Share.'

'I love you, Bill.'

'Love you, too.'

'Goodnight.'

'Goodnight.'

He lies on his side, drifting into sleep while thinking about the man in the open topcoat and the bright red ski sweater. He crosses over without knowing it, thought melting effortlessly into dream. 'Sixty-seven was a hard year,' the man in the red sweater says. 'I was at Loc Ninh, you know. Tory Hill. We lost a lot of good men.' Then he brightens. 'But I got this.' From the lefthand pocket of his topcoat he takes a white beard hanging on a string. 'And this.' From the righthand pocket he takes a crumpled Styrofoam cup, which he shakes. A few loose coins rattle in the bottom like teeth. 'So you see,' he says, fading now, 'there are compensations to even the blindest life.'

Then the dream fades and he sleeps deeply until 6:15 the next morning, when the clock-radio wakes him to the sound of 'The Little Drummer Boy.'