

GRAVEYARD SHIFT

Two A.M., Friday.

Hall was sitting on the bench by the elevator, the only place on the third floor where a working joe could catch a smoke, when Warwick came up. He wasn't happy to see Warwick. The foreman wasn't supposed to show up on three during the graveyard shift; he was supposed to stay down in his office in the basement drinking coffee from the urn that stood on the corner of his desk. Besides, it was hot.

It was the hottest June on record in Gates Falls, and the Orange Crush thermometer which was also by the elevator had once rested at 94 degrees at three in the morning. God only knew what kind of hellhole the mill was on the three-to-eleven shift.

Hall worked the picker machine, a balky gadget manufactured by a defunct Cleveland firm in 1934. He had only been working in the mill since April, which meant he was still making minimum \$1.78 an hour, which was still all right. No wife, no steady girl, no alimony. He was a drifter, and during the last three years he had moved on his thumb from Berkeley (college student) to Lake Tahoe (busboy) to Galveston (stevedore) to Miami (short-order cook) to Wheeling (taxi driver and dishwasher) to Gates Falls, Maine (picker-machine operator). He didn't figure on moving again until the snow fell. He was a solitary person and he liked the hours from eleven to seven when the blood flow of the big mill was at its coolest, not to mention the temperature.

The only thing he did not like was the rats.

The third floor was long and deserted, lit only by the sputtering glow of the fluorescents. Unlike the other levels of the mill, it was relatively silent and unoccupied - at least by the humans. The rats were another matter. The only machine on three was the picker; the rest of the floor was storage for the ninety-pound bags of fibre which had yet to be sorted by Hall's long gear-toothed machine. They were stacked like link sausages in long rows, some of them (especially the discontinued meltons and irregular slipes for which there were no orders) years old and dirty grey with industrial wastes. They made fine nesting places for the rats, huge, fat-bellied creatures with rabid eyes and bodies that jumped with lice and vermin.

Hall had developed a habit of collecting a small arsenal of soft-drink cans from the trash barrel during his break. He pegged them at the rats during times when work was slow, retrieving them later at his leisure. Only this time Mr Foreman had caught him, coming up the stairs instead of using the elevator like the sneaky sonofabitch everyone said he was.

'What are you up to, Hall?'

'The rats,' Hall said, realizing how lame that must sound now that all the rats had snuggled safely back into their houses. 'I peg cans at 'em when I see 'em.'

Warwick nodded once, briefly. He was a big beefy man with a crew cut. His shirtsleeves were rolled up and his tie was pulled down. He looked at Hall closely. 'We don't pay you to chuck cans at rats, mister. Not even if you pick them up again.'

'Harry hasn't sent down an order for twenty minutes,' Hall answered, thinking: *Why couldn't you stay the hell put and drink your coffee?* 'I can't run it through the picker if I don't have it.'

Warwick nodded as if the topic no longer interested him.

'Maybe I'll take a walk up and see Wisconsin,' he said.

'Five to one he's reading a magazine while the crap piles up in his bins.'

Hall didn't say anything.

Warwick suddenly pointed. 'There's one! Get the bastard!'

Hall fired the Nehi can he had been holding with one whistling, overhand motion. The rat, which had been watching him from atop one of the fabric bags with its bright buckshot eyes, fled with one faint squeak. Warwick threw back his head and laughed as Hall went after the can.

'I came to see you about something else,' Warwick said.

'Is that so?'

'Next week's Fourth of July week.' Hall nodded. The mill would be shut down Monday to Saturday - vacation week for men with at least one year's tenure. Layoff week for men with less than a year. 'You want to work?'

Hall shrugged. 'Doing what?'

'We're going to clean the whole basement level. Nobody's touched it for twelve years. Helluva mess. We're going to use hoses.'

'The town zoning committee getting on the board of directors?'

Warwick looked steadily at Hall. 'You want it or not? Two an hour, double time on the fourth. We're working the graveyard shift because it'll be cooler.'

Hall calculated. He could clear maybe seventy-five bucks after taxes. Better than the goose egg he had been looking forward to.

'All right.'

'Report down by the dye house next Monday.'

Hall watched him as he started back to the stairs. Warwick paused halfway there and turned back to look at Hall. 'You used to be a college boy, didn't you?'

Hall nodded.

'Okay, college boy, I'm keeping it in mind.'

He left. Hall sat down and lit another smoke, holding a soda can in one hand and watching for the rats. He could just imagine how it would be in the basement - the subbasement, actually, a level below the dye house. Damp, dark, full of spiders and rotten cloth and ooze from the river

- and rats. Maybe even bats, the aviators of the rodent family. *Gah.*

Hall threw the can hard, then smiled thinly to himself as the faint sound of Warwick's voice came down through the overhead ducts, reading Harry Wisconsky the riot act.

Okay, college boy, I'm keeping it in mind.

He stopped smiling abruptly and butted his smoke. A few moments later Wisconsky started to send rough nylon down through the blowers, and Hall went to work. And after a while the rats came out and sat atop the bags at the back of the long room watching him with their unblinking black eyes. They looked like a jury.

Eleven P.M., Monday.

There were about thirty-six men sitting around when Warwick came in wearing a pair of old jeans tucked into high rubber boots. Hall had been listening to Harry Wisconsky, who was enormously fat, enormously lazy, and enormously gloomy.

'It's gonna be a mess,' Wisconsky was saying when Mr Foreman came in. 'You wait and see, we're all gonna go home blacker'n midnight in Persia.'

'Okay!' Warwick said. 'We strung sixty lightbulbs down there, so it should be bright enough for you to see what you're doing. You guys -' he pointed to a bunch of men that had been leaning against the drying spools - 'I want you to hook up the hoses over there to the main water conduit by the stairwell. You can unroll them down the stairs. We got about eighty yards for each man, and that should be plenty. Don't get cute and spray one of your buddies or you'll send him to the hospital. They pack wallop.'

'Somebody'll get hurt,' Wisconsky prophesied sourly. 'Wait and see.'

'You other guys,' Warwick said pointing to the group that Hall and Wisconsky were a part of. 'You're the crap crew tonight. You go in

pairs with an electric wagon for each team. There's old office furniture, bags of cloth, hunks of busted machinery, you name it. We're gonna pile it by the airshaft at the west end. Anyone who doesn't know how to run a wagon?'

No one raised a hand. The electric wagons were battery-driven contraptions like miniature dump trucks. They developed a nauseating stink after continual use that reminded Hall of burning power lines.

'Okay,' Warwick said. 'We got the basement divided up into sections, and we'll be done by Thursday. Friday we'll chain-hoist the crap out. Questions?'

There were none. Hall studied the foreman's face closely, and he had a sudden premonition of a strange thing coming. The idea pleased him. He did not like Warwick very much.

'Fine,' Warwick said. 'Let's get at it.'

Two A.M., Tuesday.

Hall was bushed and very tired of listening to Wisconsky's steady patter of profane complaints. He wondered if it would do any good to belt Wisconsky. He doubted it. It would just give Wisconsky something else to bitch about.

Hall had known it would be bad, but this was murder. For one thing, he hadn't anticipated the smell. The polluted stink of the river, mixed with the odour of decaying fabric, rotting masonry, vegetable matter. In the far corner, where they had begun, Hall discovered a colony of huge white toadstools poking their way up through the shattered cement. His hands had come in contact with them as he pulled and yanked at a rusty gear-toothed wheel, and they felt curiously warm and bloated, like the flesh of a man afflicted with dropsy.

The bulbs couldn't banish the twelve-year darkness; it could only push it back a little and cast a sickly yellow glow over the whole mess. The place looked like the shattered nave of a desecrated church, with its high ceiling and mammoth discarded machinery that they would never be able to move, its wet walls overgrown with patches of yellow moss, and the atonal choir that was the water from the hoses, running in the half-clogged sewer network that eventually emptied into the river below the falls.

And the rats - huge ones that made those on third look like dwarfs. God knew what they were eating down here. They were continually overturning boards and bags to reveal huge nests of shredded newspaper, watching with atavistic loathing as the pups fled into the cracks and crannies, their eyes huge and blind with the continuous darkness.

'Let's stop for a smoke,' Wisconsky said. He sounded out of breath, but Hall had no idea why; he had been goldbrickmg all night. Still, it was about that time, and they were currently out of sight of everyone else.

'All right.' He leaned against the edge of the electric wagon and lit up.

'I never should've let Warwick talk me into this,' Wisconsky said dolefully. 'This ain't work for a *man*. But he was mad the other night when he caught me in the crapper up on four with my pants up. Christ, was he mad.'

Hall said nothing. He was thinking about Warwick, and about the rats. Strange, how the two things seemed tied together. The rats seemed to have forgotten all about men in their long stay under the mill; they were impudent and hardly afraid at all. One of them had sat up on its hind legs like a squirrel until Hall had got in kicking distance, and then it had launched itself at his boot, biting at the leather. Hundreds, maybe thousands. He wondered how many varieties of disease they were carrying around in this black sumphole. And Warwick. Something about him -

'I need the money,' Wisconsky said. 'But Christ Jesus, buddy, this ain't no work for a *man*. Those rats.' He looked around fearfully. 'It almost seems like they think. You ever wonder how it'd be, if we was little and they were big -' 'Oh, shut up,' Hall said.

Wisconsky looked at him, wounded. 'Say, I'm sorry, buddy. It's just that . . .' He trailed off. 'Jesus, this place stinks!' he cried. 'This ain't no kind of *work for a man!*' A spider crawled off the edge of the wagon and scrambled up his arm. He brushed it off with a choked sound of disgust.

'Come on,' Hall said, snuffing his cigarette. 'The faster, the quicker.'

'I suppose,' Wisconsky said miserably. 'I suppose.'

Four A.M., Tuesday. Lunchtime.

Hall and Wisconsky sat with three or four other men, eating their sandwiches with black hands that not even the industrial detergent could clean. Hall ate looking into the foreman's little glass office. Warwick was drinking coffee and eating cold hamburgers with great relish.

'Ray Upson had to go home,' Charlie Brochu said.

'He puke?' someone asked. 'I almost did.'

'Nuh. Ray'd eat cowflop before he'd puke. Rat bit him.' Hall looked up thoughtfully from his examination of Warwick. 'Is that so?' he asked.

'Yeah.' Brochu shook his head. 'I was teaming with him. Goddamndest thing I ever saw. Jumped out of a hole in one of those old cloth bags. Must have been big as a cat. Grabbed on to his hand and started chewing.'

'Jee-sus,' one of the men said, looking green.

'Yeah,' Brochu said. 'Ray screamed just like a woman, and I ain't blamin' him. He bled like a pig. Would that thing let go? No sir. I had to belt it three or four times with a board before it would. Ray was just about crazy. He stomped it until it wasn't nothing but a mess of fur. Damndest thing I ever saw. Warwick put a bandage on him and sent him home. Told him to go to the doctor tomorrow.'

'That was big of the bastard,' somebody said.

As if he had heard, Warwick got to his feet in his office, stretched, and then came to the door. 'Time we got back with it.'

The men got to their feet slowly, eating up all the time they possibly could stowing their dinner jackets, getting cold drinks, buying candy bars. Then they started down, heels clanking dispiritedly on the steel grillework of the stair risers.

Warwick passed Hall, clapping him on the shoulder. 'How's it going, college boy?' He didn't wait for an answer.

'Come on,' Hall said patiently to Wisconsky, who was tying his shoelace. They went downstairs.

Seven A.M., Tuesday.

Hall and Wisconsky walked out together; it seemed to Hall that he had somehow inherited the fat Pole. Wisconsky was almost comically dirty, his fat moon face smeared like that of a small boy who has just been thrashed by the town bully.

There was none of the usual rough banter from the other men, the pulling of shirt-tails, the cracks about who was keeping Tony's wife warm between the hours of one and four. Nothing but silence and an occasional hawking sound as someone spat on the dirty floor.

'You want a lift?' Wisconsky asked him hesitantly.

'Thanks.'

They didn't talk as they rode up Mill Street and crossed the bridge. They exchanged only a brief word when Wisconsky dropped him off in front of his apartment.

Hall went directly to the shower, still thinking about Warwick, trying to place whatever it was about Mr Foreman that drew him, made him feel that somehow they had become tied together.

He slept as soon as his head hit the pillow, but his sleep was broken and restless: he dreamed of rats.

One A.M., Wednesday.

It was better running the horses.

They couldn't go in until the crap crews had finished a section, and quite often they were done hosing before the next section was clear

- which meant time for a cigarette. Hall worked the nozzle of one of the long hoses and Wisconsky pattered back and forth, unsnagging lengths of the hose, turning the water on and off, moving obstructions.

Warwick was short-tempered because the work was proceeding slowly. They would never be done by Thursday, the way things were going.

Now they were working on a helter-skelter jumble of nineteenth-century office equipment that had been piled in one corner - smashed rolltop desks, mouldy ledgers, reams of invoices, chairs with broken seats-and it was rat heaven. Scores of them squeaked and ran through the dark and crazy passages that honeycombed the heap, and after two men were bitten' the others refused to work until Warwick sent someone upstairs to get heavy rubberized gloves, the kind usually reserved for the dye-house crew, which had to work with acids.

Hall and Wisconsky were waiting to go in with their hoses when a sandy-haired bullneck named Carmichael began howling curses and backing away, slapping at his chest with his gloved hands.

A huge rat with grey-streaked fur and ugly, glaring eyes had bitten into his shirt and hung there, squeaking and kicking at Carmichael's belly with its back paws. Carmichael finally knocked it away with his fist, but there was a huge hole in his shirt, and a thin line of blood trickled from above one nipple. The anger faded from his face. He turned away and retched.

Hall turned the hose on the rat, which was old and moving slowly, a snatch of Carmichael's shirt still caught in its jaws. The roaring pressure drove it backward against the wall, where it smashed limply.

Warwick came over, an odd, strained smile on his lips. He clapped Hall on the shoulder. 'Damn sight better than throwing cans at the little bastards, huh, college boy?'

'Some little bastard,' Wisconsky said. 'It's a foot long.'

'Turn that hose over there.' Warwick pointed at the jumble of furniture. 'You guys, get out of the way!'

'With pleasure,' someone muttered.

Carmichael charged up to Warwick, his face sick and twisted. 'I'm gonna have compensation for this! I'm gonna -,'

'Sure,' Warwick said, smiling. 'You got bit on the titty. Get out of the way before you get pasted down by this water.'

Hall pointed the nozzle and let it go. It hit with a white explosion of spray, knocking over a desk and smashing two chairs to splinters. Rats ran everywhere, bigger than any Hall had ever seen. He could hear men crying out in disgust and horror as they fled, things with huge eyes and sleek, plump bodies. He caught a glimpse of one that looked as big as a healthy six-week puppy. He kept on until he could see no more, then shut the nozzle down.

'Okay!' Warwick called. 'Let's pick it up!'

'I didn't hire out as no exterminator!' Cy Ippeston called mutinously. Hall had tipped a few with him the week before. He was a young guy, wearing a smut-stained baseball cap and a T-shirt.

'That you, Ippeston?' Warwick asked genially.

Ippeston looked uncertain, but stepped forward. 'Yeah. I don't want no more of these rats. I hired to clean up, not to maybe get rabies or typhoid or somethin'. Maybe you best count me out.'

There was a murmur of agreement from the others. Wisconsky stole a look at Hall, but Hall was examining the nozzle of the hose he was holding. It had a bore like a .45 and could probably knock a man twenty feet.

'You saying you want to punch your clock, Cy?'

'Thinkin' about it,' Ippeston said.

Warwick nodded. 'Okay. You and anybody else that wants. But this ain't no unionized shop, and never has been. Punch out now and you'll never punch back in. I'll see to it.'

'Aren't you some hot ticket,' Hall muttered.

Warwick swung around. 'Did you say something, college boy?'

Hall regarded him blandly. 'Just clearing my throat, Mr Foreman.'

Warwick smiled. 'Something taste bad to you?'

Hall said nothing.

'All right, let's pick it up!' Warwick bawled.

They went back to work.

Two A.M., Thursday.

Hall and Wisconsky were working with the trucks again, picking up junk. The pile by the west airshaft had grown to amazing proportions, but they were still not half done.

'Happy Fourth,' Wisconsky said when they stopped for a smoke. They were working near the north wall, far from the stairs. The light was extremely dim, and some trick of acoustics made the other men seem miles away.

'Thanks.' Hall dragged on his smoke. 'Haven't seen many rats tonight.'

'Nobody has,' Wisconsky said. 'Maybe they got wise.'

They were standing at the end of a crazy, zigzagging alley formed by piles of old ledgers and invoices, mouldy bags of cloth, and two huge flat looms of ancient vintage. 'Gah,' Wisconsky said, spitting. 'That Warwick -'

'Where do you suppose all the rats got to?' Hall asked, almost to himself. 'Not into the walls -' He looked at the wet and crumbling masonry that surrounded the huge foundation stones. 'They'd drown. The river's saturated everything.'

Something black and flapping suddenly dive-bombed them. Wisconsky screamed and put his hands over his head.

'A bat,' Hall said, watching after it as Wisconsky straightened up.

'A bat! A bat!' Wisconsky raved. 'What's a bat doing in the cellar? They're supposed to be in trees and under eaves and -'

'It was a big one,' Hall said softly. 'And what's a bat but a rat with wings?'

'Jesus,' Wisconsky moaned. 'How did it -'

'Get in? Maybe the same way the rats got out.'

'What's going on back there?' Warwick shouted from somewhere behind them. 'Where are you?'

'Don't sweat it,' Hall said softly. His eyes gleamed in the dark.

'Was that you, college boy?' Warwick called. He sounded closer.

'It's okay!' Hall yelled. 'I barked my shin!' Warwick's short, barking laugh. 'You want a Purple Heart?'

Wisconsky looked at Hall. 'Why'd you say that?'

'Look.' Hall knelt and lit a match. There was a square in the middle of the wet and crumbling cement. 'Tap it.'

Wisconsky did. 'It's wood.'

Hall nodded. 'It's the top of a support. I've seen some other ones around here. There's another level under this part of the basement.'

'God,' Wisconsky said with utter revulsion.

Three-thirty A.M., Thursday.

They were in the north-east corner, Ippeston and Brochu behind them with one of the high-pressure hoses, when Hall stopped and pointed at the floor. 'There I thought we'd come across it.'

There was a wooden trapdoor with a crusted iron ring-bolt set near the centre.

He walked back to Ippeston and said, 'Shut it off for a minute.' When the hose was choked to a trickle, he raised his voice to a shout. 'Hey! Hey, Warwick! Better come here a minute!'

Warwick came splashing over, looking at Hall with that same hard smile in his eyes. 'Your shoelace come untied, college boy?'

'Look,' Hall said. He kicked the trapdoor with his foot. 'Sub-cellar.'

'So what?' Warwick asked. 'This isn't break time, col-'

'That's where your rats are,' Hall said. 'They're breeding down there. Wisconsky and I even saw a bat earlier.'

Some of the other men had gathered around and were looking at the trapdoor.

'I don't care,' Warwick said. 'The job was the basement, not -'

'You'll need about twenty exterminators, trained ones,' Hall was saying. 'Going to cost the management a pretty penny. Too bad.'

Someone laughed. 'Fat chance.'

Warwick looked at Hall as if he were a bug under glass. 'You're really a case, you are,' he said, sounding fascinated. 'Do you think I give a good goddamn how many rats there are under there?'

'I was at the library this afternoon and yesterday,' Hall said. 'Good thing you kept reminding me I was a college boy. I read the town zoning ordinances, Warwick they were set up in 1911, before this mill got big enough to co-opt the zoning board. Know what I found?'

Warwick's eyes were cold. 'Take a walk, college boy. You're fired.'

'I found out,' Hall ploughed on as if he hadn't heard, 'I found out that there is a zoning law in Gates Falls about vermin. You spell that v-e-r-m-i-n, in case you wondered. It means disease-carrying animals such as bats, skunks, - unlicensed dogs - and rats. Especially rats. Rats are mentioned fourteen times in two paragraphs, Mr Foreman. So you just keep in mind that the minute I punch out I'm going straight to the town commissioner and tell him what the situation down here is.'

He paused, relishing Warwick's hate-congested face. 'I think that between me, him, and the town committee, we can get an injunction slapped on this place. You're going to be shut down a lot longer than just Saturday, Mr Foreman. And I got a good idea what *your* boss is going to say when he turns up. Hope your unemployment insurance is paid up, Warwick.'

Warwick's hands formed into claws. 'You damned snot-nose, I ought to -' He looked down at the trapdoor, and suddenly his smile reappeared. 'Consider yourself rehired, college boy.'

'I thought you might see the light.'

Warwick nodded, the same strange grin on his face.

You're just so smart. I think maybe you ought to go down 'There, Hall, so we got somebody with a college education to give us an informed opinion. You and Wisconsky.'

'Not me!' Wisconsky exclaimed. 'Not me, I-'

Warwick looked at him. 'You what?'

Wisconsky shut up.

'Good,' Hall said cheerfully. 'We'll need three flashlights. I think I saw a whole rack of those six-battery jobs in the main office, didn't I?'

'You want to take somebody else?' Warwick asked expansively. 'Sure, pick your man.'

'You,' Hall said gently. The strange expression had come into his face again. 'After all, the management should be represented, don't you think? Just so Wisconsky and I don't see *too* many rats down there?'

Someone (it sounded like Ippeston) laughed loudly.

Warwick looked at the men carefully. They studied the tips of their shoes. Finally he pointed at Brochu. 'Brochu, go up to the office and get three flashlights. Tell the watchman I said to let you in.'

'Why'd you get me into this?' Wisconsky moaned to Hall. 'You know I hate those -'

'It wasn't me,' Hall said, and looked at Warwick.

Warwick looked back at him, and neither would drop his eyes.

Four A.M., Thursday.

Brochu returned with the flashlights. He gave one to Hall, one to Wisconsky, one to Warwick.

'Ippeston! Give the hose to Wisconsky.' Ippeston did so. The nozzle trembled delicately between the Pole's hands.

'All right,' Warwick said to Wisconsky. 'You're in the middle. If there are rats, you let them have it.'

Sure, Hall thought. And if there are rats, Warwick won't see them. And neither will Wisconsky, after he finds an extra ten in his pay envelope.

Warwick pointed at two of the men. 'Lift it.'

One of them bent over the ringbolt and pulled. For a moment Hall didn't think it was going to give, and then it yanked free with an odd, crunching snap. The other man put his fingers on the underside to help pull, then withdrew with a cry. His hands were crawling with huge and sightless beetles.

With a convulsive grunt the man on the ringbolt pulled the trap back and let it drop. The underside was black with an odd fungus that Hall had never seen before. The beetles dropped off into the darkness below or ran across the floor to be crushed.

'Look,' Hall said.

There was a rusty lock bolted on the underside, now broken. 'But it shouldn't be underneath,' Warwick said. 'It should be on top. Why -'

'Lots of reasons,' Hall said. 'Maybe so nothing on this side could open it - at least when the lock was new. Maybe so nothing on that side could get up.'

'But who locked it?' Wisconsky asked.

'Ah,' Hall said mockingly, looking at Warwick. 'A mystery.'

'Listen,' Brochu whispered.

'Oh, God,' Wisconsky sobbed. 'I ain't going down there!'

It was a soft sound, almost expectant; the whisk and patter of thousands of paws, the squeaking of rats.

'Could be frogs,' Warwick said.

Hall laughed aloud.

Warwick shone his light down. A sagging flight of wooden stairs led down to the black stones of the floor beneath. There was not a rat in sight.

'Those stairs won't hold us,' Warwick said with finality.

Brochu took two steps forward and jumped jip and down on the first step. It creaked but showed no sign of giving way.

'I didn't ask you to do that,' Warwick said.

'You weren't there when that rat bit Ray,' Brochu said softly.

'Let's go,' Hall said.

Warwick took a last sardonic look around at the circle of men, then walked to the edge with Hall. Wisconsky stepped reluctantly between them. They went down one at a time. Hall, then Wisconsky, then Warwick. Their flashlight beams played over the floor, which was twisted and heaved into a hundred crazy hills and valleys. The hose thumped along behind Wisconsky like a clumsy serpent.

When they got to the bottom, Warwick flashed his light around. It picked out a few rotting boxes, some barrels, little else. The seep from the river stood in puddles that came to ankle depth on their boots.

'I don't hear them any more,' Wisconsky whispered.

They walked slowly away from the trapdoor, their feet shuffling through the slime. Hall paused and shone his light on a huge wooden box with white letters on it. 'Elias Varney,' he read, '1841. Was the mill here then?'

'No,' Warwick said. 'It wasn't built until 1897. What difference?'

Hall didn't answer. They walked forward again. The sub-cellar was longer than it should have been, it seemed.

The stench was stronger, a smell of decay and rot and things buried. And still the only sound was the faint, cavelike drip of water.

'What's that?' Hall asked, pointing his beam at a jut of concrete that protruded perhaps two feet into the cellar. Beyond it, the darkness continued and it seemed to Hall that he could now hear sounds up there, curiously stealthy.

Warwick peered at it. 'It's. . . no, that can't be right.'

'Outer wall of the mill, isn't it? and up ahead'

'I'm going back,' Warwick said, suddenly turning around.

Hall grabbed his neck roughly. 'You're not going anywhere, Mr Foreman.'

Warwick looked up at him, his grin cutting the darkness. 'You're crazy, college boy. Isn't that right? Crazy as a loon.'

'You shouldn't push people, friend, keep going.'

Wisconsky moaned. 'Hall -'

'Give me that.' Hall grabbed the hose. He let go of Warwick's neck and pointed the hose at his head. Wisconsky turned abruptly and crashed back towards the trapdoor. Hall did not even turn. 'After you, Mr Foreman.'

Warwick stepped forward, walking under the place where the mill ended above them. Hall flashed his light about, and felt a cold satisfaction - premonition fulfilled. The rats had closed in around them, silent as death. Crowded in, rank on rank. Thousands of eyes looked greedily back at him. In ranks to the wall, some fully as high as a man's shin.

Warwick saw them a moment later and came to a full stop. 'They're all around us, college boy.' His voice was still calm, still in control, but it held a jagged edge.

'Yes,' Hall said. 'Keep going.'

They walked forward, the hose dragging behind. Hall looked back once and saw the rats had closed the aisle behind them and were gnawing at the heavy canvas hosing.

One looked up and almost seemed to grin at him before lowering his head again. He could see the bats now, too. They were roosting from the rough-hewn overheads, huge, the size of crows or rooks.

'Look,' Warwick said, centring his beam about five feet ahead.

A skull, green with mould, laughed up at them. Further on Hall could see an ulna, one pelvic wing, part of a ribcage. 'Keep going,' Hall said. He felt something bursting up inside him, something lunatic and dark with colours. *You are going to break before I do, Mr Foreman, so help me God.*

They walked past the bones. The rats were not crowding them; their distances appeared constant. Up ahead Hall saw one cross their path of travel. Shadows hid it, but he caught sight of a pink twitching tail as thick as a telephone cord.

Up ahead the flooring rose sharply, then dipped. Hall could hear a stealthy, rustling sound, a bit sound. Some-thing that perhaps no living man had ever seen. It occurred to Hall that he had perhaps been looking for something like this through all his days of crazy wandering.

The rats were moving in, creeping on their bellies, forcing them forward. 'Look,' Warwick said coldly.

Hall saw. Something had happened to the rats back here, some hideous mutation that never could have survived under the eye of the sun; nature would have forbidden it. But down here, nature had taken on another ghastly face.

The rats were gigantic, some as high as three feet. But their rear legs were gone and they were blind as moles, like their flying cousins. They dragged themselves forward with hideous eagerness.

Warwick turned and faced Hall, the smile hanging on by brute willpower. Hall really had to admire him. 'We can't go on, Hall. You must see that.'

'The rats have business with you, I think,' Hall said.

Warwick's control slipped. 'Please,' he said. 'Please.'

Hall smiled. 'Keep going.'

Warwick was looking over his shoulder. 'They're gnawmg into the hose. When they get through it, we'll never get back.'

'I know. Keep going.'

'You're insane -' A rat ran across Warwick's shoe and he screamed. Hall smiled and gestured with his light. They were all around, the closest of them less than a foot away now.

Warwick began to walk again. The rats drew back.

They topped the miniature rise and looked down. Warwick reached it first, and Hall saw his face go white as paper. Spit ran down his

chin. 'Oh, my God. Dear Jesus.

And he turned to run.

Hall opened the nozzle of the hose and the high-pressure rush of water struck Warwick squarely on the chest, knocking him back out of sight. There was a long scream that rose over the sound of the water. Thrashing sounds.

'Hall' Grunts. A huge, tenebrous squeaking that seemed to fill the earth.

'HALL FOR GOD'S SAKE -'

A sudden wet ripping noise. Another scream, weaker. Something huge shifted and turned. Quite distinctly Hall heard the wet snap that a fractured bone makes.

A legless rat, guided by some bastard form of sonar, lunged against him, biting. Its body was flabby, warm. Almost absently Hall turned the hose on it, knocking it away. The hose did not have quite so much pressure now.

Hall walked to the brow of the wet hill and looked down. The rat filled the whole gully at the far end of that noxious tomb. It was a huge and pulsating grey, eyeless, totally without legs. When Hall's light struck it, it made a hideous mewling noise. Their queen, then, the *magna mater*. A huge and nameless thing whose progeny might some day develop wings. It seemed to dwarf what remained of Warwick, but that was probably just illusion. It was the shock of seeing a rat as big as a Holstein calf.

'Goodbye, Warwick,' Hall said. The rat crouched over Mr Foreman jealously, ripping at one limp arm.

Hall turned away and began to make his way back rapidly, halting the rats with his hose, which was growing less and less potent. Some of them got through and attacked his legs above the tops of his boots with biting lunges. One hung stubbornly on at his thigh, ripping at the cloth of his corduroy pants. Hall made a fist and smashed it aside.

He was nearly three-quarters of the way back when the huge whirring filled the darkness. He looked up and the gigantic flying form smashed into his face.

The mutated bats had not lost their tails yet. It whipped around Hall's neck in a loathsome coil and squeezed as the teeth sought the soft spot under his neck. It wriggled and flapped with its membranous wings, clutching the tatters of his shirt for purchase.

Hall brought the nozzle of the hose up blindly and struck at its yielding body again and again. It fell away and he trampled it beneath his feet, dimly aware that he was screaming. The rats ran in a flood over his feet, up his legs.

He broke into a staggering run, shaking some off. The others bit at his belly, his chest. One ran up his shoulder and pressed its questing muzzle into the cup of his ear.

He ran into the second bat. It roosted on his head for a moment, squealing, and then ripped away a flap of Hall's scalp.

He felt his body growing numb. His ears filled with the screech and yammer of many rats. He gave one last heave, stumbled over furry bodies, fell to his knees. He began to laugh, a high, screaming sound.

Five A.M., Thursday.

'Somebody better go down there,' Brochu said tentatively.

'Not me,' Wisconsky whispered. 'Not me.'

'No, not you, jelly belly,' Ippeston said with contempt.

'Well, let's go,' Brogan said, bringing up another hose. 'Me, Ippeston, Dangerfield, Neddeau. Stevenson, go up to the office and get a few more lights.'

Ippeston looked down into the darkness thoughtfully. 'Maybe they stopped for a smoke,' he said. 'A few rats, what the hell.'

Stevenson came back with the lights; a few moments later they started down.