

Chapter Three

One of the pleasures of working for Dr. Mausestod was that he regarded it as a legitimate expense for me to rent a car. It is difficult to express how unusual this attitude is in a client, given that I already have a beater Ford. The little voice that always told me to rent a Cadillac was full of shit, because of course that was one of the few cars anyone would remember seeing. But I didn't want to stint myself under the circumstances, so I usually rented a one-year old Chrysler New Yorker, one grade below the Caddy.

It was an eminently respectable car, not so nice as to look totally out of place in any but the worst neighborhoods, yet quite at home in even the ritziest country-club parking lot. There were always old-money types who chintzed on cars and went for the New Yorker, or even the Newport plus all the accessories. For a second or every-day car, mind you. An even moderately well-off Negro, by contrast, would always go for the 'hog' no matter how much it cost him. At certain stoplights in Hollywood the sight of a flashy pimp worth \$300 in his brand-new Cadillac next to some west-coast Rockefeller worth \$300,000 in a Newport was by no means uncommon.

The advantage of having a second car, if you're going to tail someone around all day, is immense. You have to know the general area you'll be working in, of course, but on a longer-term job that's no problem. You sit the subject down in some restaurant, go switch cars and put on a new hat and jacket and -- boom. You're invisible. The truth is that people are very unobservant.

This is one of the things that makes it fun for me to read British mysteries. Not a lot is lost on those village types, I'll tell you. Lord Plimsoll turns up and starts asking them about that night last month or two years ago, and I'll be damned if the eel-monger's wife doesn't just remember what kind of shoes the dark stranger who hurried past her was wearing, not to mention the scar on the left temple and so forth. It's very convenient, not that it helps you as a reader to solve the mystery. Because all the murderers are such tricky cold-blooded planners, with expert knowledge of rare poisons that make it look like you've been shot, no amount of knowledge about human nature or even actual murderers will help you. The only requirement for a book like that is that you have to be able to compare the solution with the beginning of the book and imagine that a much cleverer version of yourself might have figured it out.

I always rented from the same lot out in South San Francisco where the prices were low. Somehow I never actually skimmed off the top when I got around to presenting the receipts to Mausestod, although it would have been easy enough. I guess that had been my original plan, but by now I was just in the habit of saving him money. I was taking the gamble that Evelyn wasn't getting up anytime real soon, which with someone hitting the pipe is pretty good odds. Dope-peddlers tend to be late risers, and there aren't a whole lot of other reasons for hop-heads to get out of bed.

I rented the car, a dark green, and hired the skinny Mexican who did the oil change to take my flivver down to Chinatown and park it with the extra keys in the glove box at Washington and Stockton. I put on a light fedora and a sober-looking blue serge suit in the reeking bathroom of the garage and headed back uphill to Twin Peaks.

I cruised past once to see that the Packard was still there; it was. I parked further down the hill this time, out of sight of the model home and facing uphill. I

was assuming she'd continue up over Twin Peaks and down towards the downtown, but I could always pull a U-turn if I was wrong. I noticed in the rear-view that there was a public phone about fifty yards further down and I rolled down to it with the brake off. I looked through my phone book until I found the number I was looking for: De La Cruz, Fernando.

Fernando was a cheerful Phillipino lad of twenty who wanted to become a detective. He had gotten the idea that I could help him along this path and I had never had the heart to disabuse him of it. His brother-in-law had hired me to do an easy job for him once, discovering the whereabouts of the Anglo rat who'd gotten little sister in the family way. The rat hadn't seemed any too happy to be found. Fernando was my only contact in Chinatown. He got the phone on the first ring.

"Hello?"

"Is this Fernando?"

"Yes, who is this?"

"Melville Stevens, you remember, the detective."

His voice became excited, "Sí, of course Mr. Stevens, can I help you in some way?"

I felt like Santa Claus. "Actually, Fernando, I was hoping to hire you for a few days, if you're not busy."

"Hire me to help you in your work, or..." he didn't want to get excited and then be embarrassed by the offer of some menial job.

"Yeah. I have a job following a girl who's buying drugs down in Chinatown. I'll need you to fill me in on some background, help me figure out what she's up to, and probably work on a two-man tail. Gumshoe stuff." He exhaled the breath he had been holding.

"I am not busy at all, Mr. Stevens! I would be more than happy to work with you. Should I bring a gun?" He asked this last with even more cheer than usual.

"No. I don't think that will be necessary. In fact, I'd really prefer it if you didn't." A trigger-happy Fernando running around with a heater was about the last thing I needed. "If you don't mind staying by the phone, I should be able to call you sometime this afternoon." Just then I saw the slivery glint off the nose of the Packard as it came out into the road.

"Gotta drift. Talk to you later."

"Good-bye Mr. Stevens!" I tried to remember the last time I had gotten so excited about anything as I ran back to the car and headed off after Evelyn Callaway.

As I'd expected, she headed right for Chinatown. I was betting myself a cigarette that we'd get within three blocks of the flivver when she suddenly turned left on Sacramento and started heading up Nob Hill. The shimmering tracks of the cable car looked like a stepless ladder mounting to the sky. The Packard sped up the steep grade, and I was glad I wasn't driving the Ford. She made a right on Taylor and pulled into a lane cutting through the block opposite Grace Cathedral. I had never been on Pleasant Street before, because my business didn't usually take me to such rarefied heights. I cruised past and parked one block further along, a safe enough procedure on a one-way street.

I walked back just in time to see her being shown into the lobby of the Losckley Arms. It was an older building, but impeccably maintained; it gave the impression of powerful, settled wealth. I slowed down as I passed the entrance, where the glass doors, with their gleaming brass pulls, were just swinging to. She

was wearing a blue hat crushed down over her auburn curls at a rakish angle, and a light blue dress that was so simple that it had to cost a mint. Her white leather purse was dangling from her fingertips as she swung it back and forth; it was a strangely childish gesture. Because the doorman had his back to me I had my first chance to look her right in the face. There was really no reason for a girl who looked like that to be born rich. Someone would have given her the money.

I could catch just a trace of her father's accent in her voice as she said: "Mr. Castleman is expecting me."

The doorman turned and called for someone; by this time the doors had closed, but I heard the word 'penthouse.' I walked on down to the end of the block, thinking. Maybe she had a thing going with Castleman and her father didn't approve. I wondered if she was visiting Philip or if there was a son in the picture. Of course, there was no reason to assume that Philip Castleman was older, but somehow the tone between Callaway and the butler had suggested a lot of history. I circled the block.

There was an old man dressed all in black feeding pigeons out in front of the cathedral. They were flocked around his feet and had even jumped up onto the bench next to him. He gave me the evil eye as I passed, and it made me angry. I looked perfectly respectable today, and I wasn't doing him any harm. Why should I be so hateable? He kept at it. I resisted the urge to go give him hell and walked back around to the car. I looked back just as I got to the corner and saw he had taken out a little pad and was scribbling something in it, giving me a dirtier look than ever. I really seemed to be attracting the crazies.

I sat in the car with the windows rolled down and waited. She was in there about an hour, a little more -- long enough for a late lunch, I guessed. I had a newspaper in front of me as she passed, but there was no need. She never glanced my way. There was something almost eerie in her set expression and blind eyes. If we weren't heading for Chinatown this time I was going to be into myself for quite a few cigarettes.

We did indeed make it to within 3 blocks of the flivver. I parked only a few cars behind her on Clay St. and followed her down the narrow alley of Waverly Place. Waverly is one of those little streets that seems genuinely Chinese, not like the tourist traps along Grant, all rip-off jade bangles and embroidered pillow-cases. A lot of the Tongs and clan associations have their headquarters on Waverly. The street itself is barely wide enough for a car, and it's made even narrower by men in folding chairs smoking outside the Tong buildings and vegetable sellers squatting behind their baskets of long beans and bitter melon. There are no sidewalks; people just step over the high sills of the buildings and into the street, which slopes slightly towards the middle, forming a shallow vee. When I go there, everyone always looks pissed off, and I've never been able to determine whether this might not be the Chinese national character. Maybe it's all laughs and smiles as soon as I clear the scene, I don't know.

No one was looking at either of us, but at the same time I felt certain that if anyone wanted to know whether a tall guy in a blue suit followed a white girl down Waverly place he'd be able to find about a hundred reliable witnesses. Just then an old granny half my height plowed right into me, fully laden with groceries. A little crowd gathered around and stood in a silent ring as I apologized and gathered up her things. She rewarded me with a stony, venomous glare. Her face bore a strong resemblance to a wrinkled shovel blade.

I kept on walking down the street, looking straight ahead, lighting a cigarette as I got to the end of Waverly. I walked down to the left, to where I knew there was a 'phone booth on Grant. It was all tricked out in a green and red pagoda and a tourist was taking a picture of it with a brand-new Leica. Civic improvements.

I called Fernando. Once again, he picked right up.

"Hello."

"Hey, Fernando, it's me, Mel Stevens."

"Hello Mr. Stevens!"

"You know, you can call me Mel, Fernando."

"OK, Mr. Mel!"

I decided that was good enough.

"Listen, I need to talk to you. Should I come up to your place?"

"Well...I have a friend staying with me right now, Mr. Mel, and maybe it's not so nice."

I looked down the street and thought. "Why don't we meet at Confucius Say, then. I'm only a few blocks away."

"OK, I'll be right down, Mr. Mel."

"Oke."

Although the name seemed a little impious to a barbarian like me -- I mean, what were they suggesting the old master said, anyway, "get high"? -- Confucius Say did a brisk business at night. It was done up with red booths and red and gold paper lanterns. During the day it was usually empty except for the Chinese barmaid and a few drunken flies. After the brightness outside the interior seemed syrupy cool and dark. There was a new mural on the wall since I'd been there last, a big gold dragon, but it didn't really brighten things up so much as punctuate the gloom. I ordered a beer and sat down to wait for Fernando. I didn't have to wait very long. My beer was still half-full when he appeared in the doorway.

I have no doubt that Fernando really cut a swathe through the Philipina girls of Chinatown. His gleaming hair was slicked straight back off his low forehead, and a neat black moustache capped off his red mouth and even, white teeth. His taste in clothing was rather restrained for a Philipino boy his age, which is to say that although loud tropical prints played the leading role, solid colors got to strut and fret on the stage a little, too, provided they were bright enough.

He ordered a snort of cheap brandy, and sipped at it warily. I gave him some money to put in the jukebox. He chose sappy romantic songs, but they would do well enough. I didn't want to advertise to the barmaid.

"So, Fernando, I followed the girl down here today, to Waverly Place." His black eyes glittered and he nodded. "The natives pulled a little routine on me, pretty well done, too. I had an inkling they might, though, and I took a look through their legs while I was down there rescuing a muskmelon." I explained about the granny and the groceries. "She was hustled into the doorway of the Teochew Yeo Clan Association, do you know what I mean? Big brick building with Chinese tiles on the upper stories. They have a joss house there up on the top floor, and you can see the balcony from down below." Through all this Fernando had been nodding to beat the band, as if to show an extraordinary degree of comprehension.

"Yes, yes, yes, Mr. Mel. I know that one." He leaned forward across the narrow, scarred table. "They say that *las drogas* can be purchased there. Also other things. They are a powerful clan association, many Teochews here in San Francisco.

They do all kinds of work, but also money-lending, like the Cantonese. Very clever in business. That place is just for the people with family name Yeo, their clan. Everybody named Yeo is like cousins. But it is also the most powerful clan from Teowchew area, so other clans maybe come there too."

"So it's not just a criminal organization?"

He shook his head violently. "No, no. More like a club or -- or a union. They help people who just move to America. You have to pay dues, but then you can find a place to live, or get a loan to start a business. They also have parties every month where you can meet other Teochews. But, I don't know, maybe some Tong has just gotten control of this clan association, so they use it for..."

"As a cover?" I suggested.

He beamed and nodded. "Yes, a cover, exactly."

"Obviously they sell dope to non-Chinese. If I gave you money, could you get in there?"

His low brow wrinkled with concern. "Maybe it's not so good for my reputation."

"I'll tell your Mom it's on my orders, if that'll help." It was a cheap shot, but he reddened anyway. "This girl Evelyn is in real trouble, and I need your help to figure out what's going on, Fernando. I can pay you four dollars an hour."

He did some rapid calculations, and seemed to come to a conclusion he liked. "What kind of drugs does she buy, this Evelyn?"

"Opium. But see what else they offer you, I'm curious about the whole operation. I'm going to go down to the men's room and leave an envelope behind the toilet in the stall with a yard and a half in it. I want you to spend some time seeing what else you can learn about this clan association, and I want you to spend half of it on drugs." His eyes widened. "Tell'em you won the money in a crap game. Tell'em you're having a party and you want a little of everything. See if you can get some coke." I drained my beer and got up to head down to the toilet. His eyes, glistening like wet olives, followed me to the gate at the back of the bar. We passed again on the stairs as he went down to get the money, and this time he didn't look at me at all.

The brilliant afternoon sun blinded me for a moment, and I let people sweep past me as I stood on the corner. Then I sauntered back to the car, making eyes at pretty Chinese girls like a man with time on his hands. The Packard was still adorning the curb. I wouldn't have been too upset if it had been gone, since getting the skivvy from Fernando and sending him off was more important than following her every move at this stage. I was getting the lay of the land rather than tailing her in all seriousness. A Chinese youth was lounging against a building at the entrance to Waverly place. I was dead certain he was on the look-out. I mused a little as I strolled up to Stockton to pick up the flivver.

She had been in there a while now. This tallied with what her maid had said over the phone, that she was often gone all afternoon. Maybe they made you consume the drugs on the spot, but somehow that didn't seem very likely. It would be bad for business. On the other hand, they *would* have all the gear for smoking: mud pipes and those little trays and what-not. The prospect of a real live opium den seemed a bit Barbary Coast for this modern age, but not impossible. The really strange thing about it was the presence of a young, rich, white girl in such a milieu.

It was a sure bet that the Callaways weren't members of any Teochew clan association.

How had she found the place to begin with, and what had made them let her in? The S.F. cops tended to keep their hands off Chinatown as long as it stayed pretty quiet, and they more or less let the Tongs and the associations keep the peace as they saw fit. Even crime victims usually went to a boss in their clan rather than to the bulls. The Chinese discouraged mixing with outsiders, since it could disturb this arrangement and bring the law into everybody's business.

I really wanted a cup of joe, and I thought about walking down to North Beach to get one, but figured there was no point in losing her now. I parked the Ford and went into a novelty shop a bit down the street from Waverly and started looking things over. I had changed into a less reputable hat and felt more myself. The proprietor gave up on me almost immediately and retreated to the back of the store after warning that "you break, you buy." Forty more minutes passed before I saw a slim figure in blue emerge from the mouth of the alley. She wasn't walking unsteadily, but she wasn't walking steadily either. Her eyes were fixed on the horizon now hidden behind the hills, as if it could keep her level. I chanced a look right at her as I crossed the street to the car. There was a dreamy little smile on her lips, and her pupils like pinpricks in her suddenly pale eyes made her look like a sleepy cat. I might as well have been a ghost; she looked right through me.

After she got into the car she sat there for a minute with both hands resting on the wheel. The opening between the buildings where the street sloped away cut a perfect slice of the Bay Bridge, backed by flat blue water and flat blue sky. She looked out at it for quite a while before starting her car.

Once I was sure she was headed back to her house I went back down and switched cars again. There was no good reason for this, except it was more fun to drive the New Yorker. I told myself it would look less suspicious parked on the street in Cliffside. I drove back to my apartment to use the phone.

I mixed myself a vodka and tonic to help me recover from my exertions and called Ted to check on his progress. Marisol picked up the phone. When I told her it was me she set the receiver down on the table hard and went to call for Ted with some asperity. Apparently my boyish charm was wearing thin. Ted's voice sounded preoccupied and far-off.

"Hey Mel."

"Hey partner, how's it going with the gear?"

"Pretty good, I guess. What did you find out today?"

"First the bad news. We'll have to go in at night out in Cliffside and we might as well do it tonight, so be sure to wrap up tight and put your mittens on." I tinkled the ice in my drink suggestively by the mouthpiece, and Ted groaned.

"Now the good news: the girl's joint is going to be empty tomorrow afternoon, so I'll rent the truck from Sherie and we can take it easy for a change."

He sighed again. "Neighbors?"

"Just the one, and Sherie can work her wrong number magic. It'll be eggs in the coffee, Ted, so relax. Everything's jake."

"You know, Mel, I really don't like this kind of thing. Marisol and I have been thinking about it and --"

"Ted, don't let that little Mexican honey browbeat you. Who's putting the carne in the chile, huh? And don't tell me you don't like having money enough to

get your gadgets. If you were working nine to five you wouldn't get anything done in the shack, you know that."

"Yeah, I know, Mel, but I have a family now, and..."

I started making whip-crack noises.

"Fuck you, Mel. Shut up and listen to me. This is the last time I'm doing this with you. This job, and then that's it. You want me to supply the goods, OK, but you'll have to find someone else to set the systems up. I can't take these kinds of risks any more with Marisol and the baby."

"This job. Will you help me with the office, at least?"

He spoke softly into the mouthpiece: "Yeah, OK. But lighten up, OK? Jesus."

"Look, it's up to you, pal. I don't want to twist your arm. Should I come get you later, say around midnight?"

He was barely audible at this point. "Yeah, OK Mel."

I always had to bully Ted into doing these jobs, even though he was genius at them once they started, and afterward he liked to reminisce about our close shaves. They also paid him better than anything else, on top of which he chiselled Mausestod out of a decent but not unreasonable sum on the equipment. He nearly always got the gear back at the end, too, with a few unfortunate exceptions. Sometimes it was too dangerous to go back in for it, and once, one of Mausestod's patients went off the track and set his wife, himself and his house on fire. Those units had been a straight up loss.

Ted was part of a group of crazy electronics hobbyists over in the East Bay, a pitiful bunch who looked like they'd never seen the light of day, which in a place with 275 days of sunshine a year is kind of an accomplishment. I used to get stuck with them at parties at Ted's place because they'd all been dragooned to keep me from talking to Marisol's cousins. Ted sometimes got work through them, since they all recognized he was the best, but it couldn't compare to working with me. The reason he wasn't pulling down the big bucks as an engineer at Northrop or whatever was because Ted didn't like 'the system'. Even though I teased him about being a beatnik, I couldn't really argue with him.

It was getting on for six o' clock, and I hadn't eaten since breakfast. I cooked two steaks bloody rare while the hash browns were frying, and I was just sitting down to eat when the phone rang.

"Hello!"

"Are you OK Mr. Mel? This is Fernando."

I began eating as I talked, cutting big pieces of steak with my one, dull steak knife. "Yeah, I was just eating. What's up?"

"Well, I didn't find out too much yet, but I...bought those things you wanted. Do you want me to bring them over?"

I started to choke on a bit of fat and had to spit it out onto the plate. "Shit, Fernando, you're amazing. Yeah, come over and tell me all about it. Did you eat yet?"

"I am eating later with my friend, her mother is cooking for us."

"Well, I guess I can't compete with that." I gave him my address, hung up the phone, and ate. It was delicious. After I washed up I decided to read while waiting for Fernando, but I had only just picked up my complete Shakespeare when I heard a hesitant knock on the door. I let him in. He had changed since I saw him earlier, and looked even more resplendent in a bamboo-and-orchid print silk shirt. The teeth of a comb had left even, gleaming ridges in his black hair.

"Have a seat, Fernando." I went to mix up a couple of drinks. He looked around the apartment. There wasn't all that much to see: a tired sofa and loveseat set, an oblong coffee table with a cigarette burn at one edge, shelves full of books, a small kitchen visible through an open doorway. In the other room there was a desk and chair, and a Murphy bed, still down but made up. Home sweet.

"You know Fernando," I said, passing him his vodka and tonic, "you're the fastest detective in the West. Seriously, that was quick."

He blushed and shook his head deprecatingly. "Thanks, Mr. Mel."

"So, what's the score?"

"Well, I talked to someone I know in my building, a Chinese guy. He smokes opium and so he is always looking for money."

I interrupted. "I'll pay you back for that kind of thing, Fernando, if you keep track of it." He was pleased by this demonstration of trust and smiled widely, exposing his perfect white teeth. I didn't mention that it wasn't my money.

"He says that the Teochew clan association used to be just a normal clan association, everything just like usual, until about one year ago. Then some big Teochew boss came from the mainland with his guys, and they took the place over. He was a very big boss in China, so the SF bosses couldn't say no. In Chinatown there is talk about this guy, but quiet, because he is part of a secret group, very powerful."

"And this new leader started the dope sales?"

Fernando nodded vigorously. "My neighbor, he says that one one of the old bosses of the clan didn't like this and he tried to make a rebellion against the new boss, and they cut his eyes and tongue out and his" Fernando grimaced painfully and pointed to his crotch, "and left him at his family house."

"How charming."

"So, my neighbor says he will take me there, and I went with him. You know the door on Waverly, right?"

I nodded.

"Well, you go in there, but the place isn't in that same building. It's hard to say where, really, because they keep the passage very dark and they lead you all around, up and down the stairs. I tried to keep track of the turnings, but --" he spread his hands in a gesture of helplessness.

"I'm sure you did your best."

"A very big guy did the leading, a Chinese guy with little eyes like a pig and hair that sticks up." Fernando splayed his fingers out from behind his head to indicate a shock of hair. "I end up in a little room with a very old Chinese guy, with a long pigtail, wearing Chinese clothes, a dirty blue robe. He talks pidgin only, very bad English. I tell him what I want, that I am having a party, and give him the money. He went away through a door with a curtain; I could see a little bit of hall on the other side, but that's all. The room smelled bad, stale. Like opium, I guess, or else just a joss house with no windows. Sweet, like. The big guy waited with me. I tried to talk to him, friendly, but he didn't say nothing. Very Chinese, just." Fernando made a stone face and glared at me blankly with his jet eyebrows lowered. Then his face relaxed into its habitual merry half-smile, and he went on. "I waited maybe ten minutes or less, and the old man came back with this."

He reached into the front pocket of his pants and brought out a package folded up neatly in a sheet of Chinese newspaper. Within it there was another, smaller packet of red and gold joss paper. Inside that there was a little treasure

trove: twenty handrolled cigarettes, sticks of tea, obviously; a glassine envelope plump with white powder; another with about twenty yellow pills inside; another smaller bundle that was probably heroin; and a foil-wrapped piece of something that looked like a big toffee. I picked it up and unrolled it; inside there was a tarry black lump that smelled of burnt sugar. I tasted a little of the brown tar that had stuck to the foil and it was bitter as sin: opium.

"They have good prices," I said, looking down at Fernando's haul.

"Yes, I think so too. I was ready to bargain with them, but then it seemed stupid, so I just left. They walked me out a different door, onto Waverly, just two doors down. The prices, it's very strange, but I think they try to make the other sellers go out of business, so they will have a... a monopoly," he finished triumphantly.

"Hmmm, yeah." I undid the glassine envelope containing the pills and shook a few out in my hand. "What do you think these are?"

"Speed', I asked them." Fernando was flushed with success.

"This is great, Fernando. I'm very happy with your work. So, do you want any of this?" I pointed to the marijuana cigarettes, and he looked bashful.

"I...if you are going to throw them away, Mr. Mel...but I don't really..."

I handed him half of the jujus. "On the house. I'm going to have my partner test some of the rest of this, for purity and so forth."

Fernando nodded. "They warned me that the heroin is very strong, eighty percent, so they told me to be careful. The old man said it is possible even to snort it instead of using the needles." He paused for a moment. "One other person came while I was waiting, a white man." This was interesting.

"He was a little shorter than you, with blond hair. Kind of thin and tired looking, a young guy. He seemed like a rich boy, very nice clothes and also...just rich. A different guy was leading him, Chinese, about my height but *very* ugly. They came to the little room where we were and passed right through to the other side, through the curtain."

"And you didn't see him come out?"

"No, and I also waited for while at the end of the street, until I thought it was too long. He never came out. Also there is one more thing. All the Chinese people are afraid of this new boss of the Teochew clan association, very afraid. They say he is part of a secret group, and he has magic powers." He smiled more widely than usual, as if to show that he didn't believe in magic powers. "I asked one other person, a Chinese girl I know. She lives by my mother's. But she got very scared and she wouldn't say anything. She said I should stop working for you and not ask so many questions."

"You told her you were working for me?" I must have sounded a little angry.

"This girl...she is a very good friend of mine, you know? I just..." Fernando hung his head.

"Yeah, well be careful with the Chinese birds, even if they are your special friends." I tried to look stern and wise.

"I'm sorry Mr. Mel."

"Yeah, OK. Go have some fun at you other friend's mother's place. See what else you can learn about this new boss. I'll call you tomorrow." Fernando got up to go, looking a little chastened. "And Fernando--" he looked at me, "-- you did a great job today."

He was in the best of spirits as he headed out.

As soon as he left, I took the hanging mirror off the wall in the bedroom and a razor from the bathroom and laid out some lines of the coke. I grabbed a fin out of my wallet and rolled it up tight into a little tube, clamped between my thumb and forefinger to keep the edges even. A diploma in the school of life. The coke was beautiful, clumping into even, soapy flakes. When chopped, it glittered like the sand on a perfect beach. After I snorted one line into each nostril I ran the side of my index finger over the mirror where the lines had been and then rubbed it on my gums. Just as I touched my mouth, the coke hit my brain, and it was like all the lights and buzzers on the back of a pinball machine were lit up at once in a spasm of pure pleasure: tilt, tilt, tilt. Five minutes later I started chopping up the makings of another line.