

P R I M E S

B Y L E W I S S H I N E R

1 For nearly an hour Nick had been stuck on Interstate 40, surrounded by the worst traffic he'd ever seen. He'd watched the last heat of the sun set fire to the horizon and burn out, and now the first stars were tunneling through the haze. He had one arm out the open window in the unnatural 60-degree heat of the desiccated January evening. In the better parts of his brain, to keep himself amused, he was revising the code for his new graphics driver project.

Once past the Durham Freeway, I-40 had narrowed to a two-lane bottleneck. Traffic seemed to have doubled since that morning, with two cars trying to squeeze onto the road for every one that crawled off in defeat.

He was wearing a black T-shirt from the 544 club in New Orleans, where he and Angela had danced on their honeymoon two years before. A huge diesel rig inched past him on the right. The trailer was stark white except for the rear panel, where the number 544 stood out in stark black numerals. Nick glanced down at the dashboard clock. It was 5:44. For an instant he felt an abyss of inexplicability open under him, and then he shook it off. It was a bizarre coincidence, nothing more, something to tell Angela about, if he ever made it home.

By six he was close enough to the Lake Jordan exit that he could pull onto the shoulder and ease around the motionless right hand lane. It took fifteen minutes more to cover the remaining mile and a half to his driveway, and by then he was too tired to think much about the Cadillac parked where Angela's gold Acura should have been. Her battery had been acting up, he knew, and she'd probably gotten a ride home with somebody from Duke Hospital, where she was on the faculty.

In truth, for most of that particular day, Nick had been consciously happy. Despite the endless commute, despite approaching deadlines on his driver, the components of his life were laid out in what seemed a comfortable and sustainable order. He and Angela had no debts except the house, and they'd nearly paid that off. They'd both weathered the latest flu epidemic and were back to full health. And Thursday was Nick's night to cook. His attention was already shifting from traffic and programming to the free-range chicken and sour cream and tortillas waiting in the refrigerator to be transformed into *enchiladas suizas*.

The fear didn't fully hit him until he climbed out of the truck and saw the color of the door that he was about to slam shut.

His beautiful white pickup truck was bright red, red as a stoplight, red as blood.

He'd been driving that pickup for four years, from the time before he'd moved to North Carolina and met and married Angela. He'd bought it back in Austin, where a white paint job could make the difference of a few crucial degrees in the inside temperature under the Texas sun. It had been white

when he'd gotten into it in the office parking lot at a quarter to five. He knew himself to be sober, drug-free, and possessed of a clean bill of psychiatric health. It was simply not possible that the truck was red.

He tried to remember if he'd noticed the hood of the truck while he was driving home. It had been dark and he hadn't been paying attention. He looked at the key in his hand. It was the wrong size and shape and there were no other keys with it. His hand lunged reflexively for his pocket and found nothing there. All of his pockets were empty: no wallet, no checkbook, no change.

He searched the red truck. It too was empty except for a jack behind the seat and an owner's manual in the glove compartment. It could be a rental, he thought. Maybe he'd been in an accident that damaged his short term memory, and nobody had realized it. Maybe he'd absentmindedly left his wallet somewhere.

He started to run for the house, his shoes slapping awkwardly at the sidewalk. The front door was locked and he pounded on it with the flat of his hand until he heard the lock click and felt the door swing inward.

The man who opened it was in his thirties, tall and fit looking, with an angular face and fair receding hair. He wore a long-sleeved blue oxford-cloth shirt, crisply pressed khakis, tasseled loafers. He had a drink in his left hand. He looked Nick over and stepped aside to let him in. "Angela?" the man said, looking behind him, "I believe Nick has arrived."

The accent, as Nick knew it would be, was cultivated British. Nick had seen the man's photo in one of Angela's albums that dated back to before Nick's time with her. His name, Nick knew, was David. He was Angela's first husband, and he'd died in 1995.

2 "David Graham," David said, extending his hand. "I expect you're a little surprised to see me here."

"I thought you were dead," Nick told him, looking down to find he'd gripped David's hand by sheer reflex.

"Ah. Angela said much the same thing."

Nick backed into the living room and sat on the couch to ease the trembling in his legs. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm afraid I live here, actually."

Angela appeared in the doorway that led into the kitchen and leaned against the jamb, arms folded. She was still in her hospital scrubs and Nick couldn't help noticing, as he always did, how that shade of green set off the red-gold in her hair. A little mascara and eyebrow pencil would have made her conventionally beautiful, but she disdained makeup and so instead her appeal was more subtle. It had taken Nick all of a minute and a half—the interval between the first time he met her and the first time he managed to make her laugh—to be overwhelmed by it.

Nick tried and failed to read her mood through the barricade of her posture. David, on the other hand, was as transparent as glass. He looked at Angela with wonder, longing, and a fading glow of residual despair.

“Is anybody going to tell me what the hell is going on here?” Nick heard his voice go shrill in the particular way that inspired him to self-loathing.

“It’s not just here,” Angela said. “It’s all over the news.”

“So you just, what, came home, saw David, and turned on CNN for an explanation?” In fact it wouldn’t have surprised him. She found her stability in the calm urgency of the newscasters, in the way they stood between mere mortals and the avalanche of information that threatened to bury all of civilization.

“I got home at four-thirty. About an hour later I went out to get something from my car and it was gone, and there was some strange car in the driveway instead. I got freaked and came in and tried to call the police, but all the lines were tied up. That’s when David walked in on me.” She stopped for a second, and Nick could see her fast-forward through her emotions. “At that point we knew something big was happening.” She turned away. “Come on in and see.”

Nick followed them meekly into the den and sat on the sofa between them. He was just in time for a recap of the day’s top story.

Between five and six in the afternoon, Eastern Time, the population of the east coast of North America had doubled, as had the population of the western bulge of South America, which lay along the same longitude. The phenomenon seemed to be spreading westward at the same rate the Earth revolved.

Nick understood that what he was hearing was true, believed it on a cellular level, but he couldn’t find a handle for his emotions. The scale of the disaster seemed to overshadow his own confusion and panic.

“I’ve checked the other stations,” Angela said, answering a question he hadn’t needed to ask. “If it’s a hoax, they’re all in on it.”

“It’s not a hoax,” Nick said. He glanced at David. “You know it’s not a hoax.”

“With some significant exceptions,” said CNN anchor Judy Woodruff, “every human being in the affected area—which now includes Chicago, Memphis, and eastern edge of New Orleans—now seems to have an exact double.” The camera panned to a duplicate Judy Woodruff in a canvas chair at the edge of the set, patting nervously at her shoulder-length blonde hair.

The scene shifted to Bernard Shaw interviewing his double on a Washington DC street corner that was sliding into chaos. In the background, abandoned cars stood with their doors open as pedestrians swarmed without apparent purpose between them. Half of the people in the crowd had twins standing somewhere near them. What struck Nick was that not all the pairs wore the same clothes, and some had radically different outfits or hair styles. The picture jumped periodically as someone from the alarmed, but not yet hysterical, mob collided with the camera operator.

“So what are these ‘significant exceptions’ she was talking about?” Nick asked Angela. “Is that us? And where did David come from?”

“David lives here,” David said.

“They don’t know yet,” Angela said. “Shhhhh.”

The street scene ended abruptly, and during a second or so of on-screen darkness Nick heard the ambient noise of an impending press conference: chairs shifting, throats clearing. “We’re live,” somebody said, and then the screen cleared to show a generic wood-grain folding table under harsh fluorescent lights. Two identical men sat at the table, each with long dark hair and a single diamond stud in his left ear. A young woman reporter Nick didn’t recognize said, “We’re here at MIT with the Doctors Jason Berlin of the theoretical physics department. Gentlemen, I understand you have a theory to explain the bizarre events we’ve seen tonight.”

“Merely a hypothesis,” said the Dr. Berlin on Nick’s left. “Have you ever heard of something called the ‘Many Worlds’ interpretation of quantum physics?”

“I’m not sure,” the reporter said. “Was it ever on *Star Trek*?”

“Frequently, as a matter of fact,” said the Dr. Berlin on the right. “It’s a sort of thought experiment that postulates an infinite number of universes parallel to our own, in which all possibilities are real.”

The other Dr. Berlin nodded. “Exactly. And every possibility splits off a new world. For instance, you might have a world where the Axis Powers won the Second World War. Or where Fidel Castro played major league baseball.”

The reporter said, “What does that have to do with what we’re seeing tonight?”

The first doctor leaned forward. “Picture our Earth, and then a second Earth that’s almost identical, but not quite. Call it, I don’t know, call it Earth Prime. In one of them Bill Clinton is President, in the other it’s Dan Quayle.”

“Dan Quayle?” Nick asked. “Is he kidding?”

Angela shushed him again.

“There’ll be other differences,” the second doctor said. “Some people will have died in one world and not in the other. Two otherwise identical people will have different jobs, different spouses. Now suppose these two universes, that had split off at some point in the past, merged together again.”

“How could that happen?” the reporter asked.

“I have no idea. Maybe the universe is downsizing.” The crowd, which had been buzzing with low conversation, now erupted in nervous laughter. “But you’d see what we’re seeing—most people would be duplicated, though with all kinds of subtle variations.”

“Why isn’t it happening all at once?” the reporter asked. “Why only people? Why no trees or cats or skyscrapers?”

The first doctor shrugged and the second said, “Frankly, we’re at a bit of a loss to explain that just yet.”

“Back to you, Judy,” the reporter said. “Or is that Judy Prime?”

Angela hit the mute button and sat for a moment, as if gathering herself. Then she looked past Nick to David and said, “Tell me. How did I die?”

3 David got up and refilled his glass from the liquor cabinet under the TV. Then he sat down again and said, “Car crash. The brakes were bad on the Mazda, and you insisted on going out in the rain to rent a film. We had a bit of a row about it, actually, and I only gave in because I felt like I was

coming down with something and I wasn't up to getting wet. You ... you slid through a stop sign." He took a drink. "A sixteen-year-old girl hit you broadside. They pronounced you dead at the scene."

"In my world," Angela said, "you went out for the movie. A movie you didn't even want."

The rising tide of emotion threatened to wash Nick out to sea. "Excuse me," he said, and went to the kitchen.

There he discovered that the refrigerator was wrong. No orange juice, no 7-Up, no raw materials for enchiladas. Instead he found two six packs of Heineken, a pizza box, some leftover Chinese takeout, a few half-pint bottles of Perrier. Over the hum of the refrigerator he heard David, his voice choked with emotion, say, "My life ended that night."

Nick closed the refrigerator and stared at his reflection in the window above the kitchen sink. "My life ended that night," he mouthed, and watched himself mime putting a finger down his throat. Then he washed his face in the sink, trying to scrub away the fear and jealousy and despair.

As he turned from the sink, looking for someplace to throw his paper towels, he saw that morning's *News and Observer* on the butcher block table. The headline read, "Quayle apologizes for State of Union blunder."

"Oh my God," Nick said.

It was not, then, a merger of two worlds. It was a hostile takeover where one world vanished and one remained. The trees and cats and skyscrapers the reporter had been talking about belonged to someone other than Nick. David was not the intruder; like he'd been saying all along, David lived here.

Nick looked at Angela where she sat in highly-charged conversation with David on the couch and did the math. Angela was not an intruder here either, world of origin notwithstanding. There was only one person who didn't fit in the equation, and Nick had been staring at his reflection only moments before.

5 Nick had caught Angela on the rebound, and he knew he'd never have had a chance with her otherwise. He'd still been in Austin when David died, still been married to his first wife, still involved in an affair that was about to turn publicly sour in a narrow circle of acquaintance. He was writing code then for a small software house called Computics and thinking more and more about North Carolina.

Computics had a customer named Richard who sold medical information systems in the Raleigh area. On a business trip in 1995 Richard had shown Nick around the Triangle and Nick had been impressed with how green everything was, how it rained even in August. Summer rain in Texas was only a distant memory. When everything fell apart in Austin the next year—divorce, threats of more layoffs at Computics, another summer of rationed water and parched brown lawns—Nick packed it in and headed east. Richard helped him find a job and an apartment, and at his New Year's party four months later he introduced Nick to Angela.

Nick was graceful for a man his size, and he'd taken the trouble to dress well that night: charcoal suit, silk tie, cufflinks. Somehow he summoned the

nerve to ask Angela to dance. She'd been drinking for the first time since David's funeral that June and it was the champagne that said yes.

A year and a half into the marriage Nick insisted on therapy, where Angela complained that Nick was too much in control, that he wanted her but didn't need her, that he didn't truly need anyone. In the third week she admitted that she loved Nick, but not in the way she'd loved David. She was afraid to love anyone that much again.

Nick slept in the guest house for a month or so after that, wanting to leave but imprisoned by his desire for her. Finally that desire became stronger than his anger and they began to make love again. He moved back into the bedroom and their attempt at therapy became, like David, one more thing they didn't discuss. Life was good again, or at least comfortable, until one day he came home and his pickup was red and David was waiting for him in the living room.

7 David fixed mushroom omelets and they ate on TV trays in the den. Nick suppressed the thought that this was how the world ended, with neither bang nor whimper, but with CNN analyzing it to death.

After dinner Nick did the dishes and then took the portable phone into the darkened formal living room. The lines were jammed, but after half an hour he managed to reach his mother in San Antonio. She was fine, she said, but this duplicate version of herself kept following her around and talking incessantly. Nick nodded silently; his father was dead, then, in this world too. His mother supposed she would just have to put up with the inconvenience. Then the duplicate got on the phone and seemed unable to understand why he wasn't calling from Austin.

After he hung up he sat in the darkness for a long time. Eventually he switched the phone on again, and after a dozen attempts got through to directory assistance. He tried Raleigh, Durham, and Chapel Hill without finding a listing for his name. He tried again in Austin and this time the computer-generated voice recited a phone number—not his old one, but an exchange that Nick recognized as West Lake Hills, a big step up from his old neighborhood east of I-35.

That knowledge made it even harder to call. He could hear a voice saying, "I wondered when I'd hear from you," a tired and put-upon voice that Nick suddenly realized was that of his father, the fat, balding, sweaty and selfish man Nick had spent his whole life trying not to turn into.

If it had been the other way around, if Nick had been flush and his other self in Austin broke and desperate, Nick would have reached out to him in a heartbeat. But this way, to have to call from a position of weakness, even with no intent of asking for help, was more than he could bring himself to do.

He put the phone down, an immense sense of loss flowering slowly in his mind. He went out the sliding glass door at the back of the kitchen and crossed the patio to the guest apartment, a free-standing building that in Texas he would have called an *abuelita*, a grandmother's house. It was unlocked. He switched on the light to face what his logical mind had assured him he would find there: all of his books gone, all his vinyl albums and CDs, the bookshelves

he'd put together and stained by hand, the Heathkit amp he'd built in college, his Math Cup from high school, all gone.

David's guest house instead contained a chair, a double bed with a white chambray spread and no headboard, a pair of framed Impressionist prints on the walls. A green banker's lamp bowed over the night stand, resting on top of a 1997 almanac and a John Grisham novel.

Nick sat on the bed and closed his eyes. When he opened them again, the room hadn't changed. It was full of absence. No favorite T-shirts, no photos of old girlfriends, no plastic model of the Space Shuttle from eighth grade. Every physical object that meant anything to him was gone.

11 By the time Nick got back to the den, the many-worlds theory of the Doctors Berlin had expanded to fill the gap left by any other rational explanation. CNN now referred to the crisis as the "Prime Event" and their art department had produced a graphic showing twin Earths just touching edges inside an infinity symbol.

At seven p.m. eastern time, CNN estimated the population of Mexico City at 60 million, a figure Nick could not meaningfully comprehend. Much of the city was on fire by 8:00 and the smoke, on top of the already lethal pollution, quickly sent population estimates downward. The sidewalks were choked with corpses of the very young and very old, and the reporters began to speak in hushed voices about typhus and cholera.

Despite warnings, LA drivers began to head out into the worst traffic jam in California history. Meanwhile, gang members cruised the fringes of enemy turf, waiting to mow down newly arrived doubles of rival gang members as they appeared. "Too many f*cking Crips already, man," a young Blood told reporters, his "fuck" censored by a faint beep. "I ain't sharing with no f*cking Primes."

Airline traffic had come to a complete halt as nearly empty planes disappeared from airport gates and hangers, only to land minutes later fully laden with Primes. There were no rental cars, hotel rooms, or clean public rest rooms to be found in North America. Restaurants were out of food, service stations out of gas, ATMs out of money.

Eight o'clock Thursday night in Durham was 3 a.m. Friday in Moscow and along the Palestinian border; 5 a.m. in Sarajevo; ten in the morning in Beijing. Around the world everyone was poised for 5 p.m. ethnic cleansing time, taking an example from the LA gangs, or more likely not needing one.

At nine Angela switched to a local channel and learned that banks were limiting withdrawals to \$100 per day per account, and holding all checks until the federal government told them exactly what their exposure was. Meanwhile local police departments asked all off-duty officers—prime or otherwise—to show up for night duty at banks, groceries, convenience stores, malls, and emergency rooms.

At ten o'clock Nick stood up. "Look, I can't just sit here and watch this anymore."

Angela stared at him as if he'd lost his mind. "This is only the most devastating event since, what, the extinction of the dinosaurs?"

“At least the dinosaurs didn’t sit around watching comet reports on CNN,” Nick said. “I can’t do anything about what’s happening, and I can’t just sit here and passively soak up any more second-hand pain and suffering. I’m full up.”

Nick saw he was keeping Angela from the next round of disasters. He turned to David and said, “I know I don’t have any right to ask this...”

“Of course you’ll stay here,” David said. “Take the guest house for as long as you need. I should think you already know where everything is.”

“Yes. Thank you.” The less charitable part of Nick’s personality knew David wouldn’t think of turning them out, not while Angela was part of the equation.

He picked up a handful of newspapers and magazines in the living room and went back outside.

13 He was exhausted, and he badly wanted Angela to find him asleep if she did happen to look in. Two troubled marriages had taught him that sleeping well could indeed be the best revenge, but that night his twitchy nerves made it hopeless. After half an hour of flinging himself from one side of the bed to the other he switched on the banker’s lamp and reached for the almanac.

He verified that Dan Quayle was President, impossible as it had seemed at first. In this universe—David’s World, as he’d come to think of it, not without bitterness—Clinton had been caught *en flagrante* two days before the 1992 election and the press had crucified him. Bush had not only won, but solidified a new era of conservatism. Quayle rode the rising backlash against affirmative action, foreigners, feminism, and welfare straight into the White House.

What surprised Nick was how little difference it had made in the end. *Time* magazine featured Saddam, Tony Blair, and Nelson Mandela cheek to jowl with faces Nick had never seen before: a Father Dominguez who was leading an armed insurrection in the Yucatan; Selma Jones, US ambassador to China, who was urging favored nation status for the totalitarian regime; Davy Davis, teen heartthrob, who had the Ricky Nelson role in the upcoming feature film version of *Ozzie and Harriet*. But for all he knew, Selma Jones had been ambassador to China in his world as well, and Nick had never kept up with matinee idols.

The thing that really seized his attention was a three-page spread on the man who’d just been anointed the richest in the world: Harvey Chambers, CEO of the Computics empire headquartered in Austin, Texas.

Nick, like everyone else in the business, had many times heard the story of the Xerox Palo Alto Research Center and the point-and-click interface they’d invented for one of their pipe-dream projects. In Nick’s World, Steve Jobs saw a demo and went home to build the first Macintosh. Bill Gates saw the Mac, and then there was Windows.

In David’s World Harvey Chambers saw the demo first. He was a comics fan, so instead of windows his operating system had “panels,” and instead of dialog boxes it had “captions” and “balloons.” Parents didn’t get it, but kids did, and the first computer-savvy generation grew up on Computics.

Chambers avoided Apple's fatal error and licensed out his hardware designs to third party vendors, concentrating his own efforts on software—first games, then study aids, then office suites, growing up with his customers. Jobs and Gates never had a chance.

Like Gates in the world Nick came from, Chambers was locked in a battle with the Department of Justice. With a Republican that Chambers had helped elect in the White House, presiding over a Republican Congress, Justice never had a chance.

In Nick's World, Computics had never pioneered anything. Chambers had sold the struggling company in the late eighties and retired to Mexico to do some serious drinking. The people who'd known him said he'd had too much ambition and too little luck, a combination they thought would kill him in the end.

Nick's rich double in Austin no doubt worked for this gleaming, world-beating Computics, pickup long ago traded for a hunter green sport utility, the *Wall Street Journal* delivered every morning so he could check his stocks as he sat in his overstuffed leather armchair, careful to avoid wrinkling his Brooks Brothers suit. It was a scab Nick should have been able to pick at successfully for quite a while, but instead his attention kept drifting to more fundamental questions.

Like how he was going to live, for one. Angela would have work—it didn't take a Nostradamus to predict a shortage of doctors. The computer industry, however, looked like it could be in a serious recession as people concentrated on the basics of food, shelter, and transportation. All the things Nick no longer had.

The thought of the Angela-shaped hole in this world brought him to the toughest question of all. He and Angela. Angela and David.

He woke at some point before dawn with Angela curled into his back, holding him. The knowledge of something terribly wrong nagged at his memory, just within reach, but he shied away from it and dove back into sleep.

17 David was the perfect gentleman. He made breakfast for Nick in the morning while Angela slept in, and gave him a robe to put on after his shower. He even found a couple of old T-shirts and a pair of sweat pants that Nick was able to fit into. While Nick tried to wake up, David went about his business, making reassuring noises on the phone to his most important clients without communicating any real data. He seemed to function in some gray area between the law and finance, and Nick was content not to know any more than that. "It's too early to tell," David said into the phone, to one client after another. "We'll just have to see how this all falls out."

On the news that morning they had an explanation, of sorts, for the red pickup. The two Doctors Berlin, now instant celebrities, were explaining the situation in terms of conservation of angular momentum (the primes who appeared in cars or planes were already moving at a high rate of speed) and conservation of mass and energy in a closed system (twice as many people, but only the same number of cars, planes, bicycles, and so on). Anyone who'd

been driving at the time of the Prime Event had ended up in a car from David's World that wasn't in use at the time. Cars had disappeared from dealerships and rental agencies and even locked garages, then turned up on the highway with people like Nick behind the wheel.

"Improbable as this sounds," one of the doctors said on the TV in the next room, "there's a precedent for matter relocating itself like this. All the way back in 1964, Bell's Theorem projected this kind of behavior from subatomic particles into the macrocosmic world."

Meanwhile, repo agents were already out in force, and the reporters expected steady growth in that sector of the economy for at least the next few weeks.

The news didn't help the clenched feeling in the pit of Nick's stomach. He watched Angela stumble in and sit at the kitchen table with a cup of coffee and knew he had to get moving. If he went back to bed and pulled the covers over his head like he wanted to, he might never come out. The next time David was between calls, Nick said, "I'm going in to work."

"Why?" Angela said.

"Because I have to at least try. I can't just keep sitting here."

"Be careful," David said. "They say traffic is even worse today than last night."

Nick bent over to kiss Angela goodbye and she turned away at the last second, putting one arm around his neck and squeezing briefly. Her self-consciousness was palpable and Nick attributed it to David being there in the room, watching. Nothing had happened between Angela and David yet, Nick was sure, but he knew he was an idiot to walk out and leave them alone there together.

Nonetheless he turned away and started toward the door, and David followed him. "Listen," David said, and Nick turned to see him holding out two twenty-dollar bills. "Think of it as a loan, if you must. You can't go out there with empty pockets."

He was right, of course. Nick had no idea how much gas there was in the truck, and he had nothing to take for lunch. "Thanks," he said, the word leaving a numb spot on his tongue.

He turned the red pickup around and waited at the head of the driveway until, with a resigned nod and a flick of the hand, a middle-aged man finally let him join the slow parade of cars. On the commercial stations the drive-to-work crews hashed over the news with morbid humor, inviting people to call in with their most humiliating prime story. Nick escaped to a university station playing Mozart.

What most surprised him were the numbers of people on foot. Most were men, some with their thumbs out, some just walking with their heads down, postures closed against the morning chill. There was menace in the hard metal of the other cars, and Nick kept turning the radio down because he thought he heard something: a collision, a scream.

Just before the 54/55 exit, he saw a late model Honda and a Ford Explorer pulled over on the shoulder and two men, one black, one white, shoving and grabbing at each other beside the cars. As Nick slowly rolled past he could see

the tight, weary expressions on their faces. Two miles later he saw a squad car stopped on the westbound side, and a cop forcing someone face down onto the hood.

For minutes at a time, one or another of the walking men would keep pace with Nick's truck as it inched forward. Once Nick turned his head and found one of the men staring in at him through the passenger window. The man's gaze was flat, empty of emotion. As if, Nick thought, the absence of hope had stranded him in an eternal present, without envy or expectation. Nick averted his eyes, his desire to offer a ride utterly quashed by the images of violence he'd seen throughout the long night on the television screen, and by the ugliness he'd already witnessed that morning through the windshield of his truck.

He made it to the office in just under two hours. The front desk was deserted when he first walked in, then John, the slight, middle-aged receptionist, ducked out of the conference room and looked at him blankly. "Can I ... help you with something?"

"Is Lisa in?" Lisa was the owner, and Richard had introduced her to Nick on his first trip to North Carolina. There was a chance she might remember him.

"Everyone's in a company meeting now," he said.

"Is this about the prime business? Because until yesterday I worked here. Your name is John Fanthorpe and your father was a logger in Oregon. Lisa's kids are named Spike and Janet. The alarm on the back door goes off every morning at 8:31 and nobody will drink the coffee when Dave Lee makes it."

John thought it over while Nick counted silently to five. "You might as well come in," he said at last.

Nick stood against one wall and scanned the room. He knew all but two of the fifty or so people there. Almost all of them were sitting in pairs, and some of the ones from Nick's world met his eyes and nodded. Both Dave Lees, Nick noticed, had on identical black jeans, black running shoes, and black 3dfx T-shirts.

One Lisa sat in the audience. The other Lisa stood at the front of the room and said, "You have to keep in mind that we're a small company, and a lot of federal guidelines don't apply here. Hell, you know as well as I do there aren't any federal regulations to cover this kind of mess. So what it comes down to is, I'm going to do whatever I think is best for the company, because in the long run that's going to do the most good for the greatest number of you all.

"I've got to sit down and crunch some numbers and make some decisions. So what I want everybody to do is to go on home." There were groans from the audience. "I know, it took you hours to get here. But you should all be home with your families right now. I will call each and every one of you before five o'clock today, Bell South and GTE willing, so that means any of you primes that aren't staying with your originals, come up here and give me a number where I can get hold of you."

Nick had heard the TV reporters distinguish between "primes" and "originals" but it sounded different when it was his job on the line. It sounded like there was no point in signing up.

“That’s it,” Lisa said. “Everybody go home, try and be cool, wait for this thing to shake itself out. I’m not even going to ask for questions because there aren’t enough answers to go around right now.”

Hands went up anyway and one or two people started sentences with “What about...”

Lisa shook her head decisively. “I’m serious, people. I’ll talk to you all one-on-one later today.” She held up one placating hand and left the room.

Nick forced himself to get in line and put his name and David’s phone number on the legal pad. The Lisa who’d been sitting in the audience came up behind him. “Hey, Nick. I looked over the employee list and didn’t see your name.”

“Apparently I’m still in Texas,” Nick told her. Lisa had been all right for an owner. She didn’t pretend to be one of the gang, but she didn’t distance herself either. Her office door was open most of the time, which meant on bad days Nick had been able to hear her yelling into the phone all the way back to his office. She was about fifty, with purplish-black skin and the first traces of gray in her short, stiff hair.

“Uh oh,” she said sympathetically.

“Yeah. Kind of takes a bite out of my seniority.”

“You want some coffee or anything? It’s not bad, Dave Lee didn’t make it.”

“No thanks. I got a long drive coming up.”

They sat on two of the folding chairs and Lisa said, “I’ll tell you what. I don’t think seniority or equal opportunity or even friendship is going to matter much. I know what I’d do in her place. If I could have two Dave Lees and lose a few entry-level programmers to do it, I wouldn’t hesitate. Especially since I could probably get the second Dave dirt cheap.”

“And let’s face it, who would know better than you what she’d do?”

“Indeed.”

“So what happens to you?”

“Lisa’s putting me and the kids up for the time being. My guess is she’s going to offer me some kind of a buyout. The thing is, the old definitions of wealth are probably going to cease to matter much. Don’t get me wrong—I’m sure the same people are going to be on top, probably by a greater margin than ever, but the units of measure are going to change. Nobody knows yet what that measure is going to be, but the more liquid it is, the more likely it is to carry the day. So if she offers me a big wad of stock, it’s probably not going to hurt her much to do it. She can salve her conscience on the cheap, and I’ll have to take it, because what choice do I have? Which means I have to find a way to turn that stock into something to eat and a place to sleep.” She drained her coffee cup, which featured Gary Larson cartoon dinosaurs. “What about you?”

“My situation is a bit complicated. Angela’s ex-husband is alive here and her double isn’t. I think she’s going to have to make a choice, and ... let’s just say my seniority isn’t looking that good anywhere.”

“Maybe seniority won’t matter there, either.”

“Yeah. We can always hope, right?”

And hope did, in fact, die hard, Nick realized, as he found himself headed toward his old office as if he would find some trace of himself there. Instead he found a fierce-looking young woman with black hair and a thin face, staring at the computer screen and typing with blinding speed. She had her own posters on the wall, no plants, no stereo. There would be no email for Nick on her machine, no code for his new graphics driver.

On the way out he ran into Tom, his project leader. Tom was heavy and graying, with a bristling white mustache. He and Nick had been friends, but never particularly close.

“Hey, Nick,” he said.

“Thereby identifying yourself,” Nick said, “as the Prime Tom.”

Tom nodded. “A bunch of us fifth wheels are talking about having a picnic tomorrow over at Lake Crabtree. Start around noon or so, go on all day. Everybody bring what they can. Maybe take our minds off things for a little while.”

“I’ll just have to see,” Nick told him. “Tomorrow seems like a million years away right now.”

19 It took Nick less than an hour and a half to get back to Hope Valley Road. As he idled past the bank which no longer held any of his money, he watched a National Guardsman in full riot gear turn people away from the cash machine, which bore a hand-lettered sign reading “Out of Service.”

“It’s a fucking lie!” a woman was screaming. Tears were running down her face and she was waving her A T M card in the Guardsman’s face. “There’s nothing wrong with that machine except the greedy bastards who shut it down!” The Guardsman was faceless behind his Plexiglas mask, but Nick could read the nervousness in his posture.

Nick looked away. The two twenties in his pants pockets had a palpable weight. The urge to drive to Food Lion and squander the entire forty dollars on candy bars and balloons and toys almost overwhelmed him. Being an adult was more of a burden than he could carry. He wanted someone to take him by the hand and either beat hell out of him or tell him everything was going to be all right.

Instead he drove back to David’s house and the chilly comfort of C N N .

On Headline News, the world’s religious leaders stepped up for their share of the limelight. “If God had no hand in this,” Pat Robertson asked, “then who put these drivers into automobiles to guard their safety? Who put these passengers into airplanes? Science can’t explain what’s happened to us in the last twenty-four hours. Life is a miracle, and we’ve just seen six billion miracles in a single day.”

Anchor Lynne Russell noted, without comment, that the whereabouts of only one Pat Robertson was known. Whether the one who addressed the nation was original or prime was likewise a mystery.

Twin Dalai Lamas, from separate encampments, each declared the other to be but *maya*, illusion, a physical manifestation of earthly greed. The Pope,

meanwhile, had gone into seclusion with his prime, intimating that they might be a while.

On the scientific side of the fence, the EPA issued a statement pointing out that the simple body heat of an additional six billion people, not to mention the carbon dioxide they exhaled, could escalate global warming catastrophically. One source speculated that the entire land surface of the planet could be desert within ten years.

The global population continued to drop rapidly, however. The combined overnight death toll from Bosnia, Kazakhstan, Jordan, Somalia, and Mexico was already estimated in the tens of millions, with no end in sight. Large portions of LA, London, and Moscow were on fire, while Mexico City had burned out from lack of oxygen. Australia and New Zealand had both closed their borders, turning back all incoming sea and air traffic while ferrying foreign tourists out of both countries on nationalized Qantas planes.

President Quayle, not knowing what else to do with him, had appointed the Bill Clinton from Nick's world as Special Advisor on Prime Affairs. The "Affairs" part had commentators sniggering. The two emerged at 5:00 eastern time to announce the formation of the US Peacekeeping Force, a new organization that would incorporate existing members of the Army, National Guard, and local police forces, plus anyone else who wanted to volunteer. The government promised all recruits three meals a day, a place to sleep, their nation's gratitude, and pay in the form of government scrip to be redeemed when the crisis was over.

"That's it," David said. "They just flushed the dollar down the loo."

At the inevitable press conference, with a freshly minted USPF logo on a banner behind him, Quayle said, "The mission of this force is to protect private property, safeguard human life, and provide an orderly." He squinted at his TelePrompTer. "Transition."

"Property first, of course," David said, and Nick felt a surge of warmth toward him.

"Transition to what?" Angela asked.

"Martial law," Nick said. "God help us all."

Helicopter footage showed an unbroken line of the desperate and homeless that stretched from Mexico City to the Texas border—cars, bicycles, pedestrians, wagons, horses. Somebody had blown up the International Bridge at Laredo in the early morning hours. The US Border Patrol blamed right-wing extremists and the Governor of Tamulipas blamed the US Border Patrol. The loss of the bridge made no perceptible difference. The tidal wave of humanity rolled across the Rio Grande like it was a mud puddle, and refugees simply swarmed over the few cops who were willing to open fire.

"In Austin, Texas," Russell said, "billionaire Harvey Chambers has become a one-man Works Progress Administration." Nick had been drifting into his own alarming fantasies of Quayle's personal New World Order, but the mention of Austin brought him back. The screen showed what seemed to be thousands of workers outside a huge complex of steel and glass towers. As one crew cleared live oaks and mesquite bushes in a long straight line, a second

crew came behind them, digging a shallow trench. In the background still more workers unloaded massive blocks of stone from flatbed trucks.

In the foreground, a young male reporter in khakis and a polo shirt turned to the camera and said, “Offering good pay, hot food, and accommodations at a Tent City of his own creation, Chambers has commissioned a large-scale building project on his Computics campus. Though Chambers hasn’t released any details of what he’s up to, it doesn’t take one of his resident geniuses to make an informed guess. It looks to be a very high, very thick wall, and with the visitors headed his way from south of the border, he may need it.”

An hour later, as Nick was washing the dinner dishes, the phone rang. David didn’t answer so Nick let the machine take it. “This is a message for Nick,” Lisa’s voice said. “I’m sorry, but we’re not going to be able to find a place for you. I’m sure you appreciate the situation.” Nick could hear her relief that she didn’t have to break the news to him directly. “If you haven’t heard, though, the government is going to have jobs for anybody who needs one.”

23 Nick woke at seven the next morning, cranky and sullen. He’d been dreaming about deserts and sandstorms, and in the middle of it all a pyramid with Computics logos carved into its sides.

Angela murmured something unintelligible and turned her back to him as he got out of bed. He dressed and went over to the main house, shivering a little in the distinctly colder morning air. David was still not up, so Nick made coffee and brought in the paper. Enjoy this, he told himself. Solitude is now the most precious commodity on Earth.

The front page told him that the USPF was an instant hit. The government, cleverly anticipating that they wouldn’t have enough guns or uniforms to go around, had declared that volunteers were to provide their own uniforms of blue jeans and white shirts. Their commanders would issue them red bandannas. They were encouraged to bring along their own personal weapons.

In separate, but nearly identical statements, two Ralph Naders warned that there was little difference between the USPF and licensed vigilantism. Any unstable person with a piece of red cloth and a gun could wreak unchallenged havoc. The reporter covering the story dismissed him as a harmless crank.

Saturday had always been Nick’s favorite day of the week. Just seven days ago he’d cooked his strawberry mint crepes in his special pan and sat on the patio in the sun to eat them. This Saturday he spread the classifieds—reduced to eight pages from the usual two dozen—across the dining room table and looked for work.

There were personal ads, mostly from primes looking for missing persons. Auto dealers were looking for temporary repossession specialists and drivers. And there was still plenty of work for telemarketers. The rest of world seemed to be holding its breath.

David eventually wandered in and logged on to his Internet provider so Nick could check job listings on the Web. The Web seemed largely unfazed by the Prime Event. And why not? Nick thought. There was no shortage of room in cyberspace. Ads for electronic stock trading services still popped up

everywhere. On ZDNet, Jesse Berst—now with two photos of himself at the head of his column—asked his readers if it was the end of life as they knew it or simply the biggest stunt yet by Harvey Chambers and Computics to stall the Justice Department. The AltaVista search engine invited Nick to ask a question like, “Where did all these people come from?”

He found half a dozen openings for C++ developers in the area, though he suspected most of them were no longer viable. He switched over to the Computics Writer program, figured out the slightly cheesy interface, and put together a quick resume. If he had to fill out a job application, he wondered, would there be a box to check if you were a Prime?

By the time he'd emailed the copies of his resume it was after noon. Angela, puffy and uncommunicative, was watching CNN with David. Special Presidential Advisor Bill Clinton was addressing protesters at the Washington Mall. “I'm a Prime just as many of you are,” he said. “I know your sense of dislocation and anxiety.”

The crowd jeered and shouted insults.

Clinton raised his hands. “I urge you to return to your homes. This disruption is only delaying our efforts to bring help to those of you who need it the most.” Clinton's words disappeared under a chorus of heckling, and finally he shrugged and walked away with his head down, surrounded by bodyguards in dark suits.

Voices began to chant, “No justice, no peace,” over and over. Nick could hear growing alarm in the voices of the CNN reporters, and then, moments later, the crowd seemed to buck, like a single organism reacting to a shock. The camera swung wildly around to show a wedge of USPF recruits in white shirts and red bandannas, swinging clubs and baseball bats and firing something into the air. The screen filled with smoke from pepper spray and tear gas, leaving sound as the only evidence of what was happening: screams, grunts, the sound of wood impacting flesh, the muted thunder of running feet. Nick, horrified, covered his ears and went into the bathroom, running water in the sink to mask the noise of the TV.

When he came out he had decided to go to the picnic at Lake Crabtree. He had real friends there, and friendship seemed less contingent than everything else in his life at that moment. He got all the way to the hall closet, looking for his softball and glove, before he remembered that he wouldn't find them there.

He stuck his head back into the den, where CNN had moved on to the next atrocity and David and Angela were in the midst of a heated discussion. “...has nothing of real value to back it up,” David was saying. “There's no disincentive to inflation.”

“Where have you been for the last thirty years?” Angela was leaning forward aggressively, but Nick could see she was enjoying herself. “Money isn't real. It's a necessary fiction that everybody's bought into for the sake of the game. There's nothing to back it up but good intentions anyway.”

“There's your, what do you call it, Federal Reserve System.”

“It's the Emperor's New Money, except the emperor is naked now. So people will transfer all their leftover hope and need to this government scrip. It's Tinkerbell money, but people will clap for it. Wait and see.”

Why can't I look up from people being beaten and debate economic theory? Nick wondered. If I could have fought with her like that, over something other than wounded feelings, then maybe she could have loved me too.

"Listen," he said. "There's a company picnic thing at work, and I think I want to go." Too late, and with too little enthusiasm, he added, "You guys can come along if you like."

David looked at Angela, who was already shaking her head. "I'll pass," she said.

"I think there's some veggie dogs in the freezer," David said, "if you don't want to go empty handed."

29 The crowding was less severe on I-40, but there was still insufficient room for Nick to shake off the restlessness that gripped him, to push the accelerator to the floor and watch the landscape come hurtling at him. He knew it was just another misguided impulse, like the one that had sent him to the closet for his baseball glove.

He got to Lake Crabtree by two and parked at the edge of the entrance road. Groups of families seemed to be living in the open-walled picnic structures and in camper trucks in the parking lots. Long lines waited outside both restrooms. It took Nick twenty minutes to find Tom and the others where they'd built a fire in the center of a soccer field and ringed it with Styrofoam coolers. The wall reminded Nick of Harvey Chambers' macroengineering in Austin, and that in turn reminded him of his dream.

Nick offered his veggie dogs and half a loaf of oat bread. "Is it okay to just build a fire like this?"

"You're kidding, right?" Tom said. "What exactly are you worried about? Pollution from the smoke? Using up precious natural resources? Park rangers busting us for not having a permit?" He waved an arm at the crowds that surrounded them. "All that stuff is over. Moot. Finito."

They sat down together and roasted a couple of hot dogs while Tom told his story. Everybody had a story now, though Nick considered his own rather pedestrian.

"I was working late," Tom said, "so I wasn't on the highway when it happened. Sometime before six I got up and went to the bathroom, and when I came back this other guy who looked just like me was sitting in my chair, typing on my computer. It was the single weirdest moment of my entire life. That feeling, to be looking at something for which you know there cannot ever be a rational explanation. I just turned around and went back into the hall and pictured that kid in the *Little Nemo* comic strip. You're too young to know what I'm talking about. Anyway, he had this hat with a sign on it that said 'Wake Up!' Flip, his name was. I tried everything I could think of to wake up—looking at my hands, pinching myself, holding my breath.

"About that time the two Lisas came by and rounded everybody up who was still in the building and took us into the conference room. We borrowed John's boom box and listened to the news, and of course once we understood

what was happening we all wanted to go home, make sure our wives and husbands and kids were okay.

“There was only one car between me and the other Tom, and by this point we’d figured out whose world this was. I mean, he had the keys and my pockets were empty. So he gave me a ride home and put me and my Suzie up in his and his Suzie’s guest room. I guess I can’t really complain, but ... you can’t tell the difference between us by looking. Only I’m in the guest room and he’s in the whole rest of the house. He drives and I have to ask if I can ride along. And he always makes me ask. He hasn’t refused me anything, but he always makes me ask.”

They both looked at the fire for a minute, and then Tom said, “Doesn’t it bother you? Them calling us ‘primes?’”

“What do you mean?”

“You’re a math person, like me. What’s the definition of a prime number?”

“Divisible only by one and itself.”

“Doesn’t that seem lonely to you? Do you remember what they call numbers that aren’t 1 or a prime?”

Nick shrugged. “I forget.”

“Composites. Because they’re made up of other numbers. But the primes are all alone.”

“Maybe they’re just self-sufficient,” Nick said, in an attempt to lighten him up.

“You think?” Tom asked, staring with an intensity that made Nick look away.

After another brief silence Tom said, “You know what’s really weird? The other Tom, he doesn’t have any trains.” In Nick’s world, Tom didn’t actually have a guest room because it was completely given over to his model railroad. “When I asked him about it, it was the first time he showed any real interest in me. ‘I always thought about doing that,’ he says. ‘I had this Lionel set I really loved when I was kid.’ And I go, ‘Yeah, I know. I was there.’”

“But they’re all gone, all those trains I put together by hand. The Texas Eagle. Southern Pacific Number One. Wiped out.” He snapped his fingers. “Just like that. I mean, you have to wonder what exactly is the point, when you can lose everything, just like that.”

Although sympathetic, Nick hadn’t lost sight of the fact that he’d come to the park to get cheered up. He ate two hot dogs and drank a Coke, then extricated himself to join the softball game starting nearby. Other than having to play barehanded, it was the best he’d felt in two days, running, chasing fly balls, swinging a big stick at something.

Darkness ended the game by five o’clock, and even with the night turning rapidly cold, the beer started to flow. Nick was not much of a drinker, and without physical exertion to distract him his thoughts kept stumbling over Angela, Angela and David, alone together back at David’s house.

“Hey,” a voice yelled. “Anybody here speak Spanish?”

At the edge of the fire Nick saw John the receptionist next to a slight man in black jeans, denim jacket, and a battered straw cowboy hat.

Nick walked over. "A little," he told John, and nodded to the other man. "Qué tal?"

"Es mi esposa," the stranger said. "Ayúdame, por favor."

"Okay," Nick said, and asked him what the trouble was with his wife.

"She's having a baby," the man said. "But it's too soon." His Spanish came fast and slurred, the way Nick was used to hearing it in Texas. "I need the hospital, but I can't take her because somebody stole my car."

Nick looked back at the fire, thought briefly about Angela again, and then remembered all the men he'd passed on the road in the last two days. Guilt welled up inside him.

"Okay," he said. "I'll take you."

"Gracias, muchas gracias. Dios te paje."

The man's gratitude made Nick even more uncomfortable. As they started across the field he said, "My name's Nick. Where are you from?"

"I'm Carlos." He shook Nick's hand. "I come from Vera Cruz, originally. Just now from San Antonio."

Nick said that he used to live in Austin.

"I know Austin," Carlos said. "There is supposed to be much work there." He was nervous and sweating, and it was getting very dark. Nick heard voices nearby and couldn't pinpoint where they came from. Suddenly he felt vulnerable and a little foolish.

"Aquí es," Carlos said abruptly.

Someone shone a flashlight in Nick's eyes and he had to fight the urge to turn and run. After a few seconds his eyes cleared enough to see a middle-aged woman in a black mantilla sitting on the grass. A girl who didn't seem older than her late teens had her head on the woman's lap. Two or three other men, one of them now holding the flashlight on the girl, stood in the shadows.

Nick asked if she could walk.

"I don't know," Carlos said.

They were only a hundred yards or so from one of the parking lots. "I'll go get my truck," Nick said, realizing, once the words were out, that they might think he was running away. "Carlos, you want to come with me?"

Nick half-ran, half-walked toward the spot where he'd left his truck. Carlos jogged beside him, thanking him again. "It's the red one, there," Nick said, then pulled up short. A man in jeans and a white sweatshirt was sliding a flat piece of metal into the window on the driver's side.

"Hey," Nick said in English. "Hey, what're you doing?"

The man glanced at Nick with apparent disinterest and went back to work. In the glow of a nearby streetlight Nick could see the man's dirty blond hair and narrow eyes.

"That's my truck!" Nick said, his voice cracking as the humiliations of the last two days reached critical mass. He ran at the man, grabbing for the hand with the jimmy. The man spun away, leaving the jimmy in the truck door and pulling something out of his waistband.

It was a .38 revolver. For a second, as the muzzle swung in front of his face and the hole in the barrel filled the world, Nick considered that he was about to die. He reacted to the thought with sadness and a flash of self-pity.

“Correction, motherfucker,” said the man with the gun. “According to the VIN, this here truck’s the property of University Ford in Chapel Hill.” There was something red around his neck. Nick realized that this was one of the new vigilantes, whatever it was they were calling themselves.

“Look,” Nick said, “this man’s wife is sick. We need to get her to the hospital.”

“I don’t see nobody.” Nick looked back and saw that Carlos had disappeared. “Now,” the man said, “you got the key to this thing?”

Nick could hear the pulse in his neck as his T-shirt scraped against it. It seemed oddly slow, but so was everything compared to the speed of his thoughts. He went through several possibilities before he finally said, “Yes.”

“Hand that son of a bitch over.”

Nick took the truck key out of his pocket. His hand trembled and he stood looking at it for what seemed like a long time.

“You scared, motherfucker? You got every reason to be.”

In fact Nick felt enraged and helpless, which was something altogether different. It made him want to cry. As he held out the key it shook loose from his fingers and clanged on the asphalt.

“You clumsy piece of shit! God dammit!” The man took one step back and waved the pistol toward the weeds by the side of the road. “Get over there and get on your God damn knees.”

“No,” Nick said, listening to his voice squirm out of control again. Self-loathing washed over him. “You’ve got the key, you’ve got the truck, you probably just killed that poor guy’s wife and child. If that’s not enough, go ahead and kill me too.”

“You prime fuck. You think if I did kill you, anybody would give a God damn?” Nick saw then that the man was more afraid than Nick was, that Nick had caught him off guard by showing up so unexpectedly, that the man had failed to think through what it would mean to point his gun at someone. Nick still wanted to smash his ugly head with a baseball bat, but he no longer believed the man was ready to shoot him.

“You’ve got the truck,” Nick said again, to remind the man that he had, after all, won. Then he turned and walked away, wondering if he’d misjudged and if the man would shoot him after all.

He walked into a clump of trees and pissed against one of them. It wasn’t as private as he would have liked, but at that point he was beyond caring. It felt like hot blood draining out of him, and he was weak and shaky when he finished.

Carlos and the others were gone. Nick made a half-hearted attempt to look for them, then went back to the company fire. He thrust his hands nearly into the flames and there still was not enough heat to warm him.

Tom and Lisa materialized on either side of him. “Are you okay?” Lisa asked. “What happened?”

Nick could only shake his head. “What’s going to become of us?”

31 Lisa gave him a ride home. “It’s only a couple hours out of my way,” she said.

“He had a Palm Pilot,” Nick said. He couldn’t seem to stop rehashing the incident in his head. “I didn’t really register that until just now. It was in a little holster thing on his belt. He was using it to run the Vehicle ID Numbers. Crackers with guns and hand-held computers.”

“Now that’s really scary,” Lisa agreed.

“He called me a ‘fucking prime.’ No, wait. He said, ‘you prime fuck.’ There was this absolute hatred in his voice.”

Lisa glanced at him just long enough to make him wish he’d kept his childlike discoveries to himself. “Yeah, okay,” he said. “Nice weather we’re having.”

Lisa laughed. “Not for long. They say it may freeze tonight.”

She let him out in his driveway and he walked around to the driver’s side. “You want to come in or anything? David’s being pretty accommodating, I’m sure he wouldn’t mind my asking.”

“It’s late.”

Nick nodded. “Thanks for the ride.”

She put a hand lightly on his arm. “Take care of yourself, all right? Just take everything slow and easy. You’ll be surprised what you can learn to live with.”

She turned around in the driveway and Nick saw her hand come up over the roof of the car in a final salute before she pulled onto Hope Valley Road and was gone. Was that the goal, then? he wondered. To find out exactly how much he could in fact put up with? Until he too was shambling along the roadside on sheer inertia, eyes glazed, with nothing behind him and nothing in front of him?

The house was dark except for a single light over the kitchen counter. Nick stopped there to scrub his face with dishwashing liquid and water as hot as he could stand. His fingers still twitched slightly, as if he’d had too much coffee.

He went on through into the den. The TV was off for once and the house was deathly silent. Nick knew something was wrong, but he couldn’t say what it was. The night’s violence had left him thinking murder and mayhem, and that was the only reason he went into David’s bedroom.

Before he could speak he heard the rustling of covers followed by Angela’s voice saying, “Nick?”

He froze.

“Oh my god,” she said. “Oh my god. We fell asleep.”

Nick switched on the light. Angela was holding the sheet up over her bare breasts. David was blinking, pushing himself up on one elbow.

Nick turned the light off again.

“Nick?” Angela said. “Nick, wait. Oh, Christ, Nick, I’m so sorry...”

What Nick really wanted was a long, hot shower. He knew, though, that it would be some time before he got one. “When you’re dressed, David,” he said, “I need to talk to you for a minute.” He went back to the den and sat on the couch.

The two of them came out together a few seconds later. David was in pants and shirt, Angela in a terrycloth robe. Angela was crying silently.

“Just David,” Nick said.

She looked at David, then at Nick, and thought better of whatever she'd been about to say. She went through the kitchen and the sliding glass doors to the guest house.

"I'll need a few things," Nick said. "Some sweat clothes, or some drawstring pants, maybe a jacket. Whatever you have that might fit me. A sleeping bag if you've got one."

"Look here, I'm really sorry about this. We didn't either of us mean for it to happen—"

"I don't want to talk about it. Could you see if you could find those clothes?"

David nodded and left the room. Nick leaned his head back and closed his eyes. He couldn't remember ever being so exhausted. Part of it, he knew, was the anticipation of fatigue to come.

"Nick?"

He started awake, amazed to realize that he'd actually drifted off for a few seconds. David was holding out a soft-side flight bag. Inside Nick found clothes, a tightly rolled sleeping bag, a Swiss Army knife, a couple of towels, a first-aid kit, some toilet paper. At the bottom was something metallic that Nick fished out and set on the couch beside him. It was a .22 target pistol.

David laughed nervously. "I expect some might think me a bit mad to offer you that in the circumstances. But I thought you might—"

"No, thanks," Nick said. "Just put it away somewhere, will you?"

David stashed it in one of the built-in drawers next to the TV, and when he came back he had money in his hand. "I've only got a couple of hundred here at the house. If you want to wait till tomorrow I could sort you out some more."

"No," Nick said. "This will do." The money only made Nick more resentful. The business with Angela was a separate issue, something he'd known would happen sooner or later. At that moment he hated David because David had everything to give and because Nick had nothing to do but take it. It made Nick careless of what David thought of him, made him greedy and arrogant and willing to push for more.

Instead he zipped the bag and stood up. Then he followed David's gaze and saw Angela in the kitchen doorway. Her cheeks were still wet. "You're not going...?" she said. "Please, please don't go. Wait until morning. Let us talk about it, at least."

"I'm just going over to Richard's house." David didn't flinch, willingly complicit in the lie. Nick felt the chill he'd known once when he'd cut himself badly in the kitchen. The knife had gone much too deeply into his flesh, but there was no true sensation at first. "I'll call you," he said, in a hurry to get outside before the pain hit.

"Be careful," Angela said, with a catch in her voice that Nick knew he would remember later.

He hefted the bag and walked outside.

37 The night was clear and cold and he stopped to put on David's jacket. Once he got moving he was actually making better time

than the cars on Hope Valley, and there was satisfaction in that. It took him only half an hour to get to I-40, where he turned right and headed west along the access road.

Fragments of his dream flashed through his mind, overlaying the reality of the stalled and abandoned cars beside the road, the smell of exhaust fumes, the trash tangled in the thick, brown grass of the hillsides. It was easy to imagine the drought never ending, the trees withering, falling, decaying into dust, while the privileged few huddled in their pyramids. But who would actually choose the desert, given the choice? Who would not walk, head down, putting one foot in front of the other, for hundreds and hundreds of miles toward whatever hope was left?

He'd been walking for an hour when he heard voices speaking Spanish beside him. He looked up, in the space of a second imagining that it might be Carlos, somehow with his wife and a healthy, if slightly premature, baby, and that they would offer him a ride because he had at least tried to help.

Instead it was a battered pickup that coasted along beside him, three men in the cabin. They all wore baseball caps and work clothes. One of them saw Nick's searching look and nodded stiffly.

Nick nodded back and said, "*Buenas noches.*"

"*Buenas,*" the man said. "*A donde vas?*"

"*Tejas,*" Nick said, giving it the Mexican pronunciation. "Austin."

"Us too," the man said in Spanish. "I hear there's much work there."

"It's true," Nick said, also in Spanish. "I saw it on the television."

Work, he thought, and more. For Nick it meant the only person in the world who would have to take him in, no matter what. Because how could you look into someone's face, knowing they were just the same as you, and turn them away?

The man smiled and jerked his head at the bed of the pickup truck, cluttered with tools and folded plastic and canvas tarps. "You want a ride?"

"*Gracias,*" Nick said. "*Muchas gracias.*"

The truck paused momentarily and Nick vaulted over the side. He propped his duffel against the back of the cab and in minutes he was asleep.