

"Selling the Suits"

I think there is a world market for maybe five computers.

Thomas Watson, chairman of IBM, 1943

Sidney took and folded Gib's jacket over his arms while Gib carefully worked his way into the rented car. Pinkwater had announced that he wanted the lines of Gib's suit to be as perfect as they could be, so Gib had given over his jacket and held himself as rigidly as possible for the duration of the cab ride. While they traveled, Pinkwater passed out breath mints to everyone to get rid of the odor of the scotch, then watched them carefully to make sure they chewed.

Bennett, Jaffe, and Geller Investments had an office in the Flatiron Building, at the junction of 23rd Street, Fifth Avenue and Broadway. The men who had picked up the Black Helicopter equipment at the Waldorf were waiting in the lobby, boxes at their feet.

"Jesus Christ," Pinkwater said, helping Gib back into his jacket, "those fuckers were supposed to take the equipment upstairs already. I'm gonna kick some ass over this."

As Sidney started toward the two movers, Gib decided he had finally had enough of Pinkwater's self-indulgent case of The Fear. The man's personality had been given way to irrationality and terror. Gib had to do something about it. If Pinkwater wanted to force him to run the pitch, then it was tie to start running it.

Gib walked up behind Pinkwater, who was fiercely cursing the delivery men and the scum who spawned them. Gib grabbed the bigger man by the arm and grunted as he turned him around.

"Gibson, I'm busy here."

"Sidney, I need you to do something for the next hour," Gib said as he dragged Pinkwater away. "I need you to keep your *fucking mouth shut*."

Pinkwater was poleaxed, stunned into silence.

Taylor Jackson and OddGreg were lurking just close enough to hear what was going on, but not look like they were listening. Gib signaled to them to come closer, then turned to the two delivery men.

"You two, get the equipment upstairs."

"Fuck you, we don't have to take that kind of abuse," one of the guys said, pointing at Pinkwater.

Gib restrained Pinkwater with a hand on his chest, then got twenties out of his wallet and threw them at the two men.

"Shut up and get those boxes in the elevators."

The men picked up the twenties and lifted the boxes.

Gib said to Jackson and OddGreg, "Follow those guys. Get up to those offices, and set up the equipment wherever they tell you. We'll be right behind you."

Jackson, OddGreg and the two delivery men piled into an elevator.

Gib continued to talk to Pinkwater, "Sidney, I'm tired of this shit. I know you told me what's on the line for you if this meeting doesn't go well, but that still doesn't explain how crazy you're acting. The Black Box works! So how can they *not* give you more money? So there's got to be something else. Either you tell me the whole story, or I'm

gone.”

Pinkwater turned white and looked nauseous. “Gibson, I –“

“Right now, Sidney. Or we’re done.”

“Feyrer and Bodio know about my money problems,” Pinkwater blurted out. “I said something that made them suspicious, and they checked up on me.”

Gib stared at Pinkwater in disbelief. “You did not.”

“Shit I didn’t. I got a phone call from them, telling me they knew how desperate I was. I *must* have let something slip.”

Gib lost his temper. “Sidney, they know your banker! That’s how you *met* them! They must have gotten a look at your bank records.”

“That’s impossible,” Pinkwater said. “Dick Moran has been my banker for ten years.”

“He’s a banker, Sidney,” Gib said, in disgust. “You’re not a member of his tribe. To him, you’re just a civilian. Hell, I’ll bet he’s convinced you he’s helping you out.”

“It just can’t be.”

“It is. But you know what? It doesn’t matter how they found out. All that matters is that you have the rotten stink of desperation. This whole morning, you’ve been playing the part of a guy who wants to get bent over a snowy log by these money fuckers. Well, enough.”

Pinkwater looked offended.

“Cut out the fucking whining, stop freaking out, and let me do all the talking.”

“Gibson, I –“

“I have three rules for you. One, get your Oscar Wilde attitude back together. Two, only speak when you are spoken to. Three, anything you say had better be goddamn cheery, or I’m walking out of that office. I need you to look like the most confident motherfucker in the universe. Like Babe Ruth, high on cocaine and confidence. If you can’t give me those three things, then you are going to get eaten up like shark chum.”

Pinkwater bristled, clenched his fists, and clearly thought about swatting Gib away like a bothersome insect. Then the huge man turned around, his shoulders hunched. With his back to Gib, he stretched out as high as he could, his joints cracking like a crumpling sheet of paper. Then he took off his Panama hat and ran his hands through his hair. With a deep breath, he turned back around, his eyes brightly glazed.

“Gibson, I am entirely in your hands. Let the bullshit fly where it may, and whoever is still standing tall and untarnished at the end of this meeting will be declared the victor.”

Gib measured Pinkwater’s attitude. “Better. Smile more. They’ll be expecting a guy on his last legs. I need you to be Tiny Fucking Tim on Christmas Day.”

Pinkwater smiled as wide as he could, and said, “God bless us, every one.” He looked shithouse crazy, but it was still a step up.

Gib pointed toward the elevators. “Let’s go.”

Rick Bodio and Jameson Feyrer were waiting in the reception area, looking sleek and confident.

Bodio said, “We sent your guys back to the conference room.”

“Great, we appreciate it,” Gib said.

Bodio and Feyrer looked confused, not recognizing Gib in his suit. “Have we

met?" Feyrer asked.

Gib answered, "I work with Sidney. Where's the conference room?"

Bodio looked startled, then said, "This way."

The conference room had a light breakfast prepared on one side, and a cabinet full of electronics on the other side. Gib conferred with Jackson and OddGreg, then went and got a cup of coffee.

After ten minutes of shuffling around, eating, and small talk, the Black Helicopter people were sitting on one side of the large, highly polished black conference table.

Facing them over clear carafes of water and bronze-colored pitchers of coffee were the assembled hosts of Bennett, Jaffe, and Geller Investments, including Bodio and Feyrer, a couple of junior suits there to take notes, and two of the three principals in the company, Edward Jaffe and Marc Bennett.

Bennett and Jaffe's faces were grim, their hands hidden below the table. Gib thought about how that kind of thing would piss him off in a card game. Under the table, reality changed. A hand of cards would suddenly have extra aces, inside straights would be filled, face cards would teleport into sweaty palms. Decks could be stacked.

Gib realized that Gibson Senior would be proud to see him in his freshly pressed Italian uniform, staring down his lesser across the table. Of course, Gibson Senior, would dismiss Gib's anger about stacked decks with a breezy wave of his hand. Gibson Senior stacked the deck in every hand he played, or he wouldn't play at all. It was like cheating on your taxes or fixing parking tickets; not only desirable, but required activity for men of power. He would have been quite pleased with the work of Bodio and Feyrer, sniffing out Pinkwater's financial distress with the skill of truffle-hunting pigs.

Gib finally realized that, regardless of heritage and nepotism, he would never be one of the wise and powerful. He couldn't take the boredom, the certainty. Instead, he was a gambler. His definition of success was to raise to the limit and let the cards fall. If the deck was stacked against him, that would just make the victory that much sweeter.

Shoot the moon, Gib thought. *Shoot the moon*.

"Gentlemen, ladies," Gib began. "I can't begin to tell you how surprised I am to see you all here. Most financial people wouldn't have the guts to risk their reputations on a meeting like this."

Gib could sense Sidney Pinkwater freeze in his chair in horror, as he realized that Gib had no intention of sticking to the carefully rehearsed script. *Too late, Sidney*, Gib thought. *Time to play*.

"But the first thing we need to do," Gib said, "is get rid of the minor league players." He stared at Bodio and Feyrer. "Beat it. You're a couple of second-rate pissants. We already know you won't have the balls to go ahead on a project like this. But we're talking to the big boys now."

Gib was betting that neither Bodio or Feyrer had told their bosses about Sidney's finances. They wanted to spring it out during the meeting, showing off how smart they were. Based on how pale their faces got, Gib realized he'd bet correctly.

Marc Jaffe, one of the principals partners, said, "We would rather keep our junior associates in the meeting." That was just pissing match games, Gib knew. Just trying to establish who was in charge.

"Oh, all right, then."

Jaffe relaxed.

“Pack it up, boys,” Gib said to Jackson and OddGreg, turning his back on Jaffe and the others. Gib stared daggers at Sidney, who finally turned to Jackson and OddGreg and said, “You heard him. Start packing.”

The two of them started packing.

Jaffe said, “Hold on, hold on. Don’t get all bent out of shape. Just a minute.” He took Bodio and Feyrer outside, there was some agitated shouting, and then Jaffe came back in. Alone.

Gib buried his smile under a Sally Field face. He motioned to OddGreg, indicating they should stand up. They did so, uncomfortably. “If you haven’t met him already, allow me to introduce Gregory Igoe. He is the technical genius who Sidney Pinkwater’s vision and helped kick and prod it into a working model. Greg, could you turn on the Black Box, please?”

Beef leaned over and flipped the on switch. The Black Box hummed quietly for a moment, then the power light cycled from red to amber to green.

“Look around at this room,” Gib announced. “Years from now, people will ask you to describe this exact scene. What color were the walls? What were Sidney Pinkwater, Edward Jaffe, Marc Bennett, and all the other famous names really like? They were visionaries.

“Because the world just changed with the flip of that switch.”, Gib barked.

Shoot the moon, Gib thought. *Shoot the moon.*

"Straight and Suddenly Flush"

The best thing in life is cashing a bet. The next best thing is losing a bet.

Nick the Greek

Hours later, the Black Helicopter guys walked out of the Flatiron Building. Jackson and Beef were carrying the equipment. Gib was looking for a cab.

Sidney Pinkwater was holding a signed contract -- and a check -- in his trembling hands.

"Pissed Off and Passed Out"

Love your enemies just in case your friends turn out to be a bunch of bastards.

R.A. Dickson

At the nearest bar, Pinkwater decided to buy champagne for everyone. Not just Jackson, OddGreg and Gib, but the whole bar.

"First thing I'm going to do," Pinkwater said as he received his glass of champagne from the bartender, "well, what *will* I do?"

Pinkwater thought for a moment, then took a deep, heaving breath. When he continued, he stood in a hipshot pose, one hand on his side, and began declaiming in a poetic manner, with great volume.

"The *first* thing I am going to do is *fire* Dick Moran, that traitorous rat-fucking, cock-sucking, dick-licking, rug-munching, quim-licking, sister-slicing, motherfucking, oath-breaking, lie-making, liberty-taking, pillow-biting, butt-pirating, ass-kissing, shit-eating, shit-licking, shit-kicking, dipsticking, scum-bagging –"

By this time, Gib, Beef and OddGreg were just sitting back in their chairs, their drinks forgotten, lit cigars burning in their hands, watching the words and spittle fly from Pinkwater's mouth in an amazing paroxysm of enraged obscenity. The rest of the crowd had also gone silent. Finally, a few people stated to clap along with Pinkwater's cursing rhythm.

"-- back-stabbing, heart-breaking, friend-cheating, Iago-impersonating --"

Gib thought that last one was stretching things quite a bit, but at that point even he had to put down his cigar and join in the clapping rhythm, which started to speed up, driving Pinkwater ahead of it like a mad, shrieking Ahab at a open mike poetry night.

"-- cunt-sticking, meat-beating, pud-whacking, masturbating --"

As the clapping got faster and faster, people started to whoop and cheer. The combination of syncopation and swearing reached an almost perfectly orchestrated climax during which Pinkwater screamed out, "and *finally!*" which stopped the clapping in its tracks.

"Dick Moran is the rat bastard son of a syphilitic, rancid whore! *And he is fired!*"

The bar erupted in cheering and applause.

Pinkwater took a deep bow, slipped the magnum of champagne into his briefcase, and strode confidently out of the bar.

"Holy shit," Beef said. "I don't think he repeated a single word."

"Well, he used 'licking' a lot," OddGreg said.

"That's true," Gib said. "but I never knew there were that many lickable things."

"There are," Pinkwater said.

"What's the *second* thing you're going to do, Sidney?" Taylor Jackson asked.

Pinkwater said, "Deposit the check. At some other bank than Moran's."

After a while, the adrenaline ran out, and they settled up the tab, accepting congratulations from bar patrons on Pinkwater's behalf on their way out.

Gib went back to his hotel and took a nap. A few hours later, the ringing phone woke him up.

"Is this Gibson Edwards?" Gib heard a voice ask him.

"Who is this?"

"Is this Gibson Edwards? The hotel has you listed as Edward Gibson."

"They must have miswritten it," Gib said, waking up. "I'm Gibson Edwards."

"You rotten motherfucker! I'm gonna sue, you bastard! I'm going to kill you!"

Gib found he couldn't resist the joke. "Dad?"

"What? This is Dick Moran. I just got off the phone with Sidney Pinkwater. He tells me you've been spreading lies about me."

"I don't think so. Did you tell Rick Bodio and Jameson Feyrer about Sidney's financial matters?"

"No! Well, yes, but it was for his own good!"

"Fine, then I haven't spreading lies. We just disagree about what's best for Sidney. Having friends who stab him in the back isn't it."

Gib hung up the phone. Then he thought about what he'd just said, and couldn't figure out whether to laugh or shoot himself in the head. Love, hate, happy, sad, all those covered a lot of bases, but it seemed there hadn't been an emotion yet invented to cover his situation. What were you supposed to feel when you were living irony like this?

Friends shouldn't stab each other in the back. What a laugh.

Maybe that was why he was so relaxed in the meeting. No matter what kind of check Sidney deposited, Bob Maynard was waiting back in San Francisco for him.

The phone started ringing again. Gib unhooked the cord from the receiver. Looking at the clock, he realized it was almost nine in the evening. He thought about everything he might do in New York City. Theater, movies, culture, the city that never sleeps.

He went over to the closet to pack his bag and get the hell out of town.

"Second Going"

How hast thou helped him that is without power? how savest thou the arm that hath no strength?
How hast thou counselled him that hath no wisdom? and how hast thou plentifully declared the
thing as it is?

To whom hast thou uttered words?

Job 26 2-4

King James Bible

Gib hooked the phone back up long enough to call Wallis. Her machine picked up, so he left a message: "I'm going back to San Francisco. I'll think some more about what we talked about. That's it. Hi to you, too, Alice."

After checking out of the hotel, Gib took a cab to the address Late Night Carson had given him. It was a parking garage south of the World Trade Center, near the southern edge of the island of Manhattan. He searched through the garage for about forty minutes before he found the bright yellow Ryder rental truck. He debated the wisdom of checking to make sure the explosives were in the storage compartment, finally decided it was better to know for sure. He opened up the back, sniffed the unfamiliar greasy smell, and saw the packages marked "Danger! High explosives". That was enough to convince him.

Throwing his bag into the cab of the truck, Gib climbed in, started it up, and drove to the exit. As he paid the lot attendant and moved toward the street, Agent Berg stepped into the street in front of him and motioned for him to stop.

Gib considered gunning the engine, but finally decided to be polite, knowing it would be a bad idea. He wondered if Berg had been tailing him for the past few days.

"Agent Gibson," Agent Berg greeted him. "I wonder if you might give me the chance to talk you out of whatever idiotic project with which you have involved Agent Carson."

"With which'?" Gib asked. "Even your grammar is clean. My god."

Berg smiled politely, as if unsure exactly how to form his lips into the proper shape. "Am I to take that as a 'no'? I have to inform you I have discovered the nature of your cargo. Personally, I think Agent Carson's choice of trucking company is his personal commentary on the cargo, and the kind of people who would use it."

"What?"

"Never mind. Just a little historical terrorist reference. In any case, I confess I don't fully understand your mission, but if Agent Robert Maynard is involved, I know it is a foolish and dangerous enterprise. I can only plead with you not to involve Agent Carson. He's only three months away from retirement."

Gib thought about, if only for the sake of appearing sensitive. But in reality, he didn't have any real choice. But he figured Agent Berg at least deserved the truth. "Look, I actually admire that you're looking out for Carson, but Maynard has got me trapped. But if I can keep Carson's name out of it, I will."

Agent Berg considered it, then slowly nodded his head. "I suppose that's better than nothing." He opened his door to get out of the truck.

"Berg?" Gib asked. "Is Carson related to you or something?"

Agent Berg turned around, looking confused. "No, I first met Agent Carson when

I was assigned to the New York office. I only know about him through his Bureau record.”

“Then why are you helping a drunk burnout like him, anyway?”

Berg looked surprised. “He needs my help. What else could I do?”

Gib looked at Berg’s face, realized that the Agent was entirely earnest in his answer. He had a natural Sally Field face. “Well, that’s...” Gib said. Then he reached out to shake Berg’s hand.

Agent Berg shook hands, then climbed down from the truck, still looking a bit confused. Gib pulled out into the street, then a thought struck him. He put the truck into reverse and pulled next to Berg.

“Hey, Berg, can you get an affidavit made up? So it looks real official, but it’s still private?”

Berg considered it, then nodded uncertainly. “I should be able to that, yes.”

Gib smiled thinly. “Then I have an idea. It won’t help me much, but it will give me some leverage. Maybe I can use it to keep Carson out of this.”

“Explain it to me,” Berg said.

After Gib did, Agent Berg nodded. “I’ll get it done as soon as possible. No later than the end of this week.”

“Thanks,” Gib said, and gave Berg the address of his apartment in San Francisco.

Berg said, “But I have to say that it still appears to me that it would be better to just abandon this whole project.”

Gib said, “I appreciate your concern.” Then he drove away toward the Lincoln Tunnel and parts west.

This second homage to Horace Greeley was a much different affair. Gib struggled and cursed his way through the usual awful New York area traffic. He had driven a lot of places and in a lot of cities, but he had never found drivers who quite equaled the unmitigated incompetence of New York drivers. Even Boston drivers were driving instructors by comparison. But once he hit the Delaware Water Gap and the Pennsylvania border, his attitude settled into a disturbing grey groove.

He set the cruise control just below 80 and watched the road with an unblinking stare. His only movement was to change lanes and to hit the scan button on the truck’s radio. He would find a station with a few good songs, then lose it. Sometimes, there would be a preacher warning against sin and various temptations. Gib would pause on some of these, morbidly curious, before continuing to scan.

He stopped for gas and a large cup of coffee in Pennsylvania around 3 a.m.. Again at the last rest stop in Ohio, around 7 a.m. After filling up the tank, he realized he needed sleep, so he parked the car and slept. When he woke up a few hours later, it was because light was flashing his face.

His first panicked thought was that Bob Maynard had found him, had even tracked him to a rest stop on the Ohio Turnpike, and was waving at him to get out of the truck. Then, more awake, he thought it might be a cop who had decided to investigate the unmoving rental truck. Finally, he looked around and realized the sky had darkened with a furious storm, and that the flashes of light were bursts of lightning as bright as spotlights. He looked around the skyline and thought he saw a funnel cloud far away to the south.

Gib shook his head and went back to sleep. When he woke up again, it was to a

light drizzle. He got some food and some more coffee and kept driving.

And driving. And stopping for coffee. And driving.

About a day and a half later, he stopped at a truck stop east of Cheyenne, Wyoming. He had staggered into the place, intending only to get yet another coffee charge-up, but a few steps into the place, he had become captivated by a rack of 99-cent tapes. The groups all seemed to play country or heavy metal music, and had names like "Big Daddy and the Stockboys" and "The Smilin' Americans". Gib finally pulled himself away from the display when he felt nervous laughter bubbling up inside his throat.

Gib walked over to the coffee pot and filled up two large styrofoam cups. Then he wound his way through the shelves of candy bars and beef stew until he noticed his hands were hurting quite a bit. He stopped and set down the coffee on a shelf. The palm of each hand was bright red, and Gib realized the coffee had been scalding hot.

"I'll sue," Gib muttered to himself, his mind wandering.

And that set him to thinking of a conversation he had had with Ruth.

They had been sitting in one of the South Park coffee shops and Gib had burned the roof of his mouth with a gulp of over-heated coffee. He had made the same "I'll sue" joke, and it had set Ruth off on a rant.

"Is that a fast food coffee joke? About that old woman who burned herself in New Mexico?"

"Uh, it was trying to be a joke, yeah."

"Do you know why that old lady sued? Do you have any idea?"

"She was trying to get something for nothing. Why else?"

Ruth said, "Really? The coffee was so hot the woman got third degree burns all over her lap, including her labia. How does that sound? Fun? And then she had to get plastic surgery, which involved skin grafts from her thighs to her genitals. How does *that* sound? The woman was in her eighties, by the way."

"That's horrible."

"That's what the woman's family thought, but they didn't want to sue. They just asked the company to some of the medical costs. I might have some of the exact details wrong, but in any case, the suits at the burger company told the family to fuck off. Their final offer before the lawsuit started was about a hundred dollars in gift certificates.

"When it went to court, the family was more than a bit pissed off, and so was the jury when the jury heard how the hamburger suits had acted. Not to mention the fact that burger place had settled over half a million dollars in coffee burn claims over the last ten years but hadn't done a damn thing to change how they served coffee. So the burger suits got slapped with about 3 million dollars in punishment, not just for burning the woman, but for being assholes. But the burger suits' instant reaction was to start a public relations campaign about how awful our legal system is, that people can get millions of dollars for spilling coffee. It pisses me off."

"All right, all right. You win. I won't sue because the top of my mouth got burned.

Ruth looked surprised. "I didn't say you shouldn't sue!"

"What?"

"I mean, if you're that big a pussy, go ahead. But it's important to know the whole story."

Gib stared at her until Ruth couldn't keep a straight face and broke out laughing.

A tap on his shoulder brought Gib back to reality. He turned and looked up at a hat with the logo, "S&M Trucking. We Take It Like Men" on it. Then his eyes tracked down to note curly black hair and a scraggly beard. The trucker was burly, Gib noticed, but looked strangely furtive for all of that. When Gib finally focused on the trucker's eyes, he saw they resembled antique pool balls, yellowed and brittle with abuse.

"You look pretty rough, man. How far you got left to drive?" the trucker asked.

"Miles and miles," Gib said. "Miles to go before I sleep. Miles to go before I sleep."

"If you got forty bucks, I got something that'll help you clear out the cobwebs," the trucker said.

Gib reached into his pocket and handed over a wad of bills. The trucker looked down and his yellow eyes widened in surprise. "I don't know if got enough stuff to cover that, man," he said nervously.

"Give me what you have," Gib said, not having much idea what the trucker was talking about.

The trucker slipped a bottle of pills into Gib's unresisting hand. "A few of these and you'll feel like you never need to sleep again." Then he walked away, leaving only a faint smell of sweat and Old Spice in his wake.

Gib looked at the pill bottle, put them in a pocket, then walked up to the front counter to pay. As he set the two cups down near the register, some of the hot coffee spilled onto his hands. The cashier looked alarmed and wiped his hands off with a cold, wet rag.

"Boy, that coffee is hot," she said. "Are you OK?"

"Fine. I'm fine," Gib said.

The cashier laughed. "Good. I guess that means you won't sue."

It's important to know the whole story.

The coffee got him another hundred miles. The skies had darkened near the Wyoming state line, so Gib had added the AM dial to the radio scanning game. In between burst of static from lightning in the atmosphere, he heard an emergency weather report break into the droning voice of Paul Harvey.

"There's an unseasonable storm sweeping into the region. We have reports of high winds and snow drifts in the following counties..." Gib saw snow flakes start to hit his windshield. In less than a half-hour, the snow had turned into a blinding sheet and Gib was barely able to see thirty yards in front of him. Wind gusts shook the truck and Gib held tightly to the wheel.

It's not even Halloween, Gib thought. *How the hell can it be snowing this hard?*

The driving snow was hypnotizing, and Gib felt himself drifting off. So he opened up his new bottle of pills and took a couple, wondering what they were.

Gib thought about his first trip west, at the beginning of the summer. This time, there was no question the universe did not want to see him back in California. When he thought about the cargo sitting in the truck behind him, Gib had to agree with the infinite reaches.

The two pills didn't seem to be doing much. Gib just felt a tiny tingle at the base of his spine, but the sensation was much too weak to travel up his spine and reach his

eyelids.

So he washed down a few with the last of the cold coffee. In ten minutes, all of his muscles spasmed, seemingly at once. It was as if a prison tried to turn its electric chair into a carnival ride, with the voltage just below a terminal level. Gib could feel each of his individual hairs vibrating in the wind from the open, and every pore on his body itched with the awareness. Before his brain turned off, the absolute last image that caught him was looking down at where he was obsessively scratching his left forearm. Trails of blood followed his fingernails across the skin of the arm.

He closed his eyes, and when he opened them again, he was in a restaurant parking lot.

Time for some food, Gib thought. Time for a huge stack of food.

There was a newspaper vending machine in front of the restaurant, and the largest local paper seemed to cover Reno. Apparently, he had blacked out in the whiteout and driven through a snowstorm all the way across the rest of Wyoming, all of Utah, and most of Nevada, before stopping in Reno. Idly, he wondered if he had hallucinated the snowstorm, because the sky above him showed no signs of foul weather.

When Gib walked into the restaurant, he saw an old woman feeding quarters into a slot machine. He had seen the woman before, he realized. He had stopped at this very same shitty restaurant -- Jenny's Grub Steak -- months before.

Before everything had happened.

Gib couldn't get more specific to himself about the meaning of "everything".

The old woman still had a thin line of drool sneaking out of the side of her mouth. With the twitchiness of a longtime gambler, the old woman looked over her shoulder and saw Gib staring at her.

"The fuck you staring at, shitheel?" the old woman said in a deep, bourbon-burned voice. "Direct those eyes someplace else or I'll rip them out of your skull and piss in the empty sockets."

Gib nodded his head. "All right, ma'am," he said. He looked around the restaurant, looked back at the old woman's hostile glare.

"And get a shave, you goddamn hippie," she said. "You look like a bucket of sloppy shit."

Gib nodded his head again and walked back to the rental truck.

As he crossed into California, Gib noticed an odd thing. He started to accidentally turn off the cruise control. He would be cruising along, and then a car would speed past him on the left, its horn blaring. He would look down at the speedometer and realize his speed was falling. But it seemed that every time he reset it, it would be at lower and lower speeds.

By the time he passed the west edge of Sacramento, the truck was motoring along at just under 50 and cars were racing around him on both sides, their horns blaring angrily. When he neared Richmond, he was driving no faster than 45. So he pulled off the highway onto San Pablo Avenue.

Doing about 20, he wound his way toward the Berkeley safe house. When he crossed the Berkeley city limits, he had to pull over and open both windows in the cab of the truck to get some fresh air.

When he started back up, he turned off onto every side street that caught his eye.

And he stopped for fresh air every other block. Anything to delay his arrival.

When Gib was only a few blocks away from the safe house, he parked the truck and walked around it six times, widdershins, dizzily praying for another snowstorm to come crashing out of the sky. He looked up at the blue sky and the few white clouds and silently demanded they turn grey, then violent. If the universe was going to send him an omen, why couldn't it send one he could really use? A hail storm would be okay. A hurricane. Flash flood. A Biblical torrent of frogs, leeches and locusts. Anything.

Finally, he got back into the truck and drove to the safe house. SO much for the infinite reaches.

He pulled up into the driveway and put the transmission into "park". Looking up at the house where he and Jan Reuben had spent interesting times, he leaned forward onto the steering wheel and fell asleep.

A time later, someone poking him on the arm through the open window woke him up. Without lifting his head, he turned to see who was poking him, and of course it was Masturbatin' Bob Maynard, who said:

"Christ, kid, what took you so fucking long?"

"Shoot the Moon"

When in doubt, win the trick.

Edmond Hoyle

By the time Gib had divested himself of Maynard, the two of them had hashed over a couple of plans as to how Gib was suddenly going to introduce the *fact* of the explosives instead of the *abstract concept*. Gib nodded his head wearily as Maynard spent two hours revising and backtracking and editing. Finally, Maynard had pronounced himself satisfied with the approach. Gib got a ride from Masturbatin' Bob to the airport to pick up his car out of long term parking.

From the airport, he drove to The Space and found a three-player game of hearts going on between Garrity, Campy and Frank Marion. After Campy broke a hundred points, Gib joined in as a fourth. After a very few hands, he quickly found himself down by many, many points. No matter how he tried, he found himself unable to concentrate on his hands. It didn't help that his attempts to make small talk crashed and burned into a silent chasm of card-playing intensity. The only reason he hadn't lost very quickly was that the Green Ragers were, for a change, taking every opportunity to dump points on each other and would sometimes overlook Gib in their zeal.

Still, inevitably, Frank Marion added up points after a particularly unsuccessful hand and announced that Gib had 99 points.

"If this was Euchre, you'd be in the wheelhouse," Marion said.

"There's four of us," Garrity said. "Why don't we play Euchre instead of Hearts?"

"Let's finish the damn game," Campy growled. Campy was the nearest in points to Gib with 82. Garrity and Marion were both hovering in the high seventies. But Campy had gone from the lowest point total to the second highest in only three horrific hands. So the big man was irritated.

"Is that fucking all right with everyone? That we finish the game?"

Garrity and Marion exchanged a smirk about Campy's poor temper.

"I'm happy to forfeit," Gib said.

"Fuck that," Campy answered.

Gib shrugged. It was Frank's deal.

Gib found himself with some high Clubs in his hand, the Queen of Hearts, one or two Diamonds. And the Queen of Spades. Not a very good hand, he thought. That's the end of that. He took the first trick with the Queen of Clubs, then started to throw down cards, just to get the game finished.

And then, leading off with the eight of clubs, Gib watched as Campy dropped the Ace of Hearts on him.

"Boom!" Campy yelled. "Game over. Let's play Euchre."

"You were the one who wanted to play this hand out. So shut up, and let's finish," Garrity said. Then he dropped the King of Hearts. And Frank Marion followed by dumping the Ace of Spades.

Gib looked at the three of them and said, "You're *all* out of clubs? Christ. Let me just end this, then." And he started to dump out the rest of his cards, starting with the clubs, then moving on to the diamonds. He couldn't seem to get rid of the lead. And he

came down to his last card and realized he only had the Queen of Spades left. He knew Marion had dumped the Ace of Spades, so he idly wondered who was going to get stuck with the Queen.

Gib dropped the Queen.

"God damn it," Campy cursed.

Gib waited to see Campy drop the King and take the thirteen points. But Campy simply took a long look at Gib, then dropped the Ace of Diamonds.

"He *didn't*," Garrity said suddenly. "I can read him like a damn book! He wasn't trying to do that!" Garrity dropped the Eight of Hearts.

Then Frank Marion dropped the Two of Hearts, and Gib realized he'd shot the moon.

"Someone already dropped the King of Spades?" Gib asked.

"I dumped it a few hands ago," Campy muttered. "Shit, he shot the moon. By accident!"

"Someone took a heart, though, didn't they?" Gib asked, starting to realize his luck.

"Nope," Garrity said with a grin. "You kicked all our asses, man."

"Nice hand," Frank Marion congratulated him. "I don't think you could have done that if you'd been trying."

"No," Gib said, excitement finally waking him up more than he had been in days. He could feel something had changed. These guys had been kicking his ass for months.

But maybe something had changed out in New York, with Sidney.

Maybe, in spite of the loaded hand of Bob Maynard, in spite of Jan Reuben, and in spite of all the other tangled complications Gib had created for himself, in spite of every player dumping on him, he still had a chance to come up the winner in this game.

"I really did shoot the moon," Gib said. "Wow!"

"Ah, enough," Campy said. "let's play Euchre." The big man gathered up the cards.

"By the way," Gib said, "I got a hold of some plastic explosives. They're in a rental truck in Berkeley."

The Green Rages stared at him. Campy forgot about the cards in his hand, and they slowly spilled out, helicoptering to the floor.

"Do you guys think we can do something about Devil's Arroyo now?"