

SNEAKERS

John Tell had been working at Tabori Studios just over a month when he first noticed the sneakers. Tabori Studios was in a building which had once been called Music City but wasn't much anymore.

The sneakers were white, or had been once, when they were new. From the look of them that had been a long time ago. That was all he noticed about them then: just a pair of elderly sneakers under the door of the first stall of the men's room on the third floor. Tell passed them and went into the third and last stall. He came out a few minutes later, washed and dried his hands, combed his hair, and then went back to Studio F, where Paul Janning, the man who had hired him-and just maybe the first friend Tell had ever made-was mixing an album by a heavy metal group called The Dead Beats.

Tell had met Janning, a rock producer of some note, at a party following the premiere of a concert film. They knew some of the same people, and got along. Tell, who normally had problems with ordinary conversation, found he could talk easily and naturally to Paul Janning. Janning asked for his phone number and called him a few days later to ask if he would like to be part of the three-man team mixing The Dead Beats' first album. 'I don't know if it's really possible to make a silk purse out of a sow's ear,' Janning had said, "but since Atlantic's paying the bills, why not try?"

A week or so after he first saw the sneakers, Tell saw them again. He only registered the fact that they were the same sneakers because they were in the same place: under the door of stall number one in the third floor men's. White-once, anyway-with dirt in the deep creases. He noticed an empty eyelet. Sneakers had laced one of them wrong. Must not have had your eyes all the way open when you did that, friend, Tell thought, and went on down to the third stall (which he thought of, in some vague way, as "his" stall).

This time he glanced at the sneakers on the way out and saw something odd: there was a dead fly on one of them.

When he got back to Studio F, Janning was sitting at the board with his head clutched in his hands.

"You okay, Paul?" Tell asked.

"No."

"What's wrong?"

"Me. I was wrong."

"What are you talking about?" Tell looked around for Georgie Ronkler and didn't see him anywhere. It didn't surprise him. Janning had periodic fugues and Georgie always left when he saw one coming on. He claimed his karma didn't allow him to deal with strong emotion. "I cry at supermarket openings," Georgie said.

"You can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear," Janning said dully. He gestured at the glass between the mixing room and the performance studio. "At least you can't make one out of pigs like those."

"It's not that bad," said Tell, who knew he spoke only the truth: it was worse. The Dead Beats, comprised of four dull bastards and one dull bitch, were personally repulsive and professionally incompetent.

"Fuck you," Janning said.

"God I hate temperament," Tell said.

Janning looked up at him and giggled. A second later they were both laughing.

The mix ended a week later. Tell asked Janning for a recommendation and a tape.

"Okay, but you know you can't play the tape for anyone until the album comes out," Janning said.

"I know."

"And why you'd ever want to, for anyone, is beyond me. These guys make The Dead Kennedys sound like the Beatles."

"Come on, Paul. At least it's over."

He smiled. "Yeah. There's that. And if I ever work in this business again, I'll give you a call."

"That would be great."

They shook hands. Tell left the building which had once been known as Music City, and the thought of the sneakers under the door of stall number one never crossed his mind.

Janning, who had been in the business twenty years, had once told him that when it came to mixing bop (he never called it rock and roll, only bop), you were either shit or Superman. For the month following the Beats' mixing session, John Tell was shit. He didn't work. He began to get nervous about the rent. Twice he almost called Janning, but something in him thought it would be a mistake.

Then, near the end of May, the music mixer on a film called Karate Masters of Massacre died of a massive coronary and Tell got two weeks' work at the Brill Building (which had once been called Tin Pan Alley), finishing the mix. It was mostly library stuff in the public domain - and a few plinking sitars - but it paid the rent. He had no more than walked into his apartment following his last day on the show when the phone rang and Paul Janning was asking him if he had checked Billboard lately.

Tell said he hadn't.

"It came on at number seventy-nine." Janning managed to sound simultaneously disgusted, amused, and amazed. "With a bullet."

"What did?" But he knew as soon as the question was out of his mouth.

"Diving in the Dirt."

It was the name of a cut on The Dead Beats' Beat It 'Til It's Dead album, the only cut which had seemed to Tell and Janning remotely like single material.

"Shit!"

"Agreed, but I think it's gonna go top ten. And that probably means the album'll go top ten. A platinum-covered dog-turd is still a dog-turd, but a ref is still a ref, am I right?"

"You sure are," Tell said, pulling open his desk drawer to make sure his Dead Beats cassette, unplayed since Janning had given it to him on the last day of the mix, was still there.

"So what are you doing?"

"Looking for a job."

"You want to work with me again? Daltrey's new album. Starts in two weeks."

"Christ, yes!"

The money would be good, but it was more than that; following The Dead Beats and two weeks of Karate Masters of Massacre, working with Roger Daltrey would be like coming into a warm place on a cold night. The man might turn out to be an utter shit, but at least he could sing. And working with Janning again would be good. "Where?"

"Same old stand. Tabori."

"I'm there."

Roger Daltrey could not only sing, he turned out to be a tolerably nice guy. Tell thought the next three or four weeks would be good ones. He had a job, he had a production credit on an album that had popped onto the Billboard charts at number forty-one (and "Diving in the Dirt" was up to number seventeen and still climbing), and he felt safe about the rent for the first time since he had come to New York from Pennsylvania four years ago.

It was June, trees were in full leaf, girls were in short skirts, and the world seemed a fine place to be. Tell felt this way on his first day back at work for Paul Janning until approximately 1:45 P.M. Then he walked into the third floor bathroom, saw the same white sneakers under the door of stall one, and all his good feelings suddenly collapsed.

They are not the same.

They were, though. That single empty eyelet was the clearest point of identification, but everything else about them was also the same. Exactly the same, and that included their positions.

The only difference was that now there were more dead flies around them.

He went slowly into the third stall, "his" stall, lowered his pants, and sat down. He wasn't surprised to find the urge which had brought him there had entirely departed only sat there, listening for sounds. Little shifting noises. The rattle of a newspaper. Perhaps a little grunt of effort. Hell, even a fart would do.

There was no sound.

That's because I'm in here alone, Tell thought. Except, that is, for the dead guy in that first stall.

The outer door banged briskly open. Tell almost screamed.

Someone hummed his way over to the urinals. As he did, an explanation occurred to Tell and he relaxed. It was so simple it was absurd ... and undoubtedly correct. He glanced at his watch and saw it was 1:47.

A regular man is a happy man, his father used to say. Tell's father had been a taciturn man, and that (along with Clean your hands and then clean your plate) had been one of his few aphorisms. If regularity really did mean happiness, then Tell supposed he was a happy man. And if you were regular, he supposed that urge came on at about the same time every day ... at least it did with

him. Sneakers was just on the same schedule, that was all, and the sneakers were always under the door of stall one because that was "his" stall just as number three was Tell's.

If you needed to pass the stalls to get to the urinals, you would have seen that stall empty lots of times, and with different shoes under it lots of other times. And what are the chances a body could stay undiscovered in a business building toilet stall for ...

He worked out the time he'd last been there in his mind.

... for nine weeks, give or take?

No chance at all was the answer to that one. He could believe the janitors weren't too fussy about cleaning the stalls-all those dead flies-but they would have to check on the toilet paper supply every day or two, right) And even if you left those things out, dead people started to smell after a while, right? God knew this wasn't the sweetest-smelling place on earth-and following a visit from the fat guy who worked down the hall at Janus Music it was almost uninhabitable-but surely the stink of a dead body would be different.

How do you know? Did you ever smell a decomposing body?

No, but he was pretty sure he'd know what it was if he did. Logic was logic and regularity was regularity and that was the end of it. The guy was probably a pencilpusher from Janus or a writer for Snappy Kards, at the other side of the floor.

Roses are red and violets are blue!

You thought I was dead but that wasn't true!

I just deliver my mail at the same time as you.

That sucks, Tell thought, and uttered a wild little laugh. The fellow who had banged the door open, almost startling him into a scream, had progressed to the washbasins. Now the splashing-lathering sound of him washing his hands stopped briefly. Tell could imagine him listening, wondering who was laughing behind one of the closed stall doors, wondering if it was a joke, a dirty picture, or if the man was just crazy. There were, after all, crazy people in New York. Lots of them. You saw them all the time, talking to themselves and laughing for no appreciable reason ... the way Tell had just now.

Tell tried to imagine Sneakers also listening and couldn't.

Suddenly he didn't feel like laughing anymore.

Suddenly he just felt like getting out of there.

He didn't want the man at the basin to see him, though. The man would look at him. Just for a moment, but that would be enough to know what he was thinking. People who laughed behind closed toilet stall doors were quite possibly not to be trusted.

Click-clack of shoes on the old porcelain tiles. Whooze of the door being opened and the hisshh of it settling slowly back into place. You could bang it open but the pneumatic elbow-joint kept it from banging shut. That might upset the third-floor receptionist as he sat smoking Camels and reading the latest issue of Krrang!

God, it's so silent in here! Why didn't the guy move?

But there was just the silence, thick and smooth and total, the sort of silence the dead would hear in their coffins if they could still hear, and Tell again became convinced that Sneakers was dead, fuck logic, he was dead and had been dead for who knew how long, he was sitting in there and if you opened the door you would see some slumped mossy thing with its hands dangling in the fork of its crotch, you would see

For a moment he was on the verge of calling, Hey Sneaks! You all right?

But what if Sneakers answered, not in a questioning or irritated voice but in a froggy grinding croak? Wasn't there something about waking the dead? About...

Suddenly Tell was up, up fast, flushing the toilet and buttoning his pants, out of the stall, zipping his fly as he

headed for the door, aware that in a few seconds he was going to feel silly but not caring. Yet he could not forbear one glance under the first stall as he passed. Dirty white sneakers. And dead flies.

Weren't any dead flies in my stall. And just how is it that nine weeks have gone by and he still hasn't noticed that he missed one of the eyelets? Or does he just wear them all the time, even to bed?

Pneumatic elbow or not, Tell hit the door Pretty hard coming out. The receptionist, a Camel smoldering between his fingers, was looking at him with the cool curiosity he saved for beings merely mortal (as opposed to such deities in human form as Roger Daltrey).

Tell hurried down the hall to Tabori Studios.

"Paul?"

"What?" Janning answered without looking up from the board. Georgie Ronkler was standing off to one side, watching Janning closely and nibbling a cuticle - cuticles were all he had left to nibble; his fingernails simply did not exist above the point where they parted company with live flesh and hot nerve-endings. He was close to the door. If Janning began to rant, Georgie would slip through it.

"I think there might be something wrong in-"

Janning groaned. "Something else?"

"What do you mean?"

"This drum track is what I mean. It's badly botched, and I don't know what we can do about it." He flicked a toggle and drums crashed into the studio. "You hear it?"

"The snare, you mean?"

"Of course I mean the snare! It stands out a mile from the rest of the percussion, but it's married to it!"

"Yes, but-"

"Jesus bloody fuck, I hate shit like this! Forty tracks I got here, forty goddamn tracks to record a simple bop tune and some IDIOT technician-"

From the tail of his eye Tell saw Georgie disappear like a cool breeze.

"But look, Paul, if you lower the eq-"

"The eq's got nothing to do with-"

"Shut up and just listen for a minute," Tell said soothingly - something he could have said to no one else on the face of the earth-and slid a switch. Janning stopped ranting and started listening. He asked a question. Tell answered it. Then he asked one Tell couldn't answer, but Janning was able to answer it himself, and all of a sudden they were looking at a whole new spectrum of possibilities for a song called "Answer to You, Answer to Me.

After a while, sensing that the storm had passed, Georgie Ronkler crept back in.

And Tell forgot what he had meant to say about the sneakers.

He thought about them again the following evening. He was at home, sitting on the toilet in his own bathroom, reading Everything That Rises Must Converge while Vivaldi played mildly from the bedroom speakers (although Tell now mixed rock and roll for a living, he only owned four or five rock records, most of them by Creedence Clearwater Revival).

He looked up from his book, somewhat startled. A question of cosmic ludicrousness had suddenly occurred to him: How long has it been since you took a crap in the evening, John?

He didn't know, but he thought he might be taking them then quite a bit more frequently in the future. At least one of his habits had changed, it seemed.

Sitting in the living room fifteen minutes later, his book forgotten in his lap, something else occurred to him: he hadn't used the third floor rest room once that day. They had gone across the street for coffee at ten, and he had taken a whizz in the men's room of The Donut Shop while Paul and Georgie sat at the counter, drinking coffee and talking about overdubs. Then, on his lunch hour, he had made a pit-stop at the Brew 'n Burger ... and another on the first floor late that afternoon when he had gone down to drop off a bunch of mail that he could just as easily stuffed into the mailslot by the elevators.

Avoiding the third-floor men's? Was that what he'd been doing today, without even realizing it? You bet your sweatsocks. Avoiding it like a scared kid who goes a block out of his way coming home from school so he won't have to go past the local haunted house. He had been spooked by a pair of dirty sneakers.

Aloud, very clearly, Tell said: "This has got to stop."

But that was Thursday night and something happened on Friday night that changed everything. That was when the door closed between him and Paul Janning.

Tell was a shy man and didn't make friends easily. In high school a quirk of fate had put him up on stage with a guitar in his hands-the last place he ever expected to be. The bassist of a group called The Satin Saturns fell ill with salmonella the day before a well-paying gig. The lead guitarist, who was also in the school band, knew John Tell could play both bass and rhythm. This lead guitarist was big and violent. John Tell was small and breakable. Offered a choice between playing the ill bassist's instrument and having it rammed up his ass to the fifth fret went a long way toward breaking down his horror of playing in front of a large audience.

But by the end of the third song, he was no longer frightened. By the end of the first set he knew he was home. Years after that first gig, Tell heard a story about Bill Wyman, bassist of The Rolling Stones. According to the story, Wyman actually fell asleep during a performance - not in some tiny club, mind you, but a huge hall-and fell from the stage, breaking his collarbone. Tell supposed lots of people either laughed at that story or assumed Wyman had been on something, but Tell guessed it was true. Bassists, he had discovered, are the invisible men of the rock world. There were exceptions - Paul McCartney, for one - but they only proved the rule.

Perhaps because of the job's very lack of glamor, there was a chronic shortage of bass players. When The Satin Saturns broke up a month later (the lead guitarist and the rhythm guitarist had had a fist-fight), Tell joined a band formed by the Saturns' rhythm man (at their first rehearsal he still had a large purple shiner), and his life's course was chosen, as simply and quietly as that.

Playing in the band, not just at the party but making the party happen-Tell liked that. You were up in front, admired, idolized almost, and yet invisible. Sometimes you had to sing a little back-up, but nobody expected you to make a speech or anything. He lived that life, parttime student and full-time band gypsy, for ten years or so. He drifted into session work in New York, began fooling with the boards, and eventually discovered he was a little better-and even more invisible-on the other side of the glass window. During all that time he had made one good friend: Paul Janning. Nor was Georgie Ronkler so different from him, he realized following what happened on that Friday night.

He and Paul were having a drink or two at one of the back tables in McManus's Pub, talking about the mix, the biz, the Mets, whatever, when all of a sudden Janning's right hand was under the table and gently squeezing Tell's crotch.

Tell moved away so violently that the candle in the center of the table fell over and Janning's glass of wine spilled. A waiter came over and righted the candle before it could scorch the tablecloth. Then he left. Tell stared at Janning, his eyes wide and shocked.

"I'm sorry," Janning said, and he did look sorry ... but he also looked unperturbed.

"Jesus Christ, Paul!" It was all he could think of to say, and it sounded hopelessly inadequate.

"I thought you were ready, that's all," Janning said. "If I hadn't, I suppose I would have been more subtle. It's just that I've wanted you for quite a while now."

"Ready?" Tell repeated. "Ready? What do you mean? Ready for what?"

"To come out. To admit it to yourself and come out."

"I'm not that way," Tell said, but his heart was pounding very fast. Part of it was outrage, part was fear of the implacable certainty he saw in Janning's eyes, most of it was dismay. What Janning had done shut him out. It also shut his mouth, but for the time being that was very much secondary.

"Let's let it go, shall we? Let's just order and make up our minds that it never happened." Until you want it to,

those implacable eyes added.

Oh it happened, all right, Tell wanted to say, but that hand-the one that had been there all his life-was across his mouth. Don't say what you shouldn't say, this is a job, a good job, you need that Daltrey tape in your portfolio even more than you need the next two weeks' salary. Be careful, John.

But that wasn't all of it. That was the small of it. The fact was that his mouth closed. It always had. It snapped shut like a bear-trap, a bear-trap with rusty implacable jaws, with all his heart below those interlocked teeth and all his head above. That was the tall of it.

"All right," he said, "it never happened."

Tell slept badly that night, and what sleep he did get was haunted by bad dreams: one of Janning groping him in McManus's was followed by one of the sneakers under the stall door, only in this one Tell opened it and saw Paul Janning sitting there, a corpse with a huge peeling hard-on sticking up from the thatch of his pubic hair like an exclamation point. The mouth of this corpse dropped open with an audible creak. "That's right; I knew you were ready," it said on a puff of greenly rotten air, and Tell woke himself up by tumbling onto the floor in a tangle of coverlet. It was four in the morning. The first touches of light were just creeping through the chinks between the buildings outside his window. He dressed and sat smoking one cigarette after another until it was time to go to work.

Around eleven o'clock on that Saturday-they were working six-day weeks to make Daltrey's deadline-Tell went into the third floor bathroom to urinate. He stood just inside the door, rubbing his temples, and then looked around at the stalls.

He couldn't see. The angle was wrong.

Then never mind! Fuck it! Take your piss and get out of here!

He walked slowly over to one of the urinals and unzipped.

It took a long time to get going.

On his way out he paused again, head cocked, and then walked slowly around into the stall area just far enough so he could see under the door of the first stall.

The dirty white sneakers were still there. The building which used to be known as Music City was almost completely empty, Saturday morning empty, but the sneakers were still there.

Tell's eyes fixed upon a fly just outside the stall. He watched with an empty sort of avidity as it crawled beneath the stall door and onto one of the sneakers. There it stopped, and simply fell dead. It tumbled into the growing pile around the sneakers. Tell saw with no surprise at all (none that he felt, anyway) that among the flies was a large cockroach, lying on its back like a turtle.

He left in large painless strides, and his progress back to the studios seemed most peculiar; it was as if, instead of walking, the building was flowing past him, around him, like river-rapids around a rock.

When I get back I'll tell Paul I don't feel well and take the rest of the day off, he thought, but he wouldn't. Paul had been in an erratic, unpleasant mood all morning, and Tell knew he was part (or maybe all) of the reason why. Might Paul fire him out of spite? A week ago he would have laughed at such an idea. But a week ago he had still believed what he had come to believe in his growing-up: friends were real and ghosts were makebelieve. Did he think the sneakers in the men's room belonged to a ghost? Well, as a matter of fact he did. Which, when taken along with the events of the night before meant he had everything backwards: friends were Make-believe and ghosts were real.

"The prodigal returns," Janning said without looking around as Tell opened the second of the studio's two doors—the one that was called the "dead air" door. "I thought you died in there, Johnny."

"No," Tell said. "Not me."

It was a ghost; Tell found out whose a day before the Daltrey mix-and his association with Paul Janning ended, but before that happened a great many other things did. Except they were all the same thing, just little mile-markers, like the ones on the Pennsylvania Turnpike, announcing John Tell's steady progress toward a nervous breakdown. He knew this was happening, understood why it was happening, and still could not help it from happening. It seemed he was not driving this particular road but being chauffeured.

At first his course of action had seemed clear-cut and simple: avoid that men's room, and avoid all questions about the sneakers. Stop thinking about it.

But he couldn't stop thinking about it. It crept up on him at odd moments and pounced like an old grief. He would be sitting home, some stupid game-show on the tube, and think about the flies, or about janitors replacing the toilet paper, and then he would look at the clock and see an hour had passed. Or he would think it was all a malevolent practical joke.

Paul's in on it, and probably that thin guy from Janus Music I see him talking to every now and then, and probably the receptionist, him with his Camels and his dead skeptical eyes. Not George, he couldn't keep it from me even if Paul shouted him into going along, but anyone else is possible. Shit, maybe even Roger Daltrey himself took a turn wearing those sneakers!

He recognized these thoughts as paranoid fantasies, but the worst thing was that recognition did not lead to dispersion. The thoughts lived their own lives inside his brain. He would tell them to go away, there was no cabal led by Paul Janning out to get him, and his mind would say Yeah, okay, makes sense to me, and five hours later or maybe only twenty minutes—he would see a bunch of them sitting around Desmond's Steak House two blocks downtown: Paul, the receptionist who smoked the Camels, maybe even the fat guy from Snappy Kards, all of them eating shrimp cocktails and drinking. And laughing, of course. Laughing at him, while the dirty white sneakers they took turns wearing sat under the table in a crumpled brown bag.

Tell could see that brown bag. That was how bad it had gotten.

But the worst was just this: the third-floor men's room had acquired a pull. It was as if there was a powerful magnet in there and his pockets were full of iron filings. If someone had told him something like that he would have laughed (maybe just inside, if the person making the metaphor seemed very much in earnest), but it was really there, a feeling like a swerve every time he passed the men's on his way to the studios or back to the elevators. It was a terrible feeling, like being pulled toward an open window sixty stories up or watching helplessly, as if from outside yourself, as you raised a pistol to your mouth and sucked the barrel.

He wanted to look again. He realized that one more look was about all it would take to finish him off, but it made no difference. He wanted to look again.

Each time he passed, that mental swerve.

In his dreams he opened that door again and again. just to get a look.

To get a really good look.

He couldn't get it out. That was the worst of it. He understood if he could get it out, pour it into someone else's ear, it would change its shape, perhaps even grow a handle with which he could hold it. Twice he went into bars and managed to strike up conversations with the men next to him. Because bars, he thought, were the places where talk was at its absolute cheapest. Bargain basement rates.

He had no more than opened his mouth on the first occasion when the man he had picked began to sermonize on the subject of the Yankees, Billy Martin, and that asshole George Steinbrunner. Steinbrunner in particular seemed to get under this man's skin. It was impossible to get a word in edgeways and Tell soon gave up trying.

The second time, he managed to work up a fairly casual conversation with a man who looked like a construction worker. They talked about the weather, and baseball (but this man, like Janning, was a Mets fan, and not at all nutty on the subject), progressed to jobs, and so on. Tell was sweating. He felt as if he was doing some heavy piece of manual labor - pushing a wheelbarrow filled with cement up a slight grade, maybe-but he also felt as if he wasn't doing too badly.

The guy who looked like a construction worker was drinking Black Russians. Tell stuck to beer. It felt as if he was sweating it out as fast as he put it in, but after he had bought the guy a couple of drinks and the guy had bought Tell a couple of schooners, he nerved himself to begin.

"You want to hear something really strange?" he said. "You queer?" the guy who looked like a construction worker asked him before Tell could get any further. He turned on his stool and looked at Tell with amiable curiosity. "I mean, it's nothin' to me whether y'are or not, but I just thought I'd tell you I don't go for that stuff. Have it up front, you know?"

"I'm not queer," Tell said.

"Oh. What's really strange?"

"Huh?"

"You said something was really strange."

"Oh, it really wasn't that strange," Tell said, then glanced at his watch and said it was getting late.

Three days before the end of the mix, Tell left Studio F to urinate. He now used the bathroom on the sixth floor for this purpose. He had first used the one on four, then the one on five, but these were stacked directly above the one on three, and he had begun to feel the owner of the sneakers radiating silently up through the floors, seeming to suck at him. But the men's room on six was on the other side of the building, and that seemed to solve the problem.

He passed the reception desk on his way to the elevators, blinked, and suddenly he was in the thirdfloor bathroom with the door whoozing softly shut behind him instead of in the elevator car. He had never been so afraid. Part of it was the sneakers, but most of it was knowing he had just dropped three to six seconds of consciousness. For the first time in his life his mind had simply shorted out.

He had no idea how long he might have stood there if the door hadn't suddenly opened behind him, cracking him painfully in the back. It was Paul Janning. "Excuse me, Johnny," he said. "I had no idea you came in here to meditate."

He passed Tell without waiting for a response (he wouldn't have got one in any case, Tell thought later; he was completely incapable of speech, his tongue frozen to the roof of his mouth), and headed for the stalls. Tell was able to walk over to the first urinal and unzip his fly, doing these things only because he thought Paul would really enjoy it if he freaked out. Paul had seemed to take Tell's horrified rejection in stride at the time. But times changed.

Tell flushed the urinal and zipped his fly again (he hadn't even bothered to take his penis, which felt as if it had shrunk to roughly the size of a peanut, from inside his Underwear). He started out ... then stopped. He turned around, took two steps, bent, and looked under the door of the first stall.

The sneakers were there, now surrounded by mounds of dead flies.

So were Paul Janning's Gucci loafers.

What Tell was seeing looked like a double exposure, or one of the hokey ghost effects from the Topper TV program. First he would be seeing Paul's loafers through the sneakers. then the sneakers would seem to solidify and he would be seeing them through the loafers, as if Paul were the ghost. Except, even when he was seeing through them, Paul's loafers made little shifts and movements, while the sneakers remained as immobile as always.

Tell left. For the first time in two weeks he felt calm.

The next day he did what he probably should have done at once: he took Georgie Ronkler out to lunch and asked

him if he had ever heard anything strange about the building which used to be called Music City. Why he hadn't thought of doing this earlier was a puzzle to him. He only knew that what happened yesterday seemed to have cleared his mind somehow, like a brisk slap or a dashing of cold water. Georgie might not know anything, but he might; he had been working with Paul for at least seven years, and a lot of that work had been done at Music City.

"Oh, the ghost, you mean?" Georgie asked, and laughed. They were in Cartin's, a deli-restaurant on 6th Avenue, and the place was noon-noisy. He bit into his corned beef sandwich, chewed, swallowed, and sipped some of his cream soda through the two straws poked into the bottle. "Who told you 'bout that, Johnny?"

"Some janitor," Tell said. His voice was perfectly calm.

"You sure you didn't see him?" Georgie asked, and winked. This was as close as Georgie could get to teasing.

"Nope." He hadn't. Not really. just some sneakers. Sneakers and dead flies.

"Yeah, well, everybody used to talk about it," Georgie said, "how the guy's ghost was haunting the place. He got it right up there on the third floor, you know. In the john. "

"Yes," Tell said. "That's what I heard. But the janitor wouldn't tell me anymore, or maybe he didn't know anymore. He just laughed and walked away."

"It happened before I started to work with Paul. Paul was the one who told me about it."

"He never saw the ghost himself?" Tell asked, knowing the answer. Yesterday Paul had been sitting in it. Shitting in it, to be perfectly vulgarly truthful.

"No, he used to laugh about it." Georgie put his sandwich down. "You know how he can be sometimes. Just a little m-mean." If forced to say something even slightly negative about someone, Georgie developed a mild stutter.

"I know. But never mind Paul; who was this ghost? What happened to him?"

"Oh, he was just some dope pusher," Georgie said. "This was back in 1972 or '73, I guess. Before the Slump."

Tell nodded. From 1975 until 1980 or so, the rock industry lay becalmed in the horse latitudes. Kids spent their money on video games instead of records. For perhaps the fiftieth time since 1955, the pundits announced the death of rock and roll. And, as on other occasions, it proved to be a lively corpse. Video games topped out; MTV checked in; a fresh wave of stars arrived from England; Bruce Springsteen suddenly became all the things the newsmagazines had said he was ten years before.

"Before the slump, record company execs used to deliver coke backstage in their briefcases before big shows," Georgie said. "I was concert-mixing back then, and I saw it happen. There was one guy-I don't want to say his name because he's dead, dead since 1978, but you'd know it-who used to get a jar of olives from his label before every gig. The jar would come wrapped up in pretty paper with bows and ribbon and everything. Only instead of

water, the olives came packed in cocaine. He used to put them in his drinks. Called them b-b-blast-off martinis."

"I bet they were, too," Tell murmured.

"Well, back then everybody thought coke was a good clean high. It didn't hook you like heroin or f-fuck you over so you couldn't work. And this building, man, this building was a regular snowstorm. Pills and pot and hash too, but mainly it was cocaine. It was the big fashion drug. And this guy-

"What was his name?"

Georgie shrugged and worked on his sandwich. "I don't know. But he was like one of the deli delivery boys you see going up and down in the elevators with coffee and doughnuts and b-bagels. Only instead of delivering coffee-and, this guy delivered dope. You'd see him this is what I heard, anyway - two or three times a week, riding all the way up and then working his way down. He'd have a topcoat slung over his arm and an alligatorskin briefcase in that hand. He kept the overcoat over his arm even when it was hot. That was so people wouldn't see the cuff. But I guess sometimes they did a-a-anyway."

"The what?"

"C-C-Cuff" Georgie said, spraying out bits of bread and corned beef and immediately going crimson. "Gee, Johnny, I'm sorry."

"No problem. You want another cream soda?"

"Yes, thanks," Georgie said gratefully.

Tell signalled the waitress.

"So he was a delivery-boy," he said, mostly to put Georgie at his ease again - Georgie was still patting his lips with his napkin.

"That's right." The fresh cream soda arrived and Georgie drank some. "When he got off the elevator on the eighth floor, that briefcase chained to his wrist would be full of dope. When he got off it on the ground floor again, it would be full of money."

"Best trick since lead into gold," Tell said.

"Huh?"

"Nothing. Go on."

"Not much to tell. One day he only made it down to the third floor. He made his deliveries, went into the men's room, and someone o-offed him."

"Shot him?" Tell asked, thinking dubiously of silencers-in the movies they made a sound very like that of the pneumatic elbow-joint on the men's room door.

"What I heard," Georgie said, "was that someone opened the door of the stall where he was s-sitting and stuck a pencil in his eye."

For just a moment Tell saw it as vividly as he had seen the crumpled bag under the conspirators' restaurant table: a yellow Eberhard Faber #2, sharpened to an exquisite black point, sliding forward through the air and then shearing into the startled black well of pupil. He winced.

Georgie nodded. "It's probably not true. I mean, not that part. Probably someone just, you know, stuck him."

"Yes."

"But whoever it was sure had something sharp with him, all right," Georgie said.

"He did?"

"Yes. Because the briefcase was gone."

Tell looked at Georgie. He could see this, too.

"When the cops came and took the guy off the toilet, they found his left hand in the b-bowl."

"Oh," Tell said.

Georgie looked down at his plate. There was still half a sandwich on it. "I guess maybe I'm f-f-full," he said, and smiled uneasily.

On their way back to the studio, Tell asked, "So the guy's ghost is supposed to haunt ... what, that bathroom?" And suddenly he laughed, because gruesome as the story had been, there was something comic in the idea of a ghost haunting a men's room.

Georgie smiled. "You know people. At first that was what they said. When I was first working with Paul, guys would tell me they'd seen him in there. Not all of him, just his sneakers under the stall door."

"Just his sneakers."

"Yeah. That's how you'd know they were making it up, or imagining it, because You only heard it from guys who knew him when he was alive. From guys who knew he wore sneakers."

Tell, who had been an eleven-year-old kid living in rural Pennsylvania when the murder happened, nodded. They had arrived at the building. As they walked up the hall toward the elevators, Georgie said, "But you know how

fast the turnover is in this business. Here today and gone tomorrow. I doubt if there's anybody working here who was working there then, except maybe for a few j-janitors, and none of them would have bought from the guy.

"And he was probably one of those guys who you never even noticed if you didn't buy from him."

"Yeah. Unless you were a c-cop. So you hardly ever hear the story anymore, and no one ever says they see the guy. "

They were at the elevators.

"Georgie, why do you stick with Paul?"

Although Georgie lowered his head and the tips of his ears turned a bright red, he did not sound really surprised at this abrupt shift in direction. "He takes care of me."

Do you sleep with him, Georgie? Something else he couldn't say. Wouldn't, even if he could. Because Georgie would tell him.

Tell, who could barely bring himself to talk to strangers and never made friends (except maybe for today), suddenly hugged Georgie Ronkler. Georgie hugged him back. Then they stepped away from each other, and the elevator came, and the mix continued, and the following evening, at six-fifteen, after the wrap and Janning's curt goodbye (he left with Georgie trailing behind him), Tell stepped into the third-floor men's room to get a look at the owner of the white sneakers.

Talking with Georgie, he had remembered what he had forgotten. Something so simple you learned it in the first grade. Telling was only half. Showing was the other half.

There was no lapse in consciousness this time, nor any sensation of fear ... only that slow steady deep drumming in his chest. All his senses had been heightened. He smelled chlorine, the pink disinfectant cakes in the urinals, old farts. He could see minute cracks in the paint on the wall, and chips on the pipes. He could hear the hollow click of his heels as he walked toward the first stall.

The sneakers were now almost buried in the corpses of dead flies.

There were only one or two at first. Because there was no need for them to die until the sneakers were there, and they weren't there until I saw them.

"Why me?" he asked clearly in the stillness.

The sneakers didn't move and no voice answered.

"I didn't know you, I never met you, I don't even take the kind of stuff you sold. So why me?"

One of the sneakers twitched. There was a papery rustle of dead flies. Then the sneaker-it was the misplaced one-settled back.

Tell pushed the stall door open. One hinge shrieked in properly gothic fashion. And there it was. Mystery guest, sign in please, Tell thought.

The mystery guest sat on the john with one hand dangling limply in his crotch. He was much as Tell had seen him in his dreams, with this difference: there was only the single hand. The other arm ended in a dusty maroon stump to which several more flies had adhered. It was only now that Tell realized he had never noticed Sneaker's pants (and didn't you always notice the way lowered pants bunched up over the shoes if you happened to glance under a bathroom stall? something helplessly comic, or just defenseless, or one on account of the other?). He hadn't because they were up, belt buckled, fly zipped. They were bell-bottoms. Tell tried to remember when bells had gone out of fashion and couldn't.

Above the bells Sneakers wore a blue chambray workshirt with an applied peace symbol on each flap pocket. He had parted his hair on the right. Tell could see dead flies in the part. From the hook on the back of the door hung the topcoat of which Georgie had told him. There were dead flies on its slumped shoulders.

There was a grating sound not entirely unlike the one the hinge had made. It was the tendons in the dead man's neck, Tell realized. Sneakers was raising his head. Now he looked at him, and Tell saw with no sense of surprise whatever that, except for the two inches of pencil protruding from the socket of the right eye, it was the same face that looked out of the shaving mirror at him every day. Sneakers was him and he was Sneakers.

"I knew you were ready," he told himself in the hoarse toneless voice of a man who has not used his vocal cords in a long time.

"I'm not," Tell said. "Go away,"

"This is where you're supposed to be," Tell told Tell, and the Tell in the stall doorway saw circles of white powder around the nostrils of the Tell sitting on the john. He had been using as well as pushing, all right. He had come in here for a short snort, someone had opened the stall door, and stuck a pencil in his eye. But who committed murder by pencil? Maybe only someone who committed the crime on ...

"Oh, call it impulse," Sneakers said in his hoarse and toneless voice.

And Tell - the Tell standing in the stall doorway - understood a great many things all at once. This had been no premeditated murder, as Georgie had seemed to think. The killer hadn't looked under the stall, and Sneakers hadn't flipped the latch. Or maybe ...

"It was broken," the thing finished in its toneless husk of a voice.

Broken. Yes. The killer had been holding a pencil in one hand, probably not as a weapon but only because sometimes you wanted something to hold, a cigarette, a bunch of keys, a pen or pencil to fiddle with. Tell thought maybe the pencil had been in Sneakers's eye even before either of them knew the killer was going to put it there.

Then, probably because the killer had also been a customer who knew what was in the briefcase, he had closed the door again, left the building, got well, got something . . .

"He went to a hardware store five blocks over and bought a hacksaw," Sneakers said in his toneless voice, and Tell suddenly realized it wasn't his face anymore; it was the face of a man who looked about thirty, and vaguely Indian. Tell's hair was gingery-blonde, and so had this man's been at first, but now it was a coarse and shineless black.

"Sure," Tell said. "He got it in a bag and came back, didn't he? If somebody had already found you, there'd be a big crowd around the door. That's the way he'd figure. Maybe cops already, too. If no one looked excited, he'd go on in and get the briefcase.

"He tried to cut the chain first," the harsh voice said. "When that didn't work, he cut off my hand."

They looked at each other. Tell suddenly realized he could see the toilet scat and the dirty white tiles of the back wall behind the corpse ... the corpse that was, finally, becoming a ghost.

"You know now?" it asked Tell. "Why it was you?"

"Yes. You had to tell someone."

"Telling is shit," the ghost said, and then smiled a smile of such sunken malevolence that Tell was struck by horror. "The only things that matter are showing ... and eating. Eating would have been better."

It was gone.

Tell looked down and saw the flies were gone, too.

He needed to go to the bathroom. Suddenly he needed to go to the bathroom very badly.

He went into the stall, closed the door, lowered his pants, and sat down. He went home that night whistling. A regular man is a happy man, his father used to say.

Tell supposed that was true.