

Snatcher 1 Snatcher from STRANGE HIGHWAYS by Dean Koontz Billy Neeks had a flexible philosophy regarding property rights. He believed in the proletarian ideal of shared wealth -- as long as the wealth belonged to someone else. On the other hand, if the property belonged to him, Billy was prepared to defend it to the death. This was a simple, workable philosophy for a thief -- which Billy was. Billy Neeks's occupation was reflected in his grooming: he looked slippery. His thick black hair was slicked back with enough scented oil to fill a crankcase. His coarse skin was perpetually pinguid, as if he suffered continuously from malaria. He moved cat-quick on well-lubricated joints, and his hands had the buttery grace of a magician's hands. His eyes resembled twin pools of Texas crude, wet and black and deep -- and utterly untouched by any human warmth or feeling. If the route to Hell were an inclined ramp requiring a hideous grease to facilitate descent, Billy Neeks would be the devil's choice to pass eternity in the application of that noxious, oleaginous substance. In action, Billy could bump into an unsuspecting woman, separate her from her purse, and be ten yards away and moving fast by the time she realized that she'd been victimized. Single-strap purses, double-strap purses, clutch purses, purses carried over the shoulder, purses carried in the hand -- all meant easy money to Billy Neeks. Whether his target was cautious or careless was of no consequence. Virtually no precautions could foil him. That Wednesday in April, pretending to be drunk, he jostled a well-dressed elderly woman on Broad Street, just past Bartram's Department Store. As she recoiled in disgust from that oily contact, Billy slipped her purse off her shoulder, down her arm, and into the plastic shopping bag that he carried. He reeled away from her and took six or eight steps in an exaggerated stagger before she realized that the collision had not been as accidental as it seemed. Even as the victim shrieked, "police," Billy had begun to run, and by the time she added, "help, police, help," Billy was nearly out of earshot. He raced through a series of alleyways, dodged around garbage cans and dumpsters, and leaped across the splayed legs of a sleeping wino. He sprinted across a parking lot and fled into another alley. Blocks from Bartram's, Billy slowed to a walk. He was breathing only slightly harder than usual. Grinning. Stepping out of the alley onto Forty-sixth Street, he spotted a young mother carrying a baby, a shopping bag, and a purse. She looked so defenseless that Billy couldn't resist the opportunity, so he flicked open his switchblade and, in a wink, cut the thin straps on her bag, a stylish blue-leather number. Then he dashed off again, across the street, where drivers braked sharply and blew their horns at him, into another network of alleyways, all familiar to him. As he ran, he giggled. His giggle was neither shrill nor engaging, but more like the sound of ointment squirting from a tube. When he slid on spilled garbage -- orange peels, rotting lettuce, mounds of molding and soggy bread -- he was not tripped up or even slowed down. The disgusting muck seemed to facilitate his flight, and he came out of the slide moving faster than he had gone into it. He slowed to a normal pace when he reached Prospect Boulevard. The switchblade was in his pocket again. Both stolen purses were concealed in the plastic shopping bag. He projected what he believed to be an air of nonchalance, and although his calculated expression of innocence was actually a dismal failure, it was the best that he could do. He strolled to his car, which he had parked at a meter along Prospect. The Pontiac, unwashed for at least two years, left oil drippings wherever it went, just as a wolf in the wilds marked its territory with dribbles of urine. Billy put the stolen purses in the trunk of the car and, whistling happily, drove away from that part of the city, toward yet untouched prowling grounds in other neighborhoods. Of the several reasons for his success as a purse snatcher, mobility was perhaps the most important. Many snatchers were kids seeking a few fast bucks, young hoods without wheels. Billy Neeks was twenty-five, no kid, and possessed reliable transportation. He usually robbed two or three women in one neighborhood and then quickly moved on to another territory where no one was looking for him and where more

business waited to be done. To him, this was not small-time thievery committed either by impulse or out of desperation. Instead, Billy saw it as a business, and he was a businessman, and like other businessmen he planned his work carefully, weighed the risks and benefits of any opportunity, and acted only as a result of careful, responsible analysis. Other snatchers -- amateurs and punks, every one of them -- paused on the street or in an alley to hastily search purses for valuables, risking arrest because of their inadvisable delays, at the very least creating a host of additional witnesses to their crimes. Billy, on the other hand, stashed the stolen purses in the trunk of his car to be retrieved later for more leisurely inspection in the privacy of his home. He prided himself on his methodicalness and caution. That cloudy and humid Wednesday in late April, he crossed and recrossed the city, visiting three widely separated districts and snatching six purses in addition to those that he had taken from the elderly woman outside Bartram's and from the young mother on Forty-sixth Street. The last of the eight also came from an old woman. At first he thought that it was going to be an easy hit, and then he thought that it was going to get messy, and finally it just turned out to be weird. When Billy spotted her, she was coming out of a butcher's shop on Westend Avenue, clutching a package of meat to her breast. She was old. Her brittle white hair stirred in the spring breeze, and Billy had the curious notion that he could hear those dry locks rustling against one another. Her crumpled-parchment face, her slumped shoulders, her pale withered hands, and her shuffling step combined to convey the impression not only of extreme age but of frailty and vulnerability -- which drew Billy Neeks as if he were an iron filing and she a magnet. Her purse was big, almost a satchel, and the weight of it -- in addition to the package of meat -- seemed to bother her, because she was shrugging the straps farther up on her shoulder and wincing in pain, as if suffering from a flare-up of arthritis. Next page Copyright 1994 Dean Koontz. All rights reserved. Copyright 1995 Time Warner Electronic Publishing All rights reserved. If you have any comments or suggestions, please post them on our Bulletin Board or e-mail them to twep-webmaster@pathfinder.com.

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