



THE HARLAN ELLISON COLLECTION

*T*HE DEADLY STREETS



The Deadly Streets

Harlan Ellison



**IN LOVING MEMORY OF
MY FATHER
LOUIS LAVERNE ELLISON**

“A city sidewalk by itself is nothing. It is an abstraction. It means something only in conjunction with the buildings and other uses that border it, or border other sidewalks very near it. The same might be said of streets, in the sense that they serve other purposes besides carrying wheeled traffic in their middles. Streets and their sidewalks, the main public places of a city, are its most vital organs....

“...if a city’s streets are safe from barbarism and fear, the city is thereby tolerably safe from barbarism and fear. When people say that a city, or part of it, is dangerous or is a jungle what they mean primarily is that they do not feel safe on the sidewalks.

“But sidewalks and those who use them are not passive beneficiaries of safety or helpless victims of danger. Sidewalks, their bordering uses, and their users, are active participants in the drama of civilization versus barbarism in cities....

“Today barbarism has taken over many city streets, or people fear it has, which comes to much the same thing in the end.... And as they fear them, they use them less, which makes the streets still more unsafe.”

Jane Jacobs, THE DEATH AND LIFE OF GREAT AMERICAN CITIES

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NEW INTRODUCTION

AVOIDING DARK PLACES

In 1974 the Mystery Writers of America awarded me an Edgar Allan Poe statuette for the “best mystery story” of the year. It was a story called “The Whimper of Whipped Dogs.” You can find it in my collection, NO DOORS, NO WINDOWS. It’s a story about street violence, based on the now-legendary murder of Catherine Genovese in New York’s Kew Gardens section, 13 March 1964. It took the rapist-killer over half an hour to slaughter the woman, as she dragged herself around almost an entire city block, screaming for help. For those few of you who may not remember this case—now solidly entrenched as cultural mythology—the horrifying extra-added-attraction that separated the murder of Kitty Genovese from all the other unspeakable rape-murders that have become, sadly, a commonplace staple filler for tabloid back pages, was this:

No one helped her. She screamed long, and she screamed loud, and no one helped her. There were witnesses. Thirty-eight of them. They watched from darkened windows; some even pulled up chairs for a more comfortable view. One turned up her radio so she wouldn’t have to hear the shrieks of agony. As Kitty was being raped in an apartment vestibule—already having been knifed repeatedly, already half-dead—one of the tenants opened his apartment door, saw the necrophiliac attack...and quickly closed the door. He even knew Kitty. Thirty-five minutes after her first screams were heard, at 3:55 A.M., someone finally called the 102nd Precinct. Three minutes later a patrol car was there. The killer was gone, however; and Kitty Genovese died in the ambulance a few minutes before five o’clock; DOA Queens General Hospital.

When “The Whimper of Whipped Dogs” was first published in a magazine in June 1973, nine years after Kitty Genovese’s death (a million excuses and explanations why those 38 people had refused to help her after Kitty Genovese’s death), I received a floodtide of letters telling me things were very different in New York now. The writers of those letters assured me New Yorkers were more concerned now, that they no longer stood by as people were robbed or beaten or killed. They called me to task for disinterring a moldering corpse of ages past. They said such things could no longer happen.

Yet in early 1975, when I first wrote this introduction, as I write this, a nurse was stabbed to death in precisely the same Kew Gardens street *and one of the observers who watched the murder, and did nothing, was one of the women who had sat by as Kitty Genovese was butchered and defiled.*

This book speaks directly to the authors of those letters chiding me, because *Plus ça change, plus c’est la même chose.*

A few weeks ago, my housekeeper, Eusona, laid a beauty on me. She reads the newspapers: I haven't the stomach for it these days. So she has become my gazette.

The story, which she found on the back page somewhere, was a quickie. Woman parking her car in Manhattan was driven to a frenzy by a dude in a VW who pulled into the space snout-first behind her, as she was backing up. As he parked, she reached into the glove compartment of her dashboard, pulled out a revolver, jumped out of the car, stalked over to the VW, aimed the weapon through the window and shot to death the man driving, and his two female passengers.

These two stories took place in New York, but just so you don't feel all teddibly superior to those barbarian Megalopolitans, here's a lovely one from a large Midwestern city (which one, I cannot remember right now, but it was on the evening network news). A couple of thugs broke into the apartment of an old Czech woman. At knife-point they demanded she give them all her money. She laughed at them, telling them all she had was about three American dollars worth of Czechoslovak *koruna*, a currency so unstable and unacceptable that the exchange control law of 1 January 1954 prohibits its import and export. She offered them the *koruna* and continued laughing. Wrong move.

They spotted her gold fillings, bust out her teeth, and got away with about \$1100 worth of marketable gold.

As horrifying as we may find Charlie Bronson's actions in *Death Wish*, his vigilante tactics of stalking and killing muggers in New York strike a sympathetic vibration in each of us, though we hate it in ourselves, though most of us would deny we feel the same urge from time to time.

You feel it, I feel it.

Ten years ago, I was worked over pretty fair by a couple of over-six-foot heavyweights. One of them held me while the other one pounded my face into guava jelly. When the local bacon finally arrived, the guys had split. One was a deckhand on pleasure yachts, with a string of priors for mayhem that made Hurricane Carter look like Christopher Robin's nanny. He skipped the country, so I was told. But the other one was a certified flake, an overly *macho* clown who had been married to a busty film starlet, had bombed out as a stockbroker, and who owed money all over Hollywood. We hauled him into the City Attorney's office, got him cold when the Man suggested we each take a lie detector test. I rolled up my sleeve right there and said, "Let's get it on!" The flake began to hem and haw, and his attorney fumfuh'd it was an invasion of something or other. Nonetheless, I took the polygraph test and it backed my story one hundred per cent. Attorney's office put out a warrant for his arrest. But the cops didn't bother looking for him.

We went to court, almost two years ago, and got a financial judgment against him for five grand, since it was obvious I wasn't going to be able to slap the sonofabitch in jail. Even though I had witnesses to unprovoked assault, battery, criminal assault, and a host of etceteras, the cops were simply too busy busting kids with grass in their possession to keep a pair of homicidal thugs off the streets.

He can keep the five grand. Just let me have fifteen minutes alone with the muther.

I'd take along a tire iron.

Not for the beginning; I want that pleasure barehanded. But after that interlude, I'd need the tire iron. I'd start with his legs. Lay him out on the floor and lean his left leg up against the wall and then just jump on the angle, right below the kneecap. Like snapping a rotted piece of cord-wood for the fireplace. Then I'd use the tire iron to break it back in the opposite direction, so bone-chips would get in the kneecap socket, so he'd walk with a limp for the rest of his barbaric life. Then I'd do his hands. Forearms with the tire iron, wrists with the tire iron, fingers one by one...

Make you uneasy? Make you sick? Makes *me* sick, to know I've got that in me somewhere. If I told you I'm a pacifist, would you believe me? Not for a second, and I wouldn't blame you; even though it's true. Let me make you even more uneasy; I'm no different than you.

Have you ever been beaten...or raped...or robbed...or even been dismissed cavalierly by some petty authority?

Think back. You know I'm telling the truth. We are all the same inside these skins. We all want to exact revenge. The invasion of our personal space, the brutalization, the debasement, the shame at not having been able to duke it out like Bruce Lee or one of the million short, smart movie/television stars who play the rabbit till they can take it no longer and then lash out and deck the hairy bully. Gary Cooper in Capra's *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town*: at the end of the trial where the forces of greed and evil try to convince the court his millions should be taken away from him because he's "pixilated" and the judge asks Deeds if there's anything else, and Cooper as Deeds says, "Yes, one more thing," and he hauls off and knocks crooked attorney Douglass Dumbrille stone cold in the courtroom. Alan Ladd in *The Glass Key*: having been worked over by pithecanthropoid William Bendix and his buddy, Rusty, played by Eddie Marr, fights back, sets fire to the room where's he's been kept prisoner, throws himself out a window and escapes, enabling him later to pound the shit out of Bendix. Jan-Michael Vincent in *Buster and Billie*: his sweetheart having been raped and bludgeoned to death, finds his ex-school chums, the gang who killed her, and goes berserk, killing two of them by smashing in their heads with a pool cue and a billiard ball. And, of course, Charlie Bronson in *Death Wish*.

But those are only movies, you say.

Are they? Think back. You know I'm telling the truth. If your wife or sister or girl friend was ever assaulted, if your husband or brother or son was ever stomped or beaten, didn't you wish you had that fifteen minutes alone with the nameless, faceless motherfuckers who did the deed? Didn't you fantasize it in your mind, some ghastly weapon in your hand that would prevent their getting at you as you crippled them? If you say you never held such a thought...you are either a liar or nobler than any other member of the human race.

Because the unspoken terror that lives with all of us in big cities these days is a constant. It runs in our bloodstream, it tingles in our skin, it aches in our bones. It's better for us here in Los Angeles than for you in Detroit or Pittsburgh or Washington, D.C., or New York. But not much.

And so, in that unseamed existence beyond regional or ethnic or religious differentiations, we are all the same. All come to that place where the fear we've been taught is so omnipresent that it can be ignored until its intensity reaches panic level.

Background noise, ever present static, the ticking of the clock in the darkened bedroom, the hum of generators underfoot, the clattering of the crickets. Always with us. Always there. Unnoticed, unheard, unknown...*always there*.

Until the moment comes when we become aware of it because it assumes corporeal reality. Like this:

On a trip to New York, I found myself at nine o'clock at night—having worked all day on the galleys of one of my books soon to go to press—descending in a semi-empty elevator at 919 Third Avenue. Bone-tired, leaning up against the wall of the elevator car, attaché case hanging from one hand, almost phased-out. Semi-empty. There was the one other passenger. A very large, very nasty-looking young man in a long and dirty topcoat.

In elevators, unless one is garrulous, one stares at the numbers lighting one after another, or pretends to be deep in thought; one never looks at the other passengers, unless one is a cut-up. I am garrulous, I am a cut-up; but not on this occasion. I was too exhausted. I merely leaned against that wall and waited for the long descent to end.

Everything that happened next, happened in a matter of seconds.

Without looking at him, but nonetheless seeing him clearly out of the corner of my eye, I perceived my companion's hand reaching down into his topcoat pocket for something weighty. Don't ask me how I knew, don't even suggest I could have been dead wrong: I'll admit I may have been way off-base, but in my *gut* I knew I was right: he was reaching for a knife. Some nice, long, heavy gravity knife or shake, like the ones I used to see uptown around 101st and First Avenue. His hand was deep in the pocket when, without moving or looking at him, speaking to the floor where my eyes were directed, I said, in a deep and gravelly voice, "If that hand comes out of that pocket with anything on the end of it but fingers, I'm going to kick your brains all over this elevator, motherfucker."

He paused. Hand deep in pocket.

And then, very slowly, very smoothly, he brought his hand out with the fingers spread, palm forward showing he held nothing. He moved finally and carefully, deeper into his corner, and he watched me.

When we got to the first floor, he was out of the car quickly, was signing the guard's register at the front door before I was even out of the elevator myself, and as I crossed the lobby of 919 Third Avenue, he was out the door and gone.

Yes, I may have been wrong. He may have been just a young guy working late in one of the upper offices. Maybe. But the noise level of fear had mounted too high to be ignored. It had assumed corporeal reality. And he was quickly gone.

I *know* if I hadn't spoken up, just psychopathic enough in my tone and phrasing, that he would have braced me with a knife. I learned the next day, from my then-publisher, Norman Goldfind, that there had been a dozen or so knifings, robberies, muggings, and even a rape in that building over the past two years. And a man had his throat slashed in a toilet in that building just a few months ago. *I knew*. As you know.

So don't judge your humble author too quickly. Don't cluck your tongue and denigrate me for the insensate violence that exists just below the civilized veneer. I am a survival type, an animal that *knows*. One gets that way in cities like New York.

I learned it a long time ago, when I was gathering material for WEB OF THE CITY (republished recently in an Ace Books edition) and for this book. So the Mystery Writers of America gave me an award for a “mystery” story that is no more a mystery than any other example of mimetic fiction. “The Whimper of Whipped Dogs” is a fantasy that explains reality in a way reality cannot explain itself.

In the same way, the stories in this book hold up that mirror to the real world, turning it slightly, so you can see what goes on around you from a new angle.

Eleven of the stories were written for this book back in the Fifties, when such things as kid gangs existed in the streets of New York. They still exist, but they’re very different now. In the Fifties, the juvies waged war against each other, and “civilians” were pretty much exempt from the slaughter, unless a random pedestrian happened to walk into the path of a zip gun slug. Today, the gangs rob and kill and spend their time helping to raise the national crime statistics by 17% every month.

Those eleven stories now become history.

There are five others I’ve added to what comprised the first edition of this book. Several of them are up-to-date exercises in street terror. They are history in the making.

But all of them, even though mere fictions, professional lies told to amuse or titillate you, bear within their plotted little boundaries the seeds of what has become the tone of the cities: fear. That unwavering threnody we hear in the night, the hum of people with aerosol cans of mace in their purses, Dobermans on leashes, Fox Locks on their doors, terror in their hearts.

Sixteen stories of violent kids, murderous adults, psychos with no sane reason to kill, streetwise thugs who make their livings preying on the weak and the unwary.

And if you should ask me, “Why tell these terrible stories? Why scare us with such fables?” Why, then I answer: because it is better to know, to see the face of fear, so you can ready yourself. Because living in ignorance is no longer blissful. It’s suicidal.

The deadly streets *are* the jungles of barbarism Jane Jacobs speaks of, and if you wish to survive in those streets, you must arm yourselves with awareness. Perhaps these stories are only cautionary tales. When they first appeared they were curiosities. It’s just barely possible they are now tools for staying alive.

HARLAN ELLISON
Los Angeles

INTRODUCTION TO THE FIRST EDITION

SOME SKETCHES OF THE DAMNED

Ever dig a fifteen-year-old boy—his face fresh out of the candy-pimples stage—ripping another kid's belly open with a switchblade, slicing the other kid's face to stringers using a raw potato studded with razor-blades?

Or a sixteen-year-old girl, just beginning to fill out like a woman, battering another chick to death across the breasts with a foot-and-a-half length of tire chain?

Ever see a war party of twenty studs, all screaming as though they were battling for the Cause, come roaring out of an alley and plow into an unwary group of kids?

And the war that follows...ever see anything like that?

Not if you live in Plymouth, Massachusetts or Cuyahoga Falls, Ohio or Cadiz, Kentucky you haven't. And you probably never will. Pray to your God you never will! You think it's rough when your kid has a couple of beers, or stays out all night getting loaded on cheap grass, or gives you the lip? Gentle reader, you've got it made. Your kid is a paragon of the virtues. And you know why?

Because your towns have trees and sky and friendliness and neighborliness and love and a small school system, and a purpose for any youngster who wants one.

But if you live in New York, or Philadelphia, or Chicago, or San Francisco...you *know* what I'm talking about. You *know* those kids live on the housestoops and the streets, and in the gutters. You *know* they mangle their hands nervously, waiting for something to happen. And when it doesn't—they make it happen.

You know, because they're *your* kids.

You *know* about the Pachucos in San Diego, you *know* about the hoods and studs of South Philly, you *know* about the pitched street battles of New York's Blooded Royals and Golden Dragons, their zip-guns blowing each other to hell. You've heard about the Happy Gentlemen and the Greeks, the Puerto Rican Flyers and the Jolly Stompers. All of them crave their kicks, and if they don't fall into those kicks in the course of an average day, they *scratch* for the kicks.

Those kicks, and those kids, are the subjects of these stories.

A word or two hundred about the stories in this book.

With the exception of one, each story is based in verifiable fact. Truth incarnate.

Unlike many of the books or magazine stories you may have read, these stories all had their starts with the kids, in the gangs, in the streets. There is no collusion here. I know they are facts because I *got* them in the streets, running with a kid gang. For ten weeks I lived as one of them: going on their raids, dating their debts, attending their meetings, undergoing their initiation.

For ten weeks I was a Baron. I hung out on Stuyvesant Street, in that section of Brooklyn called Redhook. For ten weeks I wore jeans and a black leather jacket and a wide black belt with its buckle honed to razor-sharpness.

When I came out, the glamour of being the JD's Hemingway, of living dangerously and writing about it, was gone. These were no little Dillingers, about whom legends could be spun. There's no glamour about catching a knife in the throat. No glamour in being stomped to death. No fast living with thirty or forty teen-aged punks circling in on you, itching to use lead pipe on your face and body. No glamour at all.

It stinks. On ice.

Instead, there was the need to set down the way of it, the smell of it, and the terror of it. For them. For the ones we've damned to live their lives in those deadly streets.

The kids live in tenements and old brownstones that are never completely free of grime or the smell of urine. They don't like it. They know they've got a crowded, rotten school setup, and they don't feature *that*, either. When they hit eighteen they know they might as well go into the service (because they can't afford college) and they don't see any point in becoming a shipping clerk or a Western Union toady. "I'll be shippin' out inna Merch Marine next Summer," one of them says, and there's a hopelessness in his voice, a defiance that suggests he's going because he's got no place else to go. Help me, man!

That's what they've got to look forward to: parents who don't give a creeping damn what happens to them; cops who know only that kids on the street spark trouble; teachers who wish they were paid more money, but usually don't earn what they already get; a loss of faith in their religion, and a firmness of belief that Uncle Sam will get them eventually.

Damned. Treadmilled. Buck-passed by the parents, the teachers, the clergy and the politicians who have to worry about bigger and better Christmas decorations for the lampposts.

So they snatch their kicks while they can, and there they are...in the deadly streets...the streets where they learn their survival, and their social habits, and their sex. The rules. *All* the rules.

There aren't many rules in the primer for gang kids, but they all count. They're all easily understood because they use a simple and sound philosophy, one that proves itself true every day for them. The rules: the gang is mother, father, home, club and highest authority; it's a stinking life, man, so get your stomps before they stomp *you!*

When he's down, go for the head and groin. Never make it on the scene unless you're shanked and the blade's got six inches on an oiled switch. Avoid cops. Play it cool. Take what you want, and tell them but nothing.

And most important...*don't get caught!*

Because of this philosophy, in many cases the social worker can't get to the heart of the stories. That was why I ran with the gangs...so I could write about them as they really are.

The stories themselves are fiction; they are intended primarily as entertainment. But in each one there is a solid and truthful grain of fact from the streets. The grain that led to the story.

That grain of truth is *not* intended as entertainment.

It is intended that perhaps one kid out of the thousands who run the alleys will read this book. And when he does, it will make the difference.

The difference between that kid's dying in bed at the age of eighty with his wife

and kids around him, a successful life behind him...or dying at the age of fifteen in a dirty city street, at 4 A.M., with a .32 zip slug in his head.

In those ten weeks with the kids, I found them to be basically honest and decent, like the kids in Cuyahoga Falls or Cadiz or Plymouth. Decent but damned!

All they need is a chance—a square chance. Nobody's asking for charity; dammit, all they need are a few breaks, and they'll come through.

It is not, however, the purpose of these stories to reform the slums or to take the kids out of the deadly streets. If the stories make you think, that's fine. If they make you try to find out where your son or daughter stays till all hours of the morning, that's even better.

But first of all, if they make good reading, I've accomplished what I set out to do. There's blood and unhappiness in these stories, and none of them are pretty; but then, there's *nothing* pretty about life for these kids. I simply hope you don't shrug it off and say this guy is a real tear-jerker...don't shrug and say these things *don't* happen. Because they happen every living day of the year!

There's darkness and violence and confusion here; the reflections of a modern teen-ager's life in an age of political immorality, guided missiles, psychiatry and high prices, and waiting to be planted when your time comes. But there's more, I hope.

It's easy to get carried away with the blood. But if you do, you miss the point each story tries to make.

A point about the kids.

The ones who deserve a chance to get out of the deadly streets.

The damned ones, the doomed ones.

HARLAN ELLISON
1958

RAT HATER

I had them bring Chuckling Harry Kroenfeld to me in the old Steel Pier warehouse.

Most people don't remember that warehouse, but back in the Twenties it was one of the best in the city. Handled cargo, month in and month out, with no slack season. It was a good warehouse—far off where a scream couldn't be heard, and dirty...very dirty; that was important.

I remembered the old Steel Pier warehouse. It was a bit of memory to me. It was the jump-off place for my sister. Well, she didn't actually jump; she was pushed. But it didn't make very much difference after it was done.

Harry wouldn't like being brought by two cheap hoods, but then, he was in no position to complain. Twenty-five years ago he might have been able to do something about it, but that was twenty-five years ago. Harry and the mob had fallen out a long while back. He was lucky they had let him live after the break. But again, that doesn't matter now.

Neither of the pistoleros who brought Harry to me knew the story. It wouldn't have done any good to tell them, either. They were being paid and they didn't care why I was going to kill an old, fat man. Money was money, and as Chuckling Harry used to point out to me—before he'd had my sister shot, weighted, and put in the harbor—business is undeniably business.

He was right, in a way. But revenge is revenge, too.

When they opened the seamed metal door and pushed Harry through, I was surprised at how much he'd changed. I just stared at him for a moment, hearing with another part of my senses the two hired thugs bolting the door from the outside.

That didn't worry me, of course. I had a key I could use to get out—afterward. But right now, we were locked in together. The only thing that kept us apart—and it was a very real barrier, I assure you—was the .45 I held oh, so steady in my left hand.

"Hello, Harry." I said.

He was lying against the metal wall, the back of one fat hand scrunched to his mouth. I'd never seen eyes quite that large before. Or skin quite that pasty-looking. But then, I'd never actually killed a man before. Harry'd never died before, either, which rather evened things.

"Lew. L-Lew Greenberg. Hi, Lew. How long's it been?" Chuckling Harry had always been a lousy bluff. He was stuttering and sweating; I expected him to slip and slide in his own wet in another minute.

"Well, Harry," I said, considering—the .45 up to my lips in thought—"it's been about eighteen years. Right after the Christmas jobs in '57. Oh, I'm sure you remember, Harry."

I sat down on a packing crate that creaked under me, though I don't weigh much, and crossed my legs.

"Oh, yeah, sure—sure! Now I remember, Lew. It's good—good to—uh—see you, Lew." He put the *strangest* inflection on the word "see."

There was only one light in the warehouse. Right in the center of the space I'd

cleared of garbage and boxes; it cast a disc of yellow brilliance. All the rest of the place was shadowy dark. I'd fixed it up just for this. Even so, it was difficult telling whether Chuckling Harry was more frightened of the gun or me.

I was disappointed a bit. I'd expected more shock on his part. But I consoled myself with knowing it would come in time.

Chuckling Harry made as if to rise, watching me carefully to see if I'd stop him. I didn't, and he got up, brushing off his suit.

"That isn't a very expensive suit, Harry."

He looked down at it, stretched over his paunch, as though seeing it for the very first time. "Oh, well... You know how it is, Lew. Wanted a suit in a hurry...".

"Did you go to one of the fat men's stores, Harry?"

He grew red, the blossoming of it making his dead white face all the whiter. He'd never liked being reminded he was an obese hulk.

"Fat man's store, hell! I got this uptown! Bought it at..." He started to continue, caught another short look at the automatic in my lap, and fell silent, licking his droopy lower lip with a pink tip of tongue.

"Bet that only ran about seventy bucks, Harry. Cheap. I remember the days you used to have thirty suits, all tailor made, all over three hundred bucks each. Remember those days, Harry?"

He waved his blocky hands inadequately. "You know how things are, Lew. Times change. Why, in the old days, I was..." He ran down of his own accord, licking his lips again.

"Come on over and take a chair," I said, motioning to the lone straight-backed chair in the center of the circle of light. He moved toward it slowly, looking around as if to make certain no one else was in the warehouse with us.

"No one else, Harry," I said quietly.

He sat down in the chair, sliding forward a bit, allowing for his bulk. The round, saggy columns of his legs were placed far apart, supporting him. His buttocks drooped over the sides of the seat. I knew he was wondering what was going on.

He was still Chuckling Harry. He was still fat—I don't think anything could change that. Except, perhaps, death. But Chuckling Harry Kroenfeld had altered much since the day eighteen years before, when I'd told him I had to quit the mob and find steadier employment to support my mother. Then he had been dynamic, powerful. Now he was tired and beaten. He was washed-up and washed-out Harry was an old man at last.

He still had an almost monk-like circlet of white hair ringing his bald head; his eyes were still that fishy, watery blue; his face was still puffy and drooping with lard. Looking at him there in the chair I could almost imagine the, rosebud-pink lips forming the words they'd formed when he'd said goodbye.

So long, Lew. Here's a couple hundred, just to keep you going. No hard feelings about Sheila, of course!

Of course. He'd chuckled then, and handed me the two crisp hundred dollar bills, which I'd taken. Of course.

He wasn't chuckling now. He looked tired and unhappy, and getting more frightened as the seconds passed.

"Wh-what are you doing these days, Lew?" he asked, toying with a pinkie ring on

his right hand.

“I have a string of supermarkets, Harry,” I answered, amiably.

“Oh, yeah, yeah,” he said, waving a pudgy hand in slow remembrance. “We heard about it around. Heard you were doing real well. Real well.” He chuckled and licked his lips again, looking around, as though expecting someone else to add to the conversation.

The conversation was threatened by lag, and I certainly didn’t want that to happen. “Do you see those ropes attached to the chair, Harry?” I pointed the muzzle of the .45 at the thick cords.

A tic leaped in his right cheek, but he bent from the hips, looking at them. He didn’t answer.

“I dislike asking you to do it, Harry,” I said, politely, “but would you mind tying your feet securely?”

“Say! What is this!” Harry shouted, almost leaping up. This time I wagged the gun, indicating it would be wisest if he sat where he was. I ran a hand through my thinning hair, smiling broadly at Chuckling Harry Kroenfeld.

“I’d appreciate it if you’d tie your feet, Harry. It would facilitate matters a great deal.” I half-rose, the gun leveling as I did.

He looked at me once, quickly, seeing the big smile on my face and the big hole in the front of the automatic. He bent once more and began wrapping the thick ropes about his ankles. “Up higher, and tie them to the legs of the chair.” I directed him, seeking the most secure job.

By the time he was finished, perspiration had beaded his forehead, some of it running crookedly down his face, into the neck of his shirt.

He’d done a good job, though. I’ve got to give Harry that. I was going to give him more, of course, but I gave him that first. I don’t forget old times.

He straightened, wiping at his florid cheeks. “Say, look, Lew, I don’t know what this is all about, but I’ve got to get home. I don’t know why you had those two guys grab me when I closed the shop, but I’ve got a kid waiting, and my wife holding dinner for me, and I’ve got to get back...”

“Yes.” I cut him off. “It was rather neat the way the boys checked what time you closed, wasn’t it, Harry?” I continued to smile. My nose itched, so I rubbed it slowly.

“You don’t understand, Lew; I don’t have time for fun tonight. The wife and kid are waiting and maybe some other time, if you give me a call, we can get together...”

It was pleasant cutting him off, so I did it again. In the old days, nobody cut off Chuckling Harry Kroenfeld. “Still the same wife, Harry?”

“Yeah, yeah,” he answered, nervously, “still Helen. We got a kid now. Robert.” He bit his lip, looking pained, and I could tell his eyes were saying, *I’m an old man now! Please leave me alone!* Yes, he was old, but some people hadn’t gotten the chance to grow old.

“How old’s your son, Harry?” I inquired conversationally. I was interested, truly.

“Seven.” He answered me reluctantly, and I could tell he had lost his sense of hospitality. He wouldn’t be much of a conversationalist from here on out. But of course it didn’t matter.

I stood up. “Would you mind wrapping your arms around the back of the chair, Harry, I’d like to—”

“Goddamit, what the hell is this? What do you want from me, Greenberg! No, I won’t wrap—”

I’m afraid I lost my temper a bit. I grated the words really fine throwing them at him: “Get your lousy, stinking hands around the back of that chair, Harry, before I blow your guts out through your stinking fat back!”

However, I must admit it was the kind of talk Harry had always understood best, and he slowly slid his jelly-roll fat arms around the back, joining the fingers.

I picked up the coil of rope from behind the crate and walked over to him. Then I cooled down, and became rather ashamed of myself. “I’m sorry, Harry,” I said, tightening the ropes around his hands, tying his arms securely to the chair. I was surprised how much like a baby’s his hands were. “It’s been a long time since I’ve lost my temper. Forgive me, Harry?”

He didn’t answer. I put the barrel of the gun at his ear. “Forgive me?” I asked again, most sincerely.

He bobbed his head, his sagging jowls bobbing humorously. “Yeah, yeah, I forgive you, Lew.” I finished tying him.

I went back to the packing crate, sucking on my lower lip in thought. “So your son’s seven now, is he?” I nodded my head in admiration. “Bet he’s a cute little boy. Just like his pop,” I said, smiling toward Chuckling Harry but keeping the gun on him.

“How old would Shelia be now, Harry?” I asked, interested, though I knew, of course.

I could tell he knew what this was all about, suddenly. If I’d thought he was white before, now he became chalky. He shook, and the chair clattered a bit on the cement floor.

“Look...Lew...that’s all in the past...you wouldn’t...I’m an honest guy now, Lew, I broke with the mob years ago...I’ve been going straight...I’m sorry, Lew...she just found out a few things, and I couldn’t chance having her around! She was too dangerous...you understand, *don’t you, Lew?*”

He was bubbling, froth starting to ooze from a corner of his mouth. I didn’t feel sorry for him.

“Do you still hate rats, Harry?” I asked, looking back over my shoulder at the dimness of the warehouse.

His head came up sharply; his nostrils quivered; the tic came once more. “R-rats?”

“Why, yes, Harry. Rats. I know how much you hated them.”

I remembered how he’d almost killed one of the guys in the gang who’d wrapped a rat as a birthday present gag. How he’d taken special pains to live near the top of all buildings, so the chance of getting rodents would be smaller. The time he’d jellied into a heap, until three of the boys had killed a rat that ran across his path.

“Rats, Harry,” I repeated, savoring the word.

“W-why? Why do you ask? Yeah, I suppose I still don’t like ’em. So what?” He didn’t know whether to answer or not. He was squinting at me, licking his lips, really nervous.

“Do you have your wife clean real good, so the rats don’t get into the cupboards, Harry? Do you call in the exterminators every year at the store, whether you need them or not? I’ll bet you smack your kid if he laughs at a Mickey Mouse cartoon. Is that right, Harry, do you?” I’d spoken softly, but steadily.

“Why do you wanta know? *Why?*” The sweat glistened like bubbles on his face.

“I just thought I’d inquire, Harry. You see, this entire place is filled with them. See them?”

Some men fear death, some fear closed places, some water. Chuckling Harry Kroenfeld feared rats. With an almost pathological fear. I wasn’t going to just kill Harry—please credit me with more ingenuity than that—I was going to *kill* him!

“Rats, Harry! Large, black, crawling rats, with thin, wiry whiskers and little, pointed snouts, sniffing. They’re all over the place, Harry! See them? See them, Harry?”

I had been talking quietly, but his head began snapping back and forth on his neck, as though he were on scent, as though he wanted away from there desperately. He probably did.

“No! There aren’t any...I don’t see any...Lew, look, you got to—uh—let me go home now! Helen’s waiting for me, Lew!” He was getting frantic, his voice was rising. But that didn’t matter. The old Steel Pier warehouse is way down away from everything. No one would hear.

“Certainly I’ll let you go, Harry. After the rats have eaten away your pants cuffs, and started on the bones in your fat legs. Do you have bones in there, Harry? They’ll find them! How long do you think it will take them to eat through all that fat, Harry?”

“*Lew!*” he screamed, straining at his bonds. The chair clattered toward me, but I motioned him off with the gun. I could tell it hadn’t completely sunk in yet. He still didn’t believe I’d do it. Chuckling Harry has been known to be wrong.

“I wouldn’t worry too much, Harry, because it’ll take them at least three hours to finish you. They’re pretty messy eaters.”

I smiled in a friendly way, then I shot him.

The .45 erupted, Harry screamed once at the pain, then spun around—still tied to the chair—and fell onto his back. There was a neat, round hole in his pant leg, and it was becoming stained dark very quickly. Blood was streaming out of his left leg. “It could have been a bit higher,” I mused, “I’d always thought there was more blood higher up the leg. Oh well...”

I walked over and looked down at Harry. He’d fainted. Or perhaps it was just a state of shock. Either way, he was lying there, eyes shut, mouth half-open, tic in his cheek jumping. I shoved the gun into my pocket, bent down.

I lifted Harry and the chair. It was quite a job; a big man, and in that half-conscious shock state he was dead weight. Well, not exactly *dead*, but soon—soon.

I tipped the chair up, set it back on its legs, and brushed off my hands. That warehouse was filthy. They really should have taken better care of it.

I held the gun steady on Chuckling Harry while I fished the knife out of my pocket. I had to open the blade with my teeth.

Harry’s head was tipped back on his shoulders, the tongue protruding from his gummy lips just a bit. He was still in shock. I laid the automatic down, taking the fabric of his pant leg in my hand. I carefully slit it up past the thigh, letting the fabric fall away from the leg. The bullet had gone through the bone, just below the kneecap. It was a messy wound—I was willing to bet it would hurt Harry plenty when he woke up.

I brushed off my hands again, and my knees. The place was deep in garbage-

leavings from winos who had camped in there. That was good.

Just as I was going back to my packing crate, Harry began moaning; then he came to. His eyes snapped open and whipped back and forth around the warehouse. I knew all he could see were the dark corners; the shimmering, hanging cobwebs; the .45 and me.

“You’ve waited eighteen years for this, haven’t you, Greenberg?” His eyes were glazed, but a sort of sanity seemed to come over him for a moment.

“For what, Harry? For the rats to eat your intestines out? That’s very true; I have. It’ll be fun. I’m not a vengeful man, as you know, but Sheila just wouldn’t rest easily if I didn’t make some sort of gesture in her behalf—”

He winced and moaned as the pain from his leg hit him. Harry licked his lips, turned his head from side to side. I’ve got to admit—he suffered. Then I took his mind off the leg; I said, “Rats, Harry? What do you think happens when they smell all that rich Kroenfeld blood?”

Harry began straining his eyes into the gloom, trying to see the rats. “They’re back there,” I reassured him, pointing to a hollow scraping behind some crates. He drew back against the chair, struggling with the ropes that bound him.

“They’re tight, Harry: You and I tied them, and we were old buddies, weren’t we, Harry? Harry? Are you listening? Hear them scabbling on the floor?”

I could tell he heard them. His face was a white balloon dotted with sick sweat. I knew *he* could hear them, because *I* could hear them. I felt for the plastic sack in my pocket.

The noise from the darkness was beginning to mount. Tight, tiny squeals came from all around us. Occasionally a gray shadow leaped from one patch of black to another. They’d smelled the blood.

“They want *you*, Harry! Remember the days when we’d come down here to the waterfront, for collections, and you’d stay in the car till we brought you the take? You didn’t like them, did you, Harry?”

I knew he was picturing the wharf rodents, fresh from the tramp steamers, tumbling over one another as they ripped apart a dead fish. Their clicking, vicious teeth leaving nothing of a bleeding gutter-mutt. The stench of them rooting in the grain bins and garbage piles.

He watched, fascinated, as I drew the plastic sack from my side pocket. I looked up, and caught him staring at me. “You know what this is, Harry?” His eyes were dull, lifeless. The leg wound was pumping shiny rivulets of blood into his sock and shoe.

I ripped the tape from the mouth of the bag, getting up. I drew out a wet, dripping piece of bread. It was brown and soggy. The smell overpowered me for a moment. I almost gagged. “Bread, Harry. Just bread. Dipped in chicken blood. My butcher was really surprised when I asked him to make some of this up. You should have seen his face!”

I moved around the warehouse, dropping the blood-soaked pieces of bread in dim corners, kicking the stuff into the darkness. One piece slid out of sight beneath a pile of broken timbers and an instant later I could hear them tearing at it.

“Lew! My God, Lew!” I turned around, where I stood in the darkness, looked at Harry in the center of the yellow circle. Suddenly he leaned forward, sweating like the pig he resembled.

“Lew, I’ve—I’ve saved some money from the old days! I—I can give you ten thousand if you’ll let me go! I’ll f-forget this whole thing, Lew! I’m an honest shopkeeper now! Please, Lew, forgive me!”

I’d never seen a man struggle so, sweat so, bite his lips so often. He had become a parody of himself. He did the same things over and over again. It was really something to watch.

I walked over to him. Looked down into the horror that stared from his eyes.

“Money, Harry? No, money doesn’t mean anything to me now. I have a great deal of it. A fine home, a wife, two children—everything I missed when I was a kid, Harry. But I’ve got something more—something *you* don’t have. I have a big hate, Harry. One that I’ve been nursing for eighteen years. One that I—oh! What’s that? There’s a rat, over there, behind that stack of bricks, isn’t there, Harry?”

He was staring up at me, terror swimming freely in his eyes. So I went on. “A *big* hate, Harry. I overheard a conversation a long time ago; you were talking to one of the boys, telling him how Sheila had bled more than you thought one woman had any right to bleed. I heard you say she was still kicking when they dumped her. Right off the loading dock of this warehouse, wasn’t it, Harry? Eighteen years ago, wasn’t it, Harry?”

His eyes rolled up and for a second I thought he was going to have a seizure, robbing me of the climax. I brought my fist back and cracked him across the mouth. His head snapped around and his eyes slid back down. They were small, small, compared to the white that surrounded them.

“Getting weak, Harry?”

He was so pale, it was amazing he was still conscious after the shot. I’d counted on fear keeping him awake. This was the big moment I’d waited eighteen years to enjoy.

“Wait till they come after you, Harry. Just wait. Rats, Harry, rats! Think of all that warm, bristly fur; think of all the fleas and death they’re carrying. First they’ll go for that bleeding leg, Harry; they’ll get a whiff of all that gore and come running! Then the ripping starts! And after a while the pain will be so big you won’t have to worry about the bullet in your leg. That’ll be nice, won’t it, Harry?”

I was going to continue, but the scream I’d seen building as I’d begun—broke.

He opened his cavernous mouth wide, saliva drooling, and screamed. Oh, my God! So loud I thought the dust would fly off everything and roar around the room!

He began kicking out, his feet still tied together, and making little mewling noises at the same time. His feet would get just a bit away from the chair, before the ropes stopped their movement. He seemed to be kicking at the rats, though they hadn’t ventured into the light yet.

But they would. Meals are too far apart on the wharves for them to pass up as juicy a feast as Chuckling Harry Kroenfeld.

He screamed again. This one was a loud, bubbling thing that started deep in his stomach and rattled up.

“Oh, stop, stop, Harry,” I begged him. “You don’t want to frighten them off, do you?”

He didn’t stop. In fact, he screamed louder. Now I could see the fingers of his bound hands clutching at the back of the chair. He was straining his quaking fat toward