

BUYIN' MY HEARTACHES A BEER

BY LEWIS SHINER

PARKING THE FORK LIFT in the shed, Clifford tried to shake the sour mood that had gotten hold of him. Maybe it's just the weather, he thought, slapping his battered straw hat against his leg.

Andy punched out and helped him roll the clattering metal shed door closed. The last few stragglers from the finishing crew were pulling out of the lot, on their way home. Clifford felt his skin tingle. "Front just came through. Feel it?"

A dark bank of clouds rolled over the sun, and the hot afternoon lost its bite. A sullen stillness hung in the air, waiting for the rain to start.

Andy looked at his watch and whistled. "Two thirty. We poured that concrete today. I ain't been off this early since ol' Albert cracked his skull and I had to take him to the doctor." Andy lit a cigarette. Clifford felt for his own pack and came up empty.

"Gimme a butt, will you?"

"Sure." Andy stuck the pack out and shook it, and Clifford took one. As they walked out to his pickup. Clifford let his eyes wander down the long rows of steel forms, lined up like old fashioned watering troughs.

"Yessir, we poured that concrete today," Andy repeated.

The first drops of rain were misting the windshield as Clifford pulled out of the parking lot. "You going down to Romito's tonight?" Andy drawled, settling back and pulling his hat over his eyes.

"I don't know," Clifford said. "I'll see if Sherry wants to. Then maybe I'll come on down anyway." He swung the truck out onto the interstate and shifted into high.

Andy let out a short, harsh laugh and switched on the radio. "Having troubles, college boy?"

The nickname didn't bother Clifford any more. He knew that Andy and the others felt he was different, but he knew they didn't care if he was. The two years of college didn't matter as much as the fact that he'd had the chances they never had, and was one of them by choice rather than necessity.

It didn't make much difference in the end. The choices were gone now anyway, had been since he'd married, bought the house and truck, and worked his way up to foreman at the precast plant. The only things that bothered him any more were the late spring afternoons when he felt like he could just walk away from everything and not have to stop.

Clifford blew out a long ribbon of smoke and hooked his right wrist over the steering wheel. "Not that, exactly. I just wonder why we got married

sometimes, that's all."

"Hell, I can tell you why a man gets married. So he can slip around and still have something to come home to. Woman's got a long term investment, don't you see. She'll hang in there through a lot."

The radio played "Out of Hand." Clifford turned it up, trying to make the windshield wipers follow the beat in his mind. He thought about the times he'd gone out on Sherry. She must have known; she acted like it. But he'd never thought of divorcing her, and she must have known that, too. He supposed that was what counted, and that Andy was right, as usual.

Will you do it again, he asked himself, and he knew the answer was yes. He didn't even have to think about it. That feeling...knowing that you know everything that's going to happen to you from now till the day you die. Wanting *anything*, just so long as it was different. When some little cowgirl sat down at his table, it was a challenge. No well off family or book learning made any difference when she'd look at you like that...as if she had all the answers—or didn't care if there were any answers.

Not that it was Sherry's fault. It wasn't as if his mind was rotting away because of her. She cared more about reading, or even thinking, than he did any more. She always wanted him to go with her to talk to that Jim Stanley, the teacher from Dallas who bought the Henderson place.

Clifford steered his thoughts away from Stanley uncomfortably. The teacher was home early on Fridays, while Clifford was usually working, and it made him nervous to think too much about that. He pulled off the highway and past the little cluster of buildings at the head of Culvert road.

"You working tomorrow?" Andy asked.

"I don't know." There wasn't much to do Saturdays, just some cleanup work, maybe a few steel cages to tie for the next pour. The men that needed the money showed up, but if a lot of them came it was hardly worth it. "Are you?"

"Not if I have a good time tonight!" He slipped Clifford a wink.

Andy's wife was sitting on the covered porch when they pulled up. Clifford waved and Andy hopped out. "See you tonight if you make it."

His own house was just down the street and with the thought of getting home, he realized how tired he was. Not yet thirty, he thought, and this is what I have to show for it. A few aching muscles and a stucco house.

He parked the truck in the carport, noticing that Sherry's car was gone. Where the hell is she, he wondered, irritated. Shopping, probably, he told himself, but he couldn't quite make himself believe it.

He stood in the rain for a minute on his way in, letting it cool his leathery skin. He looked at the house, and it seemed like it was just big enough to hold up the TV antenna that stuck out of it. Just like Andy's house, just like the ten or fifteen others around them. Cheap enough that a man could pay for it on a hundred dollars a week, eat all right, and save a little for the kids. If there were any kids.

He went in and yelled, "Honey! I'm home!" in case she was there after all, but got no answer. Getting a pack of cigarettes from the bedroom, he lit up and opened a beer. Once he sat down, the week's work seemed to all pile up

on him at once. The beer went straight to his head, mixing with his fatigue to make him drowsy. He killed it off and crushed the can, standing up slowly. His doubts about Sherry came over him again and he shook them off, walking heavily into the bathroom to shower.

Over the noise of running water he heard Sherry come in, slamming the front door behind her. He soaped himself all over, boiling off all the grit, cement dust and sweat. When he finished, he cut off the water and opened the door a crack to let out the steam. Through the opening he could see Sherry, turned away from him, looking at herself in the mirror.

She was naked, and Clifford could sense something different about her from the way she was standing. She was stretching out, almost posing, running one hand over her full breasts and down across her stomach. Her eyes were half closed, her long red hair spilling in tangles down her back.

He dried himself roughly and wrapped the towel around his waist. Fear itched in his belly and he was ashamed to confront her. When he opened the door, Sherry kept her back to him and pulled her slip over her head. The motion seemed natural enough, but Clifford wondered why she didn't want him to see her body.

"Hi, honey," she said, pushing past him. "My turn." She aimed a kiss at his cheek, missed, and closed the bathroom door behind her.

Clifford reached into the dresser and got a pair of shorts. Stepping into them, his foot knocked Sherry's purse over and the contents spilled onto the floor.

Suddenly there was a roaring in his ears. He sat on the edge of the bed and picked up a little ball of waxed paper, carefully pulling it straight. It was stiff, and made a familiar crackling noise. The printing on it read "Sanitized for your protection," and below that "Plains Motel" in smaller letters.

He was still sitting on the bed when Sherry came out of the shower. She saw what he had in his hands and said, very quietly, "Oh, Christ."

Slowly, like a falling tree or the start of an avalanche, Clifford turned to face her. His voice, when he found it, was calm, but his eyes were flat and cold. "How long?" he asked.

Her eyes danced over the room, and she licked her lips but no words came. Clifford stood in front of her, dazed, and grabbed the top of her slip. A wave of anger went over him and he ripped it off her body. Her breasts swayed slightly, the nipples hardening. He was detached, his vision blurry, but he could see the stippled passion mark on her shoulder, the small bruises on her thighs.

He slapped her without any real force, and she fell across the bed. Shame mingled with his anger and hurt, and a sourness crawled up out of his stomach. He had never hit her, never hit any woman before, and he realized he didn't like it. But in his shame and anger and hurt, he slapped her again.

Tears came out of her eyes. "P-please Cliff..."

She was a stranger to him. He tried to remember if he'd ever seen her before. He realized he was undressed, and went to the closet. Slowly, in a dream, he put on a clean pair of Levis and buttoned on a shirt. As he sat on the bed and pulled on his socks, Sherry reached out, touching him lightly on the

arm. Reflexively, Clifford half turned and struck out with his left fist. She fell back, stunned, and a part of Clifford noted that he had caught her in the eye, that it would soon swell and turn black. He put his boots on and walked into the thickening rain.

WHAT DO I do now? he thought. He felt he was sinking, going right down, and knew that he had to move or he would be lost. He got in his truck and backed out of the carport, drove slowly back toward the highway.

Already he was starting to come down. He realized he was on the way to Romito's, and decided that stopping in might be a good idea. He had a problem, that was all, a problem like a lot of people had. Going to Romito's, getting away from himself, would be the best thing for him.

The bar was the leading edge of a retail strip along the interstate consisting of three filling stations, a grocery, and finally the Plains Motel about a mile on up the road. Like everything else around, it was the bare minimum—four unpainted cinderblock walls, a metal door, and a sign from Schlitz that said ROMITO'S in big red letters.

Inside it was so dark that Clifford had to wait for his eyes to adjust before he could walk across the room. Finally he saw Rick Romito behind the bar, rinsing beer mugs. His wife Karen was moving around the deserted room, setting up chairs. Clifford looked down at his watch and saw that it was four o'clock, that they must have just opened up. He felt conspicuous and embarrassed to be barging in before they got the place completely set up. Like an old wino, he thought. Can't wait to get started.

He walked up to the bar and waited for Romito to notice him. He didn't know where the guy was from; he looked Mexican, but you couldn't tell, these days. He was young, about Clifford's age, but sort of dark and withdrawn. He didn't talk much, rarely smiled, always did things his own way. A couple of cowboys from the Rodeo had gotten impatient with, him one night and started pushing him around. Romito had calmly decked one with a sap and stared at the other until he dragged his buddy away.

Romito drifted over, wiping the bar, and said, "Beer, Cliff?" Clifford nodded, accepted the draw, and set a half dollar on the counter.

"Something wrong?" Romito asked.

"Nah," Clifford said, and took his beer over to a side booth. One of the dark ones.

He could hear the rain tapping the sheet metal roof, making him feel closed in, isolated. He couldn't seem to keep his mind on anything for long, so he forced himself to go back over everything he'd done from the minute he got home. He took it slow, and thought over everything in order, and when he was through it still didn't seem real.

He heard a rig pull up outside, whining its air brakes. The drivers walked in, laughing. They shouted greetings to Romito and Karen, then started in on the weather. Clifford heard glasses clinking and the pattering beer tap.

I didn't even make her admit the guy's name, he thought. He was sure it was that Jim Stanley, that teacher, but he should have should have made her

say it anyway. He felt weak and stupid, wondered what he should have done. Killed her, probably, but he wasn't man enough.

That thought came hard. It was a new one, one he never thought he might have to apply to himself. But there it was. Not man enough to keep his woman. He wondered how he was going to be able to live with that.

He'd met Sherry when he was on football scholarship to Texas Tech. When he didn't make the team junior year, he dropped out and took Sherry with him. He could have kept the scholarship, or gotten his parents to put up the money, but he'd been too proud to take it. Besides which, he'd been in school for nearly fourteen years and he wanted a taste of the real world. And he'd liked it, even if it left Sherry feeling bored and ordinary. And sent her, Clifford figured, to that Jim Stanley for books...and other things. Books, Clifford thought. Maybe if he'd read more books he'd know what to do with himself.

Karen came by, picked up his mug. "You want another one, sugar?"

Clifford looked at her, admiring her even through his bitterness. "Better make it a pitcher."

Her jeans were tight across her bottom as she walked away, and he reacted instinctively to the sight. Some things die hard, he thought, reminding himself that she was Romito's wife. Then he thought, so what. Marriage didn't seem to count for much any more.

He looked over at the bar, saw Romito draw the pitcher for her, hand it to her. She said something to him, and he shook his head, as if apologizing. She brought the beer over, her short dark hair soaking up what little light there was. As she set the tray down, she asked, "What's eating you, lover?"

"Woman problems—what else?" He poured a beer and drank it off.

"Bad?"

"Yeah." He poured another one and sipped it, staring at the way Karen's blouse folded around her body.

"Anything I might be able to do for you?"

"Drink a beer with me?"

"Not right now." She slanted her head toward the bar. "Rick's going out to run a couple errands and I'll sit with you while he's gone. As long as we're not too busy. Okay?" She flashed him a smile.

"Okay. Thanks;" She walked back to the bar and checked on the truck drivers. Clifford watched Romito leave, amazed at the sudden warmth Karen was showing him. One of the truck drivers started up the juke box, playing a Moe Bandy number about a cheating wife. It cut Clifford like a knife in the stomach and he drank another beer, and another...

He lost all idea of time. He knew it was afternoon, could still hear the rain pounding away outside, but his body was numb. Gary Stewart came on the jukebox, singing "Backslider's Wine."

He felt he was floating in heavy oil, and was ready to let himself just sink into it when Karen's face appeared again in front of him. Her eyes were lively and green, and he managed to hang on to them and let them pull him out of his stupor.

She poured herself a beer and refilled his glass. "You're putting it away all right. Feel like talking?"

“I don’t know if there’s anything to say. When a man’s wife is cheating on him, it’s just something he’s got to settle with her.”

“Did you?”

“Did I what?”

“Settle it with her?”

Clifford stopped for a second, realized he’d already told her what he had to say. “I don’t know.” His mind was fuzzy and wouldn’t focus. Gary Stewart was singing about how he’d always thought himself a strong and loving soul, until the day he found himself face down on a barroom floor. The conversation had got off into something he wasn’t sure he understood.

“Tell me what happened,” Karen said, and Clifford looked into her eyes and told her, thinking, I should have learned something, but I haven’t. I still want this woman, and I shouldn’t even be thinking about women at all.

People were coming into the bar, had been for a while. Karen got up to wait on them, and Clifford sat helplessly as his eyes followed her.

“Son, you look like two miles of bad road.” Clifford looked up to see Andy leering at him. “That’s all right, college boy, drink up. If you need a shoulder to cry on, I’ll, be at the bar.” Andy walked away, laughing.

Easy enough for you, Clifford thought, and wondered what it took to get to Andy. Nothing short of violence ever seemed to. What would he do if he caught his wife cheating? Clifford watched him at the bar, joking with Romito, who had just come back in.

When it happened, several beers later, he didn’t know whose idea it had been, or how it had come up. But Karen had said she would meet him at the Plains Motel in an hour. Room 17, she said, it was always available. He understood that he was supposed to go and get the room, that she would join him later. That she didn’t want Romito to see them leave together.

Once outside, the chill of the rain brought him around, and he was able to drive well enough. He registered at the motel for Room 17 and took his key.

The room was dark, and chilly from too much air conditioning. He cut the unit off, got a towel from the bathroom, and rubbed his hair with it. Once the cooler was off the mustiness of the room caught up with him, smelling of age and the hundreds of couples that had come together there. Clifford pulled his boots off and lay across the bedspread, drowsy and almost relaxed.

He was dozing lightly when the tapping came at the door. He let Karen in, who kissed him quickly and shivered. “You got a towel here, darlin’?” He handed it to her, and she dried her face and hair. “I’m going to get out of these wet clothes.” She kicked off her shoes and unzipped her skirt. Clifford, his heart suddenly racing, stood behind her. As her skirt fell, he turned her to him and began unbuttoning her blouse. His face was close to hers, and he leaned in and kissed her. She responded hotly, sliding her arms around his neck. Then she pulled away with a smile and finished taking off her shirt.

Clifford undressed, watching her, feeling the kind of thrill he hadn’t known for years. Karen flung back the sheets and lay down, opening her arms for him. He made love to her fiercely, and all the while she whispered and cried in his ear, urging him on. When they were finished, she lay beside him and shared a cigarette.

"I've got to get back. Are you going to stay here?"

"Might as well. It's paid for, and I don't really want to go home."

Karen slid out from under the sheet and began to get dressed. "You're going to have to make up your mind, Cliff."

"About what?"

"About what to think about Sherry."

He stubbed out the end of his cigarette.

"Not ready to forgive her yet, are you?" she said.

"Forgive her?" Clifford said.

Karen's voice was light, but there was mockery and even a hint of temper behind it. "Well, before you climb too far up on your high horse, you might ask yourself what you were doing here tonight." She walked out and closed the door.

Clifford was stunned for a moment, then angry. He got to his feet, not drunk any more, but still light headed, and went into the bathroom. Splashing water over his face, he reached automatically for a drinking glass and tore off the paper. The sound reminded him, and he looked at the crumpled ball in his hand. Sanitized for your protection. He threw the glass at the wall and the crash startled him with its volume. Gripping the sides of the door, he swayed with the violence of his thoughts.

A radio in the distance played Ronnie Milsap. It was too late for Ronnie to worry, and he was too blue to cry.

And just that suddenly his anger was gone, leaving him drained and lonely. He got dressed and sat on the edge of the bed, nursing a half formed desire to go home.

The phone rang, jarring him.

He lifted the receiver. but didn't say anything. "Cliff?" It was Karen's voice, hushed to a whisper.

"Yes?"

"You're still there." She sounded out of breath, but relieved.

"What's going on?"

A pause. "Cliff, how hard did you hit Sherry?"

"Gave her a black eye, maybe. Why?"

"She's dead, Cliff. Beaten to death. The police were just here looking for you."

HE SET THE RECEIVER on the cheap night table and lay down. He could hear Karen's voice calling his name.

outside, the wind whistled down empty streets and blew rain against the windows. A long time passed before Clifford could think again, and when he could, his first thought was: How good are my memories? Did I kill her?

He picked up the phone again.

"Karen, tell me what happened. How did they find her? Everything you know."

"Somebody came over, heard the T V, but nobody answered the door. So they went in and found her dead. Beat up bad, they say."

"The T V was on? You're sure?"

“Yes. Why?”

“I didn’t kill her.” Saying it made him feel better, but not much.

“Somebody else did.”

After a moment Karen said, “I believe you, but the police won’t. It looks bad, Cliff.”

“Yeah. It means I’ve got to find whoever killed her by myself.”

“There’s something else,” she added.

“Yeah?”

“I’m...sorry for what I said. About you and me. You know.”

Clifford felt she had meant to say something else. “Don’t be. I had it coming. Thanks, Karen. I’ll be in touch.”

“Cliff?”

He broke the connection, then left the receiver off the hook. He had to think, and think fast. The only person who’d want Sherry dead would be her lover, in fear of Clifford getting his name from her. Or in anger, thinking she had already talked. She would have looked like Clifford had forced her to.

And that didn’t sound like Jim Stanley. He went to the bathroom and washed his face again, trying to force his mind into unaccustomed patterns. How could Stanley have known? Sherry wouldn’t have called him if he was the violent type, and he wouldn’t have come looking for her unless he knew that Clifford was out.

And the only people who knew where Clifford had been were the people in Romito’s.

Like Andy. His good buddy, who got married so he could “slip around.” Who lived just down the street. But who couldn’t have been with Sherry at the motel because he was working with Clifford at the time.

Like Karen. But why would she do it? Unless she was jealous, but Clifford didn’t think that much of himself. Or unless it wasn’t Clifford she was jealous over...

No, it wasn’t Karen. She had never had time.

And because Clifford knew who the real killer was.

He tugged his boots on and tried to figure his next move. The police were after him, so he didn’t dare show up in public, or even stay where he was any longer. But there were probably roadblocks to keep him from getting very far, either. So his best bet was to lay low someplace until it was time to make his move.

At two o’clock, eyes bloodshot and heavy with exhaustion, Clifford pulled up outside Romito’s. For the last six hours he had sat at the end of an old gravel road near Denton Creek, fighting sleep, trying to decide what he would do when he faced Sherry’s killer. At last he’d given up and watched the full moon rise through a break in the clouds.

One by one the customers filed out of the bar. Hidden in shadows across the street, Clifford watched them get into their cars and drive away. Finally Karen and Romito came out, padlocking the door behind them. Clifford started his engine.

He tried to keep his distance as he followed them home, but the effort was wasted. Romito was ready for him, and stopped at his house just long enough

for Karen to get out. She stood by the side of the road, and as Clifford shot past her he could see the anguish and fear in her face. She was waving him to stop, but he ignored her.

He cursed violently, shifting back and forth from third to high gear as he swung the pickup down the twisting road. Romito had everything to gain, and Clifford had it all to lose. If the police showed up, or Romito took him past one of their roadblocks, then Clifford would just have to keep on going. Otherwise he might never see daylight again.

Romito was heading west, away from the expressway, but taking side roads that carried them south as well. Both lanes were deserted, but slick, and Romito was driving a low slung Cadillac that hugged the pavement. Clifford felt his truck fishtailing time and again, but fought off the skids and clung to the road. They screamed up to an intersection and Romito took a hard left toward the east. Clifford, his reflexes bad, missed the turn and went off into the mud.

Yelling curses, he jammed the truck into four wheel drive and lurched out of the ditch, spurting thick mud in all directions. He knew he had lost Romito, that the chase was over. But as he rounded the turn, he saw Romito's car up ahead, slowed, holding back for him. As Clifford gained on him, Romito pulled off the road and stopped his car.

Clifford braked and pulled in behind him, adrenaline surging into his brain. The misery, the anger and fear of the night boiled up in him, and he leapt out of his truck and over to Romito's car in an instant. He grabbed the door and practically took it off the hinges as he yanked it open.

And looked into the barrel of a .38 revolver.

"You're a smart boy, Cliff," Romito said. "But not smart enough. You should know that bartenders carry guns."

"I thought you didn't need one," Clifford said. "I thought you just beat people's faces in."

"Don't get hasty. I don't want to have to kill you here and drag your body to the river. I'd rather just shoot you there."

Clifford suddenly realized where he was. He relaxed, and stepped back slowly. Then he turned and started walking toward the river. He wondered if Romito knew how close they were to the Interstate.

"Glad you see sense, Cliff. But I guess you wouldn't be here if you weren't pretty good at figuring things out."

"Yeah. I'm real smart. It took a lot of brains to figure out that you were the only one that left the bar this afternoon. You could tell from a mile away that me and Sherry had had a fight, and you knew what that meant. Why'd you kill her? To set me up? Or did you just get carried away?"

"You got a big mouth, cowboy, just like your wife. But you'll be as quiet as she is before long."

Clifford held his anger in, knowing he would need it. He lengthened his lead on Romito, just enough to force a warning: "Careful there, Clifford..." and then the moon slipped under a cloud. Clifford dove to his right and heard a shot go over his head. Then he zigzagged for the top of the hill, and heard another shot. The underbrush was damp, soaking his jeans and making it hard

to push through.

He made it over the top and saw the precast operation below, where he knew it would be. With all the strength he had he crashed through the soggy weeds, almost falling down the hill, praying for a few more seconds of darkness. Then he was into the clearing and heading for the shed at a dead run. A prickling at the back of his neck told him that he was exposed, making a clear silhouette against the gravel, but he had no other choice than to rush ahead. Another shot came, this one from only a few yards away, and Clifford felt a dull impact in his left arm that spun him around.

He fell behind a stack of concrete test cylinders, and crawled toward the side door of the shed.

I'm shot, he thought, with a calm that frightened him. He knew he had only seconds before Romito would round the corner and finish him off. On his knees, he unlocked the door and wormed inside. A shadow flickered behind him, and he knew the moon had come out again. But there were no more shots. Romito was getting cautious, probably afraid to leave a lot of bullet holes around to stir up questions. It gave Clifford an advantage he needed.

He climbed into the seat of the forklift and waited with his hand on the starter. His eyes were accustomed to the deeper gloom inside the shed, and he counted on a second or two for Romito to adjust.

Romito walked in the side door. Huddled in the shadows, Clifford held his breath. Romito paused, but failed to recognize Clifford among the dark shapes of machinery. He began to move toward the front door of the shed. Afraid to hope, Clifford felt his fingers vibrating slightly on the starter knob. The blood trickled down the inside of his arm, damp and cold, but he didn't dare shiver. All his concentration was focused on the gun in Romito's hand.

Romito crossed in front of the fork lift.

Clifford gunned the engine and threw it into forward. Romito whirled, raised the gun, but couldn't find his target. Clifford cranked up the big block of metal that held the fork, putting a shield of heavy steel between himself and the gun.

"Drop it," Clifford said, "or I swear to God I'll push you through that steel wall."

Clifford heard the pistol clatter across the floor and almost fainted from relief. He dropped the fork and stared at Romito's enraged, contorted face. With the fork at waist height, he eased out the clutch and drove the machine forward.

"What are you doing?" Romito yelled, his eyes wide with fear. "You're gonna crush me!"

The ends of the fork tore through the flimsy metal wall, pinning Romito between the machine and the steel.

Suddenly Clifford saw his own fist traveling through the air in slow motion. He saw it ram into Sherry's face. He saw her anguish, felt the pain inside of himself.

He stopped the motor.

Romito was pinned, but unhurt. It had been close, though, and it seemed

to Clifford that a couple more inches would have killed him.

Clifford picked the pistol up by the barrel and carried it over to Romito. The little man was frozen, unable to speak or even cry out as Clifford rapped him firmly across the back of the head. Clifford didn't know how hard he should hit him, but he tried not to be too rough. Romito's head slumped forward into the machine.

Clifford tossed the pistol onto the seat and walked outside. Clouds were piling up again in the sky, and the rows of steel forms looked like a line of coffins. He knew he must be in shock because his arm didn't really seem to hurt, but he knew it soon would.

He didn't hear the car pull up beside him, didn't notice Karen until she actually spoke to him.

"Clifford!"

He stopped.

"Cliff, what happened to you? Where's Rick?"

He tried to explain, but no words came out. He only knew that he could not stop, that he was a wanted man. He tried to run, and fell to his knees.

A policeman came up beside him and supported him under his good arm. "You don't have to run any more, Cliff. You're clear."

Weakness took him then, but he managed to point to the shed and mutter Romito's name.

WHEN THINGS CAME into focus again he was stretched on a hospital cart, and a doctor was treating the crease in his arm.

"It was the black eye," Karen explained. "When the doctor got there he could tell immediately that she had died a couple hours after you hit her. Which means you were at the bar, with witnesses, when she was killed. I called, but you'd already left the motel."

The policeman took Clifford's statement and Karen listened to the story of her husband's guilt without emotion. Eventually the police left them alone, and he was wheeled to a room.

Karen sat by the bed in silence, looking out the window.

"I'm sorry," Clifford said.

"Sure. Me too." She didn't try to smile.

The rain was coming down again. Clifford's thoughts spun from Karen to Romito to Sherry, aimlessly. He could find no sense in the broken thing that had been his life, and he couldn't stop looking for it. At last a nurse came in and gave him a shot.

Rain smeared the window, and a rumble of thunder sounded in the distance.