The Blood–Brain Barrier

by C. P. Boyko

On July 9th, 1980, Mike Burger was having dinner with his wife, Roz, and four friends at a restaurant in West Hollywood.

Q. Now, can you tell us, Doctor, what the defendant was thinking and experiencing at the time of, and leading up to the time of the instant offense?

Their friends were waving their wineglasses around and talking loudly, as if to make up for Mike and Roz's silence.

A. I can tell you that, following the perceived insult in the foyer, that his thought processes are disordered. His mental state is predominantly one of confusion and disorientation. The sights and sounds, and smells of the restaurant are reaching him as if from afar. He is experiencing a profound depersonalization—

Roz's gaze briefly met Mike's as she left the table. Mike was breathing heavily.

Q. Can you define that last word for us, Doctor? I'm sorry to interrupt.

"This shit has got to fucking stop," Mike said. The others looked at him. Mike stood and strode across the room.

A. A sense of not being himself. A sort of feeling of detachment from reality, you might say. A sort of feeling of being on autopilot, or being in a dream.

He pulled a man out of his chair and threw him to the floor and began kicking him in the face, muttering the word "motherfucker" repeatedly.

Q. Was he angry? Was he . . . "enraged," as the newspapers put it?

Someone screamed. Two men tried to pull Mike away. He thrashed free, elbowing one of them in the face, breaking his nose with a crunch, and the other backed away.

Mike kicked the man on the floor in the stomach. "Get up, motherfucker." A thick sob emerged from the man's bloody, shattered mouth; he did not get up. "Have it your own way." Mike began stomping on the man's back, neck, and head.

A. He was not angry. On the contrary. He was dissociated from his feelings. It was like he was in someone else's body, watching someone else do these things. Like watching a movie.

Abruptly he stopped. The room had half emptied out, and those who remained stood staring at him, aghast. He spat on the man's crushed skull and returned to his table.

He picked up his fork, put a piece of broccoli in his mouth, then made a face. He threw down his fork; everyone in the room jumped. "Well?" he shouted. Aside from some stifled whimpering and the dripping of spilled wine, the restaurant was silent.

He sighed and slumped in his chair. "Where's Roz?" he asked.

Eight months later, Joseph Massick, counsel for the defense, took his hands out of his trouser pockets and folded them behind his back.

Q. Doctor, I would like to thank you for your time and for your testimony. This has been a difficult, a most thorny case, and I would like to thank you for lending us your expert assistance in disentangling the truth from the many falsehoods that surround this matter. And now, I would like to ask you one final question if I may, and that is this. Doctor, did you, as a

result of reading about this case, reviewing the reports of eyewitnesses and police officials, and most importantly interviewing the defendant for many hours on several occasions over the course of the last two months, did you arrive at a conclusion as to whether Mr. Burger was, at the time of this lamentable incident, able to appreciate the criminality of his conduct, or to conform his conduct to the requirements of the law?

Daniel Strickland leaned into the microphone.

A. Yes, I did.

Q. And what was the conclusion you arrived at, Doctor?

Strickland glanced at his notebook, but only for a moment.

A. I concluded that the defendant at the time of the crime was suffering from a psychological disorder which made him unable to conform his conduct to the requirements of the law.

He paused, as if waiting to be asked more. But Massick, who had been moving his lips almost imperceptibly as the psychologist gave this answer, sat down.

Q. Thank you, Doctor.

THE COURT: Doctor, would this be a good time for a recess?

Strickland looked at Mike Burger, who was looking out the window.

A. Thank you, Your Honor, but I'm all right to continue. I don't mind.

THE COURT: All right. Ms. Lattimann, you may begin your cross-examination.

Q. Good afternoon, sir.

A. Good afternoon, Ms. Lattimann.

Q. Can you tell us again, Professor—I'm sorry, I can't help but think of you, in looking at you and listening to you, as a professor. Do you have any objection to me calling you Professor?

A. It's very unusual. Not even my students call me Professor. But I will try to get used to it.

Q. All right, sir. Thank you, sir. It's your image you present and your background that makes me—I mean it very respectfully.

A. Thank you.

Q. Can you tell us, Professor, when you first met with the defendant.

A. Certainly. It was January first.

Daniel Strickland sat watching television in a dark, cavernous room with a woman who wore too much make-up.

"Three," she said, counting down with the crowd on the television. "Two. One!" She clicked a photo of the screen, then one of Strickland. "Happy New Year!"

"Happy New Year to you, Beryl."

Later, she wept.

"Nineteen fifty-nine," she said. "Shirley MacLaine, Deborah Kerr, Robert Stack. George Scott. *Anatomy of a Murder*—now that was when they made movies. Oh God. Everything turns to shit."

Strickland frowned and nodded.

Beryl gave him a fierce look. "Well? Aren't you going to say I'm catastrophizing?"

Later, she slept.

Someone who did not know the words was singing Auld Lang Syne. Someone was watering down the whiskey. Someone was patiently picking infinitesimal grains of cocaine out of the carpet. Someone was on their hands and knees, making kissing noises at the cat, which cowered beneath an end table.

"Five billion dollars for how many, fifty people? That's—ten million dollars a person! I don't care if they *are* Americans."

"Here puss. Here puss puss."

"Just another histrionic personality disorder in other words."

"It's a hundred million and you teach statistics."

"Here puss, got some nice . . . what are these?" She tasted one and made a face. "Macadamias?"

"Guatemalans. They're good in salads."

"Say what you will about histrionic but at least they'll never bomb us. Rest of the world, U.S.A. *is* Hollywood and not even the Iranians would let

their crazy government bomb bloody I don't know, Paul Newman."

"My dear drunken dear, Guatemalans are people."

Strickland came in holding a large bottle of champagne by the neck, like a club. He leaned over a woman who was sprawled with dignity across an armchair.

"Happy New Year, dollface." He tried to kiss her but she sat up.

Martie said, "Honey please don't interrupt. Nigel was saying something very interesting about the economic crisis."

"The solution is simple. Let them keep the hostages; we'll keep the money heh heh."

"I think that's wonderfully appalling," said someone.

"What's wrong with your cat!"

Electronic sockets projected from the creature's bare skull.

"Evan brought him home from the lab. I forget why."

"Because he's used up," said Evan. "Be careful, he's blind, too."

Someone clapped Strickland on the back and screamed, "Dan's here! We can finally pick."

The men lined up and drew keychains from a hollow African idol. After each turn the hostess put the statuette's head back on and shook it like a cocktail mixer.

Strickland pulled out a turquoise rabbit's foot to which a flashlight, flip-top lighter, garage door opener, and some keys were attached.

"Lucky Jim," said a plump woman, taking him roughly by the arm. "Goodnight, my husband," she called, waggling her fingers. "I'm leaving with this other, strong, manly good-looking man who is not you." Failing to get a reaction, she led Strickland away. He resisted, trying to catch his wife's eye.

Someone drew the hostess's keys and she put down the idol with a squeal.

"Who's left?" shouted Nigel, pushing his glasses up his nose.

"Just me I guess," said Martie.

"Then I guess it's you and me tonight heh heh."

"Looks like it."

Strickland was yanked brutally from the room.

Strickland drove, but she was the one who kept her eyes on the road while he cast little inquisitive glances her way. Nothing was said for a long time.

"He used to be different," she said at last. "People always say, After that operation she was a changed woman, he was a changed man." She laughed. "I always thought that meant changed for the better."

"And he's . . ."

"Oh he was always a bit of a swinger, I didn't mind, both of us were I guess. He just never used to take it so seriously. All this theory crap. Erotogenic zones, modern civilization, polymorphous sexuality and the decline of genital supremacy. It's a bit of a drag."

". . . I know how you feel."

"But then I'm not a psychologist. I was probably the only one."

"Some of us are psychiatrists," Strickland joked. "Not me," he hastened to add.

"No? What're you?"

"A psychologist. I'm Dan."

"I know who you are. It was you we were all waiting for."

"My reputation precedes me."

"Trace," she said. They shook hands lightly, ironically. "I'm Ted's wife."

"Ah yes," said Strickland. "I don't know Ted very well. He's an experimental man, isn't he?"

"You mind if I smoke?"

"It's your car. I don't mind."

"Did you see what they did to that cat?"

"Lookie what we have here," she said.

Strickland crouched beside his five-year-old son. "Sergeant Bonzo," he said, "what are you still doing awake?"

"Melanie was mean to me. Who's that?"

"I'm sorry to hear that. Did you walk away, or were you mean back?"

"Walk."

"Good man. This is a friend of mine. Her name is Trace."

Trace leered at the boy over his father's shoulder. The boy ducked his head, exaggerating a pout to hide a grin.

"Let's go find your sister," said Strickland. "Sorry about this."

Trace whispered, "Is there someplace I could go for a little pee-pee?"

"End of the hall. And the, ah . . ."

"I'll find it!"

When she was gone, he asked the boy, "Do you know if Melanie paid the sitter?"

"I did it."

"Good man," said Strickland. "Uh, how much did you give her?"

Melanie sat in front of the television, which showed one man bludgeoning another to death. Strickland gestured his son out of the room. The boy marched off with dignity.

"Everything cool?"

Melanie swiped at her eyes with a hand but said nothing.

"Home a bit earlier than we expected. Lousy party?"

She shook her head. After a pause, she said, "And where's Martie?"

"Staying with a friend tonight."

She snorted.

"Want a drink?" he asked.

"No."

"Think I'll have one."

"Good for you."

She came into the kitchen while he was pouring. She did not acknowledge him, but sat down at the table briskly, as if meeting someone who was already late. Strickland took his drink to the window while she sat cracking her fingers.

"Catch the fireworks at all?"

She slumped forward and buried her face in her arms. He sat down beside her. He nodded, frowning. He reached out to touch her, then hesitated.

"Your mother . . ."

She walked out of the room.

Strickland watched his son get into bed and pull the sheets up to his chin.

"Light on or off?"

"Off. On! On."

"Definitely on?"

"Definitely."

"Goodnight, Bonzo."

"I'm sleepy."

"Good. Then you'll enjoy your sleep very much."

"Wait! Dad?"

"What is it?"

"How much does it cost to buy a whale?"

"A blue whale?"

"No, a big one."

"A big one. Probably somewhere between seventy-five and eighty thousand dollars."

While the boy pondered this figure, Strickland turned off the light and slipped away.

The woman, Trace, was sound asleep on top of his bed.

She wore nothing but a sheer negligee. He reached for a blanket, then changed his mind.

Q. January first. And when did Mike Burger beat to death Antonio DiRosa in The White Grape?

A. The date of the instant offense as I believe it is called was July ninth.

Q. Nearly six months later.

A. I beg your pardon?

Q. It is true that you only finally interviewed Mike Burger for the first time nearly six months after the killing?

A. I will take your word for it on the math. It was several months later, yes. Undoubtedly. As I understand it this sort of delay is not . . .

Q. Do people not sometimes change substantially in six months? Or even one month? Professor?

He turned off the television and lay down on the couch.

A. They can. Certainly. Sometimes.

The next afternoon, Mike Burger pulled his car into Strickland's driveway. He scowled up at the house for a moment, whistling a tune, before going to the front door. He had a loose, springy gait, one that seemed to bring into play every muscle in his body.

Strickland's son looked up from the card game he was playing on the floor beside the couch where his father lay.

The barrage of knocks brought Strickland to his feet, kicking cards across the floor as he stumbled around in search of his glasses. "Where is everyone?"

Mike was peering in through a window when at last the door opened.

"You Strickland?" he said, bounding back up the steps.

Strickland took an involuntary step backward. "Yes."

"You the shrink?"

"Psychologist. Clinical—yes, I'm Daniel Strickland."

"This your house?"

"Yes. It is. My house."

Mike grimaced and fingered his upper teeth as if adjusting a denture. "Guess I was expecting some kind of office or something with waiting rooms and magazines and shit."

"Ah," said Strickland. "Of course. You're Mr. Burger."

"Lawyer sent me."

Strickland offered his hand and Mike shook it.

"I keep an interview room in the house," Strickland explained. "I have an office at the university but I don't often use that for my clinical appointments. I prefer to see people on their own turf—or let them see me on mine. Ah yes. This is my son," he said, sounding slightly perplexed. "Ben, this is Mr. Burger."

"Mike," said Mike. "None of that mister shit for me."

"Are you my mom's friend?"

"Don't think so." Mike considered. "Don't know. Who's your ma?"

"No no," said Strickland, "this—Mr.—Mike is my friend, Ben. He's one of *my friends*."

"My mom is staying with a friend, I thought maybe you were him."

"She ain't at my house, swear to God, Your Honor." Mike had begun investigating the room, picking up pictures from the mantel and replacing them indifferently. "This her?"

Strickland said, "Is Melanie around somewhere?"

The boy shrugged, watching the visitor.

"Benjamin."

The boy detected the undertone of urgency in his father's voice, but so did Mike. They both looked at him.

Strickland hesitated only a moment. "Will you kindly keep Mike here company for a few minutes while I get dressed?"

The boy looked at Mike and shrugged. Mike shrugged back.

"I guess I could teach you about aquatic mammals."

"Sure, and that's great actually, 'cause actually I don't know shit about aquatic mammals."

When Strickland had left the room, Mike said, "He looks dressed to me."

Strickland took a quick shower, shaved quickly, and quickly got dressed. While buttoning his shirt he suddenly stopped and looked around the room.

He went to the window. Only Mike's car was in the driveway.

There was a note on the night table.

THANKS FOR A WONDERFUL NIGHT
I WILL NOT SOON FORGET
P.S. DOWN WITH GENITAL SUPREMACY ANYWAY
XXX OOO TRACE (TED'S WIFE)

Ben had opened a book on Mike's knees and was standing beside him, turning the pages fussily.

"Some of them aren't even mammals."

"What about that one?"

The boy shook his head. "That's an orca. Sometimes people call it killer whale but they're not supposed to."

"Well, they breathe air, don't they?"

The boy scowled, uncertain, and his mother decided to save him.

"They call them killers because they like to eat meat. They're excellent hunters."

The book fell to the floor as Mike stood. "Shit. Here. Thanks, kid, for the lesson." He added, "I liked the expensive whales best."

"Oh good," said Strickland. "You're here."

"You must be the Missus," said Mike.

"You just missed a very sweet moment," Martie told her husband.

"Yes, well. Mike and I will be in the interview room for a little while. You know what that means, Ben."

"You're not home."

"Good man. Mike?"

Mike shrugged and followed him from the room. Martie stared at her son for a moment, then went the opposite direction. The boy looked at his book and card game.

"All right if I smoke in here?"

"I don't mind."

"I'm smoking all I can while I'm still in the world. To be honest I don't

even like the shit that much."

Strickland had settled himself into one of two comfortable armchairs that faced each other at a slight angle. He had in his lap a few books and a notepad. Now he picked up a pen and asked, "Still in the world? You can sit down."

"If it's all the same to you I'd rather just . . ." Mike paced demonstratively before the window. "I've never been much good at sitting."

"What did you mean by while you're still in the world?"

"Not in hoosegow. Not in the clink. Not in fucking jail, man."

"I understand." Strickland wrote a string of random numbers at the top of a page. "I thought today we could start out with a few simple cognitive tasks."

"Like tests? Like mental sanity tests?"

"More like memory tests."

"Well shit. It's what I'm here for. Fire at William."

Strickland said, "Seven. Five, three, two, eight, seven . . ."

"This somebody's phone—"

Strickland held up a hand and finished, "Five, nine, zero, four. Now, how many of those can you remember?"

"Seven, five. The last one was four. I wasn't paying attention."

"That's fine. Let's try another." He wrote and circled a 2, then started a new row of numerals, reading them aloud as he went. "Four, two, eight, seven, nine, six, six, one, two, five. Now give them back to me."

"Shit, man. Four two eight, uh seven, six maybe. That's all I know. And two sixes and a five at the end there."

Strickland wrote and circled a 4. "This time let's try it backwards. Ready?"

Mike sat down.

Strickland showed Mike a cartoon from one of the textbooks. In the foreground a disgruntled-looking man wore only one shoe, and in the background a car sped away, leaving behind a cloud of dust or exhaust.

"What happened in this picture?"

"Man, what *didn't* happen."

"Guess."

"Could be anything."

"Then just make up a story."

"Shit, I don't know. Could be this guy just got his ass kicked out of this fucking car for some reason."

". . . Why? Who's in the car?"

"Probably his wife," Mike laughed. "She caught his dumb ass in bed with some skanky bitch and dumped him on the side of the road somewheres. Middle of fucking nowhere somewheres. Didn't even have time to put on both shoes, sorry-ass motherfucker." Mike looked at Strickland. "Something like that, could be."

"That's fine."

"Yeah?"

"If I said to you, a table and a chair, what are they, what do they have in common, I think the answer would be furniture. Agreed?"

"Yeah, okay."

"What about a pair of pants and a shirt?"

"Clothes."

"How about a bicycle and an airplane?"

"Shit you get around in. I mean vehicles. Or not vehicles, but like—transportation. Right?"

"That's fine. How about a fly and a tree?"

"A fly and a tree? Things that got leaves—no. I don't know. I don't know that one."

"That's fine. If I say don't cry over spilled milk, what does that mean?" On the notepad, he wrote *fly + tree = leaves?*

"It means the past's in the past and there's no use getting all het up over it."

"How about: People in glass houses shouldn't throw stones."

"It's when people who are involved in bad shit, they shouldn't go round accusing others of—whatever. It's like—hypocritical, right?"

"That's fine," said Strickland, writing *vocabulary!?* "How about: If wishes were wings, pigs would fly."

"No. Never heard that before."

"That's why I gave it to you."

"Ha!" Mike gave a sly grin. "Okay, well, I guess it's like if—a person can get what he wants if he wants it bad enough."

"Not bad," said Strickland, capping the pen and putting the notepad aside.

"That okay? I got it right?"

"It doesn't have one single interpretation. Very few people get that one. But your answer is not bad, not bad at all."

Mike settled back in his chair with a slight smile and looked around for his cigarette.

Strickland walked Mike to his car.

"What about a fly and a tree?," Mike asked.

"Life."

"Life? Motherfucker."

"See it now?"

"Yeah, I see it."

"All right."

"Just . . . weird comparison, right?"

"How so?"

"Well, not weird. But I mean they're pretty fucking vastly different."

"Well yes, but so are a bicycle and a plane. Vastly different."

Mike shook his head. "That's for sure."

They reached the car. Mike stood looking down the street.

"So that means I'm okay in the head?"

Strickland pursed his lips. "That's not a very clinical way of putting it. But yes. I think you're probably okay in the head."

"That's what you'll tell them, then?"

"Who?"

"Whoever. The jury. The lawyers. Whoever."

"When's your trial?"

"Fuck knows. February something if they don't change it again."

"Then let's not put the cart ahead of the horse. You know that one?"

Mike grinned and fingered his upper teeth. "Yeah, I know that one."

"Let's meet again in four days." Strickland glanced up at his house. "On your turf, this time."

"My turf?"

"Your place. We still have a lot to talk about."

Q. You are not a forensic psychologist, are you, Professor.

A. No. I admitted as much under Mr. Massick's examination.

Q. In fact this is your first time, as an expert witness.

A. That's correct. I believe I said as much.

Q. Well, you're doing just fine, Professor. You're a natural. Let me be the first to say.

A. Thank you, Ms. Lattimann.

Melanie said, "And this is the guy you leave Ben alone with?"

"Melanie," said Martie.

"What."

"You know what. Don't interrupt."

"I gave him the abbreviated cognitive battery," Strickland resumed. "Everything was within parameters—pretty normal," he added for Melanie's benefit. "His digit span—that's his memory—was maybe a bit low for his IQ. Careful, this is hot."

"I don't like yams," said Ben.

"Could indicate intrusion of emotional factors," Martie said.

"I thought of that. But the strange thing is, he didn't strike me as overcontrolled. That is, he had no problem expressing his feelings. For the most part he was polite and obliging, eager to make a good impression of course, but he also sighed and grumbled at times, openly expressed his resentment about the court system, showed some bitterness on the TAT . . ."

"Why is that a problem?," Melanie asked. "That he has feelings."

"Normally, a case like this, where a guy blows up, goes berserk, with little or no provocation—well, you expect to see a history of bottling things up."

"So he just killed this guy for no reason? Great! So he's crazy."

Martie said, "We don't use that word, dear. And it's a little more complicated than that."

"According to his statement to the police," Strickland said, "the other guy's group got seated first."

"So your client," said Martie, "expressed his resentment."

Melanie guffawed. "By beating the guy to death!"

"I don't like yams," said Ben.

"These aren't yams," said Melanie, "they're sweet potatoes. You like sweet potatoes. Ow! Fuck!"

"We told you it was hot," said Martie.

Ben perked up. "That kind of language . . ."

"Yes, Ben," said Strickland. "It's all right at home."

"But not at school!"

"Yes, Ben," said Melanie, "we know, Ben."

"Run it under cold water, Mel?," Strickland suggested.

"Forget it. It doesn't hurt."

"Could be an undercontrolled hostility pattern," Martie mused, gazing through her daughter.

"I thought of that too. The problem is the delay. First there's some sort of argument, apparently, in the foyer, while they're waiting for a table. But it's broken up, his friends break it up, everybody seems to calm down, nobody needs to be kicked out. Then twenty minutes later he gets up from his dinner and . . . attacks the guy."

"Beats him to a bloody pulp, you mean."

"Melanie."

"What."

"You know what."

"Anyway," said Strickland, "if he had *no* impulse control, he should

have flown off the handle right away, there in the foyer."

"What about his attachment pattern?"

"What's a tachment pattern?," Ben asked.

"Don't interrupt," Melanie told him.

"Melanie."

"Now what!"

"You know what. We agreed you're not to mother him."

"All I did was tell him not to interrupt."

"I think it's for the individuals talking to decide whether or not an interruption has taken place."

"Well, I was talking too, wasn't I? Or don't I count?"

Martie put down her fork. "Daniel," she said, "may I bring you in as mediator at this point?"

"That's fine. Let's all just take a little breather."

Melanie said, "Forget it."

"Ben," said Martie, "an attachment pattern is the way you relate to people as a grown up, because of the way you were related to when you were a child, especially by your mother. Now, you need some orange on your plate to go with the green and brown."

Melanie made a choking noise. "I wonder what kind of attachment pattern *I* have."

Martie put down her fork. "Melanie, if you are looking for a reaction, you won't get one here. You had a perfectly healthy and loving upbringing, as you well know, and if you are finding it difficult to relate to people with respect and on a footing of equality then the reason must lie somewhere in the five years you lived under your father's roof."

"It was only a joke!"

"Fuck fuck fuck," said Ben.

"Daniel," said Martie, "did I raise my voice just then?"

"Well, I don't know . . ."

"Never mind. I think I know when it is time to calm down and consider alternatives. In fact, I will excuse myself, I have a late appointment with a client, thank you for a lovely meal. And look into this man's attachment

pattern is my advice to you. Goodnight, Ben. Goodnight, Melanie."

After a long silence, Ben asked, "Where is Mom going?"

"You heard her," said Melanie.

"You don't know what he heard," said Strickland, then told his son, "She has a late appointment with a client." After a pause, he added, "She has to go to work."

"If you believe that," Melanie muttered.

"Will you two wash up?," Strickland asked. "At least run them under the tap. Then it's easier later."

Q. What exactly is your specialty, Professor? You do have a specialty?

A. I am a clinical psychologist.

Q. So you run a clinic?

A. I use the word 'clinical' to distinguish it broadly from so-called experimental psychology, which is the sort generally done in a university setting, usually on undergraduate students, and usually with some form of pencil-and-paper multiple-choice questionnaire, to determine for instance whether men or women have better willpower and burning questions like that.

MR. MASSICK: Now Your Honor, I think I must object. Ms. Lattimann has already agreed to accept Doctor Strickland's credentials as an expert witness.

MS. LATTIMANN: These questions, Your Honor, are not about the doctor's credentials but his method. I am trying to get a clearer picture of what his general method is when assessing someone.

THE COURT: Which I do not doubt you will use to shed light on the particular method of this particular case, Ms. Lattimann. Objection overruled.

Q. Now, I don't think you answered my question, Professor.

A. I'm sorry, I've quite forgotten your question.

THE COURT: I think the doctor can be forgiven for that. Let the record reflect that there was laughter in the courtroom, Miss Reporter. Not a lot, but some. And would you kindly read out Ms. Lattimann's last

question.

REPORTER: You run a clinic.

A. Thank you. No, I do not run a clinic per se. I see patients in various settings, and these meetings are all clinical in the sense that I provide a form of cognitive and behavioral therapy, or counseling, but I do not have a clinic, no. To answer your question.

Q. People who are insane or who have mental disorders come to you and you cure them.

A. Ah. That is a mouthful. I would perhaps object to the term "insane" and to the concept of "cure." But otherwise, in general, you could say that yes, people with mental disorders or psychological disturbances come to me for help and I try to help them.

Q. You help people.

A. I do my best.

A frail, perspiring young man with thinning hair sat slouched over a tidy kitchen table and said rapidly, "I even explained it to her, I said very clearly —I know I can have a tendency to mumble but I said it quite clearly—I said Hi, my name's Robin but most people call me Coby, she said All right I'll call you Coby, I said Actually I prefer Robin, she said Okay I'll call you Robin, but now already she's calling me Coby like everyone else."

Strickland frowned and nodded.

"That doesn't matter I realize, but it gets under my skin. I try not to let it get under my skin but I can't help thinking about what I could have said differently. It's the same as at the grocery store last week. I have to park out at the edge of the parking lot—I told you about this—where there aren't any cars around or I feel hemmed in, but then on the news the other day I heard there was this warning to women about some guy who was going around supposedly selling perfume and when you smell it it's actually chloroform, I couldn't get it out of my head even though it was broad daylight and I'm not a woman." He gave Strickland a quick defiant look. "Actually to tell you the truth I think I get all worked up because I'm actually afraid women will think *I'm* the guy, one of these guys going around trying to abduct them

with a bottle of fake perfume. But what can I do? I need groceries," he finished miserably.

After a long pause, Strickland said, "I think that's probably an urban myth. Chloroform, to the best of my knowledge, does not operate so quickly."

"That doesn't matter. That's not the point. It sounds true."

Q. As a doctor of psychology—I'm sorry, as a clinical psychologist, you do your best to help people.

A. That is correct.

Q. And is that what you've done in this case?

A. I beg your pardon?

Q. Shall I have the reporter read back the question?

A. I heard the question correctly, but I do not understand the question.

Q. What you have said to Mr. Massick's questions, what you have told the jury and the honorable judge and everyone else in this courtroom—it will help Mr. Burger, won't it?

Massick stood up.

A. I don't know what will help Mr. Burger, Ms. Lattimann. I am a doctor, not a lawyer.

Massick sat down.

Strickland sat at his desk, thinking.

Mike, as a child, holding his mother's hand, waiting with his mother and her friends for a table in a posh restaurant.

The maitre-d' saying, I'm sorry, but we have a table for only eight at the moment.

His mother dropping Mike's hand and laughing, That's okay, we'll take it, the boy can wait, I'm starving!

Mike, as a child, being left behind.

"Ridiculous," Strickland muttered, rubbing his neck.

A crash came from the living room.

Martie told her daughter, "Well, that wasn't a very intelligent thing to do."

Melanie stomped out of the room.

"What was that about?," Strickland asked. Glass shards were scattered across the floor.

"That girl has a serious punishment complex. She needs to be told that she's doing everything wrong. You know, her father was always correcting her posture . . ."

"But what's it all about?"

"Oh, evidently I was insufficiently appalled to learn that my daughter is a bisexual. Or thinks she is. Or wants to think she is. Or wants me to think she is."

Strickland tapped on Melanie's door, then opened it. The room was empty.

He tapped on the closet door, then opened it.

She was standing there, almost hidden by clothes.

"Hey," he said.

She groaned.

"Look," he said. "Your mother . . ."

"Aw, *fuck* my mother!" she said, and slammed the door in his face.

Strickland wandered the halls of the courthouse.

"Excuse me," he asked a sharply dressed woman pulling a trolley stacked with boxes of files, "is there a list somewhere of the cases, the court cases, currently in session?"

They stood before a list posted to the wall.

"What are you in the mood for?"

In a small courtroom with mahogany paneling, a police officer in uniform sat in the witness box, his face pressed against the microphone, and read tonelessly from a report he held in his lap.

"At which juncture Officer Daniels and myself—it says Officer Miller here, but that is myself—Officer Daniels and Officer Miller proceeded to

question the suspect, period. New paragraph. The questioning began at seventeen fifty-four—that is written as one seven, uh colon, five four—and continued until one eight four five, that is one eight colon four five, open parenthesis five one minutes, close parenthesis period. The suspect gave the officers—and here is a typo, it says notal, N O T A L, but it should say—well, I'll just read what it says. The suspect gave the officers notal cooperation in answering the questions put to him by officers Daniels and Miller, comma . . ."

Strickland stood and, with little gestures of apology and gratitude, shuffled out past the other spectators.

The corridors were suddenly bustling. He heard his name called. But there was no one here he knew.

Someone shouted "Dan!" again, right in his ear, and grabbed his arm.

"You!" he said.

Trace smirked at him. "'You,'" she mimicked, then sighed. "You, he said. He remembered where she worked, but not her name."

"Actually," he grinned guilelessly, "it's exactly the opposite."

"I never told you I was a court reporter?" She bit her lower lip. "Then it's just a coincidence."

She sat on folded legs, leaning over the table. With the base of her cup she made little overlapping circles of coffee on the tabletop.

Strickland sat stiffly upright, one leg draped neatly over the other, knee atop knee. "Is that so bad?" he said.

As if changing the subject, she said, "I thought you were going to call me. After all . . ."

"But I don't have your number," he protested.

"I left you that note."

"But no number!"

"You were supposed to track me down. That was supposed to be the whole fun of it. Really, with your big brain . . .!"

"I'm actually not very smart sometimes."

She withdrew a pen from her purse and scribbled on a napkin. "There," she said, sliding it across the table like a poker bet. "Now you don't have to be smart anymore."

"Come on," she said.

"Should we be in here?" he asked, entering the courtroom cautiously.

"It's a public building. Anyway, I work here. Right here, as a matter of fact."

She showed him the equipment she used.

"And you can get down everything everybody says?" he asked.

"We use a kind of shorthand. And you always got to compare it with the tapes before filing anything officially. But yeah, mostly everything."

"Show me."

Her fingers hovered above the typewriter. "Say something."

"Uh . . . The world is too much with us. Uh, late and soon, getting and spending, we uh, lay waste our powers. Little we see in . . . nature that is ours."

She rolled her eyes. "Say something *quick*."

With an effort, Strickland babbled, "Once upon a time there was a boy who got his foot stuck in a radiator and some cats then came along and jousted one another with the footballs in the heart-attack revelation of the final days of September and all the mothers were whimsical so whimsical in their summer dresses. How's that?"

Trace read it back to him. He clapped his hands and she curtsied.

There was a moment of silence. They looked away.

"You know, it's funny," he said.

"What?"

"It's only now that I feel like . . . Although technically . . ."

"Yeah?"

"Never mind."

"Well, hell's bells. I gotta go." At the door she turned back and said, "When you call . . ."

"Yes?"

"*If* you call . . . let it ring once, hang up, then call again. That way I'll know it's you."

"All right. When I call."

He sat in the witness box. Furrowing his brow, he leaned forward and said, "That is correct." The loudness of his voice in the empty room startled him. He smirked, allowed the smile to grow cold, then said sarcastically, "Yes, I suppose you *could* say that."

In the cafeteria, Strickland said, "And potatoes and the steamed vegetables."

"It's only zucchini today, that all right?"

"That's fine. I don't mind."

Strickland stood at the front of a small classroom, listening to a debate among his students.

"Yes, but self-reflectiveness can be conceptualized as a self-organized subject-object relation where both the subject and the object of attention are the self."

"We all know what introspection is, there's no need to define it."

"What I would like defined is this suicidal ideation. Why not just say thoughts of suicide?"

"So . . . he killed his family because he was depressed and wanted to die?"

They looked at Strickland, who said, "It's not a true story. You tell me."

After a pause, a girl in a black turtleneck said, "Quite probably his ego boundary had expanded to include his family, so naturally suicide would include them as well."

Strickland raised his eyebrows and pursed his lips.

She said, "He just never got around to himself."

Strickland sat in his office, watching a video. On the screen, Orson Welles said, "Well thank you, Doctor. Now uh, can you tell us how far this

tendency to what you call schizophrenia had progressed with Artie Strauss?"

The distinguished, goateed man on the witness stand crossed his legs and said forcefully, "Not with any degree of exactitude. We do know that the habit of lying, indulging in fantasies, and telling stories which the boy developed in infancy had progressed to the stage where he himself was having difficulty distinguishing between what was true and what was not true . . ."

The girl in the turtleneck appeared in the doorway.

"Oh, hi!" Strickland jumped up and fumbled for the remote control just as the phone rang. They both laughed. "Sorry, Marianne, I'll just—hello?"

"Come now," cried the television, "you are an expert and under oath, is your diagnosis insanity or not!"

He gestured for her to wait but she shook her head, mouthed an apology or a promise, and was gone.

"Under oath I cannot answer that, sir. Insanity is a legal term, not a medical one. I am a doctor, not a lawyer."

"Yes, sorry, hello?"

"Daniel Strickland?"

He trotted up the wide steps of the school. "I must have gotten my days mixed up. Howdy, Sarge."

"Hi."

The boy's teacher, a young woman in a yellow floral-print dress, wrung her hands in satisfaction at this successful reunion. "He was no trouble, Mr. Strickland."

"What'd you learn today, Benderson?"

"Buts."

"I often stay a bit late on Tuesdays over my correcting."

"Butts?"

"Conjunctions," she explained. "Ands and buts and what else?"

"Ors," said Ben.

"Very good. One little matter," she said, dropping her voice. "Since you're here."

Ben went on ahead to the car, alternately clomping and scuffing his feet like a zombie.

The teacher wrung her hands. She had a smattering of freckles across one clavicle.

"Ben," she said, "likes to eat . . . dirt."

"Yes. We know."

"Oh!"

"It's called pica."

"I thought that was only pregnant women."

"Apparently not." After a moment he elaborated: "We think perhaps it came about as a result of little tidbits left in some of the houseplants by his half-sister. She believes in composting."

"Tidbits?"

"Teabags and carrot tops and egg shells and things."

She looked with dismay at the boy buckling himself into the back seat of the car.

"Egg shells too?"

"My wife assures me it's a phase."

"Yes, but is it . . . healthy?"

"Oh," Strickland sighed, "a lot of them at that age toy with the idea of saving the world. Especially the ones from so-called broken homes. Form of compensation, presumably . . . But she'll grow out of it. We all do."

"Melanie? Martie?"

Ben said, "Nobody home."

Strickland said into the phone, "Is Stephanie there? Daniel Strickland. Yes, Ben's . . . No, it'd be for now. Yes. No. Thanks anyway."

He looked at his son.

He stopped the car but did not get out.

"It won't be more than a couple of hours," he said.

"Okay," the boy said.

"Just be . . . nice to her, all right?"

"I'm nice to everyone."

"All right. Good man. And stay away from the pool."

Beryl cooed, "What a lovely surprise. Come in, young man, come in."

Strickland said, "It won't be more than a couple of hours."

"That's fine, of course it is, we'll be just fine won't we young man."

"Well, see you later, Sergeant."

"Okay," the boy said. "Thanks."

When Strickland was gone, Ben said, "This is a big house."

"It was my husband's. He was a faaamous movie director. Do you like movies?"

"I like documentaries."

"Good! I'll show you some photographs."

"Do you have a . . ." He gazed out the tall windows, then pulled himself away. "Anything to eat?"

Strickland walked along the narrow sidewalk, looking at addresses.

He noticed a young man proceeding methodically from car to car, trying the door handles. Strickland opened his mouth, closed it, then stepped out into the street.

"Excuse me," he called. "Can I help you?"

The man looked over, his face blank.

"Are you . . . Are any of these cars yours?"

". . . Yeah."

"Well . . . which one?"

"I don't know, man."

Strickland came closer so he would not have to shout. "I'm afraid I don't understand. You don't know which is yours?"

"I forget where I parked," the man said.

"But . . . This will sound stupid of me, but . . . that doesn't make any sense."

"I locked my keys inside."

"But . . . is one of these cars yours or not?"

The man cast a thoughtful glance over his shoulder. "I might've parked on a different street, I guess."

"Wait a second."

"I'll keep looking. Peace, man."

He disappeared around a corner, and Strickland stood there, frowning at the parked cars.

As he came up the walkway, a child ran out the front door and across the street, calling out in a loud whisper to a group of others, "He's coming!"

The building was even more rundown inside. The corridors were dim, the walls peeling. The sound of an argument filtered down the stairwell.

Mike's wife, Roz, threw open the door, holding it for a moment at arm's length as if ready to slam it shut again. "Oh good," she said.

Strickland hesitated. "I'm . . ."

Mike's bellow came from inside the apartment: "It him?"

"Well, come on in. He's in the den."

Mike came bounding across the cluttered room to shake his hand. "Well," he said. "Sure enough."

"Hello again, Mike."

Mike kicked a toy truck across the room. "Fucking kids' fucking shit," he apologized.

They sat down.

"So here you are. My turf." He whistled some. "Doing all the whistling I can while I'm still in the world," he explained. "Don't let you whistle in the clink."

"That seems harsh."

"Naw," said Mike. "It ain't respectful. Some of those guys there for life. Man, get the fuck out of here!"

Strickland turned his head. One of the children he had seen in the street

ducked out of sight.

"Man, I told them motherfuckers two hours. What's it been, five fucking minutes?"

Roz said, "Your pop is gonna whoop your asses something good." To Strickland she said, "We don't uh, have no uh, any coffee. Mike can't drink it, on account of his kidney."

"Kidney, shit. I got stomach problems."

"You want some tea instead?"

"That's just fine. I don't mind."

"That bitch thinks she knows everything because her sister is a big-shot fucking nurse, but she don't know shit."

"You had these stomach problems long?," Strickland asked.

"*That* is *it!*" Mike leapt to his feet, stomping noisily in place. From the hallway came screams and the clatter of fleeing footsteps. Mike sat back down. "Fucking monsters got minds of their own."

"You may as well tell them to come in," suggested Strickland.

Mike said, "Huh?"

Strickland sat with Mike, Roz, and five of their children in the den. A sixth appeared in the doorway.

Roz said, "Well, come on over, dopey."

Without taking her eyes off Strickland, the little girl crouched at her father's feet and pressed her face against his leg.

"Clamantha," Roz told Strickland.

"Well, that's all of them," said Mike. "The whole goddamn brood."

The children fidgeted. Their parents stared at the floor.

Strickland sipped his tea. "What would you all be doing right now if I wasn't here?"

"What *wouldn't* we be doing," Mike muttered.

"Getting our ass whooped," said Joan, the oldest girl.

"Got that right," Roz said.

"Playing basketball," said Clarence, the oldest boy.

Strickland put down his cup. "Oh?"

The children ran around the blacktop. Clarence got ahold of the ball, bounced it off Clamantha's head, and executed a perfect layup.

Mike shouted, "Now you know better than that! You gotta get behind the line before you throw again."

The girl looked over at her mother, who stood with her arms crossed at the edge of the court. "Don't look at me," Roz said. "Get him back."

"That's travelling," Mike called. He was agitated, hopping in place. "And that's holding, Clem, goddamn it. Okay, give me the ball, give, me, the ball. There's no point in playing unless you're gonna play proper."

"I'm captain!"

"I'm captain," Mike corrected him. "Me . . . and Dan."

"Oh no," Strickland laughed.

The children stared at Strickland, then clamored: "I'm on Pop's team!"

"I pick first," Mike said, "and I got Clarence." The boy hooted and yanked the ball out of his father's hands.

Strickland looked at Roz, who shrugged and rolled her eyes.

He nodded at Clamantha. "Do you want to be on my team?"

The others laughed. "He picked *Clammie!*"

Mike picked the next biggest boy.

"You playing?," Strickland asked Roz.

"Everybody plays," said Mike.

"He picked *Ma!*"

Mike crouched in front of Joan and grimaced. "You feeling it?"

"I'm feeling it."

"You bringing it?"

"I'm bringing it."

"Then let's do it." They slapped palms and knuckles together solemnly, then let out a wild war cry. "That's my team," he told Strickland, "you can have the other two."

The two youngest children looked at each other, crestfallen.

"Team meeting," Strickland said. "Emergency team huddle. All right. Now. Listen up. As your uh, team captain, I have only one thing to say. I

order you . . . to go out there . . . and have fun."

Roz said, "You heard the man. Now let's see some hands." She put hers out, and the children slapped theirs down onto it. Strickland laid his on top.

"C'mon, you lazy slop-buckets!," Mike screamed. "We're starting without you!"

They played basketball. Strickland and Roz and the kids tripped over one another and fell laughing to the ground. Mike's team danced around them, scoring point after point.

"We're the best!"

"The best at *sucking!*"

"The best at sucking at being *losers!*"

Strickland lifted Clamantha into the air, but before she could shoot, Mike, gibbering with glee, slapped the ball out of her hands. Soon the youngest children grew discouraged and drifted to the sidelines, and without opponents the older kids grew bored, till only Mike, radiant in triumph, and Strickland, ruddy with exhaustion, stood alone on the court with the sun going down behind the apartment blocks.

"Forty-one to one," Mike said. "Not bad."

"I wasn't keeping score."

"Losers never do."

"I'm parked down here," Strickland said.

Mike shook his hand. "Good game, man. You don't give up."

"Neither do you."

"I like to win."

"See you next week."

Strickland stood in the street, staring at a gap in the row of parked cars.

Mike opened the door. "Forget something?"

"This will sound funny."

Strickland stood on the sidewalk with his hands in his pockets while Mike paced back and forth in the street, muttering, "Motherfucker. This is my neighborhood, man."

A car honked at him. He slammed his fist down on the hood but stepped aside.

He joined Strickland on the sidewalk. "This burns my fucking ass, man."

Strickland smiled, but then his face went blank. "Oh no."

Beryl told Ben, "Just pretend that no one is watching you. That's all acting is: pretending you're all alone. Now try it again."

Ben put down the teddy bear and looked at it. "I wish they didn't kill you," he announced.

"Yes," Beryl cried, "but without words! We don't talk when we're alone, do we? Only crazy people talk to themselves."

The doorbell rang.

"Speak through your actions," she said on her way to the door. "Your body is your instrument."

Ben laid his head on the bear's breast.

In the car, Ben said, "And her husband is a famous movie director and if we had a VCR we could watch his movies when we got home like we did at her house."

In the driver's seat, Mike said, "Listen, I been thinking. Cops ain't gonna do shit. Bunch of goldbricking dogfuckers." He glanced at the rear-view mirror. "Pardon my Portuguese. What I'm saying is, give me a couple days to check it out."

"Check it out?"

"Make some calls. See what turns up. I know some people work in this shop. Sometimes these shitheads try to move hot cars through them. What is it, a '77?"

Strickland said, "I'm bad with cars."

Martie watched Ben get into bed.

"Brush your teeth?"

He showed her the inside of his mouth.

"Good man."

"Mom? The brown man is going to help Dad find the car."

"So I heard. And we don't say brown man."

"How come?"

"We say black."

"But he's not black."

"That's just the way it is." She sighed and sat on the edge of the bed. With some difficulty she explained, "It has to do with equality. Now, your skin isn't exactly white either, is it? But we say white people and black people because white and black are the most common, the most basic colors."

"So Penny is black too?"

"No, Penny is oriental. It's a little complicated at first, but you'll pick it up."

"Mom? What's a goldbricking dogfucker?"

After a pause, she said, "Well, it must be some kind of idiom. Tomorrow maybe we'll look it up."

"Mom? I want to be an actor."

"You can be anything you want, dear."

"I want to be an actor."

After a pause, she said, "Then that's what you should be."

Strickland was at his desk.

"I just had the funniest conversation with Benderson," Martie said.

Strickland sighed. "I didn't know what else to do," he said. "You weren't here, I didn't exactly want to take him along to the home of a— And Stephanie wasn't home, it was supposed to be your day to pick him up I thought, and I'm not leaving him with that Barbara girl anymore I've decided, she doesn't even talk to him, she just listens to that Walkman the

whole time, it'll stunt his socio-intellectual development and I didn't think that was what we wanted."

Martie looked at him sadly.

"I'm sorry," he stated. "Did I raise my voice?"

"No. You never do."

"Maybe I need a time out." He rubbed his neck. "It's been a long day." After a minute, he chuckled. "Believe it or not, I played . . ."

But when he looked up she was gone.

Q. Now, Professor, in your testimony to Mr. Massick you mentioned, I believe it was, let me get this right, intermittent explosive disorder. Is this correct?

A. That was my diagnostic impression, yes.

Q. When you say diagnostic impression, do you mean diagnosis?

A. Yes. That is what I mean, yes.

Q. Because when you say an impression, it sounds like, I don't know, something less than a diagnosis.

A. Thank you for bringing that to my attention. I should have said diagnosis.

Q. By what date precisely had you arrived at this diagnosis?

A. I don't think I could pinpoint the date with any degree of exactitude.

Q. Well, was it January first? Was it yesterday?

A. It took some time. These things take time. It is not the same as with medical diagnosis, where you can simply tally up the presenting symptoms and arrive at a conclusion.

Q. So symptoms and conclusions play no part in psychiatric diagnosis?

A. I don't believe I said that. Of course they do. But psychiatric—psychological symptomatology, etiology, these things lie beneath the surface, you must get at them, it is a gradual process and often there is resistance.

Q. You mean, your patients lie to you?

A. Not exactly. Not consciously. They—there are things they don't like to talk about.

Q. Such as the murders they committed?

Strickland said, "Huh?"

"I said," said the cabbie, "twenty-five eighty."

"Jesus."

Massick said, "Come in, Doctor. Have a seat if you like. You'll forgive me for standing, I've been in court all morning. Well. Now. You'll forgive me for cutting straight to the chase scene: What can you tell me about our mutual friend, Mr. Burger?"

"Well . . ."

"Quite a guy, isn't he. Quite a character. Family man too, which is always a bonus in my line of work. Beautiful wife. Bunch of rug rats, I understand. In the army too. Good citizen. Likable guy. Full of beans. Can't keep a man like that down, no, not for long. Says what he means and means what he says. No damn good at all on the witness stand. Though don't think I wasn't tempted. He'd win over eleven of them and get stuck in the craw of one bitter old little old lady. But that's the jury system for you: any twelve meatheads picked out of a hat know the law better than one intelligent man who's dedicated his life to it. Imagine if they tried that in any other line of work. If you had to get twelve people off the street to fix your car, or take out your appendix—or do what you do, Doctor! But what can I do? Every man wants to go before a jury of his peers. Every man wants to be found not guilty. In this case, not guilty by reason of insanity is the best we can do. So be it. All right. So give it to me straight. Mike Burger. In your professional opinion."

Strickland opened his briefcase. "Well, I've prepared a preliminary report, and I thought—"

"No no no, just give it to me in your own words."

Strickland looked at the thick sheaf of paper in his hand. "These are my own words."

"Summarize it for me, doctor. I'll be reading reports and motions and counter-motions and responses and counter-responses and affidavits till the Los Angeles River wets its bed and one thing I can tell you is they're not

worth the paper they're printed on. When you're paid by the page, why say in ten words what you can say in a hundred? No, I'll take it from a man's mouth every time, thank you, and when the courts start reading cases instead of hearing them, *well,* that's when I'll know it's time to shuffle off this jurisprudent coil and retire back home to Alabama. In the meantime here we are, mano a mano, so give it to me in your own words."

Strickland put the report down on the desk. "I haven't come to any firm conclusions, of course, but judging from what I have seen so far, I think the most likely diagnosis is going to be something in the nature of an impulse-control disorder."

Massick, who had been pacing, sat down abruptly.

"In other words," said Strickland, "for the most part he is absolutely adequately adjusted—lively, likable, all those things you said. But evidently he has . . . outbursts. Now, we all have those. But his are way outside the normal, the acceptable range. Which strongly suggests pathology."

Massick sat silent.

"That's it in a nutshell," Strickland said. "If you read through my report you'll no doubt be able to get a better idea of the legal, uh, ramifications . . ."

Massick stood again. "Tell me something, Doctor." He perched on the front edge of the wide desk and crossed his arms thoughtfully. "What you just said . . . It's all a lot of pigwash, isn't it?"

"Pardon?"

"A load of crap. Hooey. Horseshit. Nonsense, Doctor. Isn't that so?"

"I'm obviously sorry you feel that way, Mr. Massick, but I . . ."

"With all due respect, sir, you psychiatrists are all alike, aren't you? A bunch of goddamn charlatans?"

"I can't help but feel that perhaps I haven't expressed myself as clearly as I could have. And that if you had looked at my report, perhaps . . . But in any case, if you feel that way I don't suppose I can be of much use to you, or to Mr. Burger. I'm sorry to have wasted your time."

Massick leapt up and made placating gestures. "You'll have to forgive me, Doctor, but that's the quickest and surest way I've found of testing a

witness's mettle."

Strickland stared.

Massick grinned down at him like a proud parent. "You're a cool customer. You'll do just fine on the cross."

"On the cross?"

"Cross-examination."

"You want to put me on the stand?" asked Strickland. He could not completely hide his pleasure.

"Now, you put an emotional man like myself or Mike Burger up there and start hammering at him and he'll either go to pieces, or he'll fight back. It makes good theatre, and the jury may even love you for it—but they won't trust you anymore. The one thing an expert must be, is dispassionate."

Strickland pursed his lips modestly.

"Where to, my friend?"

Strickland looked in his wallet. "The police station."

The bored cop said, "Anything of value in the vehicle?"

Strickland looked puzzled and fatigued. "No. Nothing of value. Just the vehicle itself."

"Anything in the glove compartment?"

"I don't think so. No. Nothing valuable."

After jotting something down, the cop sat back in his chair, as if calling it a day. "And this man you saw in the street," he said finally. "Think you could identify him?"

"You mean . . . pick him out of a line-up?"

"Or recognize him from a photo."

Strickland sighed. "Are you familiar at all with the research of Elizabeth Loftus?"

The cop looked at him with serene blankness.

"There's a Russian proverb," said Strickland. "'He lies like an eyewitness.' Never mind. I don't trust myself. I wouldn't trust myself to get the right guy. I wasn't really paying attention."

Strickland entered a phone booth, dialed, let it ring once, and hung up.

Then he lifted the receiver again.

Trace pulled up to the curb in a station wagon, rolled down the window, and smirked.

Strickland scuffed his feet forlornly.

She laughed. “Need a ride, stranger?”

“I’m glad they stole your car,” she said. “I bet I never would have heard from you otherwise. I should have thought of it myself.”

“Did you steal my car?”

“I’ll never tell.”

Strickland fumbled with his chopsticks. Trace, with a huff of exasperation that stirred her frizzy bangs, slid around the table to give him a lesson.

“Grasp the first one like a pencil.” She took his hand and showed him. “Then the top one is your pincher doodad. Like this.”

“I think my method is unimprovable,” said Strickland. “It’s the mushrooms that are to blame. They’re slippery buggers.”

“Then why don’t I have any problems? See?” She popped a mushroom in his mouth.

“Best part of the meal,” she said, cracking open her fortune cookie. “Whoa, whoa. You’ve got to eat the cookie first or the fortune won’t come true.”

He chewed slowly and made a face. “Worst part of the meal.”

“Oh, I’ve got two! Twice as much future as you. ‘The first week of next month will be a good time to complete unfinished tasks.’ I hate the ones that are just advice. ‘You are creative but can also be diligent when it is called for.’” She considered this. “It’s not a fortune, but it’s true.”

“True of everyone.”

“No it isn’t!”

“It’s vague and it’s vaguely flattering. Anyone would recognize

themselves in that. It's like astrology."

"I don't believe in astrology. I believe in personality." She peered at him. "What are you?"

"What am I what."

"I'd peg you as either INFP or INFJ."

"Oh God. You mean this Myers-Briggs thing."

"I can't decide if you're introverted intuition with feeling or introverted feeling with intuition."

"Come on. There is absolutely no foundation to that system, absolutely no experimental data that would—actually, it's impossible even to imagine what experiments *could* be done to validate it. It's entirely unfalsifiable. Unfalsifiable and unverifiable."

She watched him contemplatively, her chin resting on one upturned fist.

"It's not science. It's not even psychology."

"Judgement, definitely," she decided. "INFJ."

He laughed.

"But that's okay," she said. "I'm a perfect ENFP myself, so we've got good overlap but also good . . ." She fitted her fingers together and made a locking-into-place sound. "Meshing. Opposition. Complement-ariness. Now read your fortune."

"'A smiling face is half the meal.'"

She looked down at their plates. "Yuck."

They laughed.

Strickland asked, "Do you really think I'm an introvert?"

Q. About how common is this intermittent explosive disorder?

A. I do not have access to any precise figures at the moment, but I should say that it is not extremely common.

Q. In fact the DSM, the psychologists' manual, says that it is extremely rare, does it not?

A. No doubt you are correct. Thank you.

Q. How many times have you seen it? In a patient. How many times in

your career have you made this diagnosis?

A. Well, Ms. Lattimann, I could not say.

Q. You don't know or you don't remember?

A. Diagnosis, in a clinical setting, diagnosis is of a secondary order of—it's not an issue of primary—it's tangential to the main thrust of treatment.

Q. Professor, for your sake and my sake and the sake of the jury, may I with all due respect please remind you to please answer the question directly.

A. Thank you, yes. I will try. Could you repeat the question?

THE COURT: Miss Reporter, will you kindly read back the last question for the doctor.

REPORTER: How many times in your career have you made this diagnosis?

A. With all due respect, Ms. Lattimann, diagnosis, putting a generic name to a cluster of individual and often unique problems or symptoms, well it does not play a large part in my clinical, therapeutic work.

Q. Your Honor, I would ask that the witness be directed to answer the question, please.

THE COURT: Answer the question if you can, Doctor.

A. I am trying, Your Honor. To the best of my knowledge, and in light of what I just said, I suppose the answer must be not very often.

Q. Professor, I will try to make this easy for you. Before Michael Burger, did you ever, have you ever made this diagnosis before? Please answer yes or no.

A. No. But as you pointed out it is very rare.

Q. How many patients do you see, Professor?

A. On an ongoing basis? It varies.

Q. How many patients do you see right now?

A. As I said, it varies.

Q. How many patients did you see in the last seven days?

A. Two. But perhaps I could be permitted to elaborate?

THE COURT: Just wait until you're asked a question, Doctor.

Q. What are your diagnoses of those two patients, Professor?

A. Well, one is suffering from a form of chronic depression, and the other, a sort of generalized anxiety.

Q. Are those diagnoses—chronic depression and generalized anxiety—are those in the DSM, Professor?

They stood beside the car on an embankment, looking down at the city.

Trace said, "Old people holding hands . . . Finding money in the pockets of clothes you haven't worn in a long time . . . Days that are sunny and rainy at the same time. What else . . . Oh!—when somebody out of the blue smiles at you like they know you, but they don't. I love that . . . What about you?"

Strickland smiled and shook his head.

In the car, she said, "Jealousy. A crime of passion."

"But the guy was a complete stranger."

"Maybe. Or maybe the wife is hiding something. Maybe your friend finally had enough and just pow!—snapped."

"I don't know."

"It's obvious. You just can't see it because you're above all that."

"I don't know."

"Do you want to come in?" he asked.

"Why?"

"I . . . I thought maybe you'd like a cup of coffee."

"Oh. In that case."

"I don't know where everybody is . . ."

She looked at the framed photographs on the mantel. "Nice."

"Do you have—kids?"

"Kids are amazing. No. Ted didn't want any." She let out a bark of laughter. "Neither did I. How old is he?"

"Five. Yes, five . . . Hard to believe. Children are the most amazing clocks. Five years used to mean nothing to me. Now it's . . . well. His

lifespan." He shook himself out of his reverie. "How do you like your coffee?"

"No sugar. Lots of cream. Till it's like the color of my skin."

She showed him an arm.

He stood in the kitchen with his forehead against a cupboard.

He poured coffee, added cream, looked at it. Added more cream, looked at it. Added more cream. Looked at it.

"What's the matter?" she asked.

"Oh, nothing. Kink in my neck. I sleep funny."

She put down her cup. "How often?"

"Every other day or so."

She stood behind him and put her hands on his shoulders.

He stiffened. She waited. He relaxed.

She began feeling his neck, his shoulders, his upper back. His head fell forward.

"That's better," he murmured.

She laughed. "I haven't even done anything yet."

The front door opened and closed. He stiffened again.

"It's not a kink, it's repetitive strain. You hold yourself too tight. Hello."

"Oh," said Martie, "hello."

Strickland got to his feet, but his wife was already climbing the stairs.

"Should I leave?," Trace asked.

"No. I don't know. No. Finish your coffee . . .?"

"I'll take a rain check, how about."

At the door she said, "See you tomorrow night, smiling face."

Strickland leaned in the doorway, hands in pockets, and watched his wife brush her teeth. She raised her eyebrows at him in the mirror.

"Are you smoking again?" he blurted.

She spat in the sink. "What?"

"It's the middle of the day and you're brushing your teeth."

Without looking at him she said, "They felt furry. I had wine at lunch."

He stepped forward and put his arms around her.

"Oh-*kay* . . ." she said.

He let her go.

"I've got to pick up Ben in . . . five minutes ago," she explained.

He sat on the bed and watched her remove jewelry, change her shoes.

"I don't think we should keep secrets from each other," he said.

"I agree. Why, do you keep secrets?"

"I think we need to talk."

"You sound like a movie. Instead of announcing that you want to say something, why don't you just say the something that you want to say."

"Very well. All right. Are you . . ."

She sighed. "I've really got to go, hon."

". . . Trace—she only gave me a lift home."

"That was nice of Trace."

"Well, you weren't going to ask."

"What you do . . . Listen, I don't have time for this."

"Then I'll come with you."

They rode in silence.

From the back seat Ben said, "Penny was running around when teacher was out of the room and she fell but nobody tripped her. She had to go to the nurse and also she cried."

Neither Strickland nor Martie replied, but glanced disapprovingly at each other for not replying.

Eventually Strickland said, "Listen . . . Do we have to go to this party thing tomorrow?"

After a long pause she said, "No. Not if you don't think it's important anymore."

"'Important'?"

"'The therapeutic value' *et cetera*—those aren't my words."

"You make it sound like I dragged you into it kicking and screaming."

"As I recall, you were the one who—No," she decided, "I'm not going to say what I was about to say."

"Please, by all means. Say it. I implore you."

"Mom," Ben asked, "are you and Dad having a disagreement?"

"I was going to say that I am not the one who was nearly reprimanded for certain no doubt wondrously cathartic liaisons with one of my students now I really do think we've made enough of a negative impact on a certain young person's emotional psycho-development for one day. *Yes*, Benjamin, your father and I were having a disagreement but now we're having a time out. How do you feel about that? All right?"

Ben said, "The black man's here again."

"Where'd you find it?"

"I know some people." Mike grinned and fingered his teeth. "I got some connections."

Strickland looked inside the car. The back seat had been slashed and cigarette burns covered the dashboard. The glove compartment held only a blackened soda can.

"Well," he said.

"They bagged the shit out of it a little but it still goes."

Strickland circled the vehicle. "Took the license plates," he noticed.

"Sure. Gotta do that if you're gonna sell it."

"Well. Thanks, Mike. I appreciate it."

"Come on."

"What?"

Mike tossed him the keys. "Take the motherfucker for a spin."

"That's easy to fix," Mike shouted over the rattling noises coming from the engine. "That's just timing, any asshole can fix that." Glancing at the cars backing up behind them, he said, "Better get off the express. Take Wilshire —I know a place."

Mike slapped palms and knuckles with the bartender.

"How the fuck are you, Mike?"

"How the fuck *ain't* I, man."

"I thought your fucking ass was in clink."

"Naw. Not yet." He leaned against the bar and surveyed the room like a man expecting to be recognized.

Strickland lowered himself onto a stool and peered at the bottles behind the bar. "Guess I'll have a little chat with Mr. Daniel."

The bartender looked at him.

"Jack Daniel's," he said in his normal voice. "Ice, no water."

"Coming right up."

"His friends call him 'Mister,'" Strickland explained.

Winking over his shoulder at Strickland, the bartender said, "This guy your lawyer, Mike?"

Mike turned slowly around, as if afraid of forgetting something. "This guy," he said, "is my fucking headshrink, man."

"No shit."

"I'm his fucking headshrink," Strickland agreed.

"Gonna get this piece of shit off on an insanity plea?"

They all laughed.

"Before that," Mike said, "it was the fucking pulp mill. Nasty fucking place, the pulp mill. I still get dreams. Fucker I knew had his arm ripped off in the fucking winch."

"Jesus," Strickland said. "Did you see it?—happen?"

"Naw. Different shifts. Still, that kind of shit . . . Before that it was Houston. Man, I did everything in fucking Houston. Construction, windows, sweeping up in a bolt factory. Chopping meat, deliveries. Even selling socks with the fags in a fucking department store."

"A lot of jobs."

"And we were only in Texas six months that time!"

"Why so many?"

"Aw, shit. You ever known a boss that wasn't a fucker? Anyway, I like variety." He gulped at his drink and said, "No, that's one thing I can't ever stand is super—you know, superior fuckers telling me what to do. I never was able to stand that shit. Not even in high school. Our football coach—now there was a disrespecting super-superior motherfucker if you ever saw one. I showed him." He grinned at the memory. "I was good, too. No shit. Halfback. Fucking solid, you know." He jumped into a pillar-like stance above his chair. "But fuck it, man. Can't push a guy around. Can't tell a guy what to do."

"What about the army?"

"What about the fucking army, man?"

"You must've taken orders there all right."

"You talking about Nam. Nam was different." After a pause he said, "It was like being in clink."

Strickland waited.

"I mean it wasn't like clink but it was like clink because you can't say what it's like, either. It's like living a different life. A different planet. Nothing connects up between nothing in it and the real world, so how do you . . . Shit, I don't know. It was like a movie."

"Like a war movie?"

"Never mind. Like going to a fucking movie. Never mind. Fuck it."

"Was it—were you ever in danger?"

"Was I ever not?—You mean was I ever in the shit?" His grin disappeared. "Twice."

"Ever . . . hurt?"

"You mean psychologically?"

"I meant physically."

"I'm here, ain't I?"

". . . Ever get hit in the head, fall down, lose consciousness? Ever been in the hospital?"

"Naw." He struck the pillar pose again and chuckled. "Solid."

"Ever done any drugs?"

"No," he said quickly. "Why?"

"Oh, you never know. Just asking." After a minute, Strickland said, "I do a little coke from time to time."

Mike was impressed. "No shit. You get high?"

"You know. Once in awhile."

". . . Wanna get high now?"

Strickland pursed his lips, then laughed.

Q. Is this the kind of disorder that would be treatable, by drugs for example?

A. That question I think indicates a rather unfortunate assumption about the state of the pharmaceutical art today. To be frank, drug treatment is not a very advanced form of therapy—more akin to faith healing than science. We have a lot of different chemicals that seem to have a lot of different effects on a lot of different people but most of the time we don't even know how they work, let alone why. The brain is an incredibly, unimaginably dense and complicated lump of circuitry. A great physiologist once compared it to the Milky Way—so try to imagine a galaxy of little stars doing an incredibly complicated yet very meaningful dance at almost the speed of light. Then try to imagine a bunch of humans trying to choreograph that dance with nothing but microscopes and prescription pads at their disposal. Pharmacology is trying to return to equilibrium this amazingly turbulent electrochemical galaxy by smuggling a few more chemicals across the blood–brain barrier, adding a few more ingredients to the soup haphazardly. It's like copyediting a million-page manuscript by randomly inserting five percent more vowels—or trying to improve the fuzzy picture on your television by adding, you know, five percent more red or blue.

Q. Dr. Strickland, do you get paid by the hour?

A. Why—yes, I do.

Q. Uh-huh. What do you make, sixty dollars an hour?

A. That is my rate, yes.

Q. Is the meter running while you are in court?

MR. MASSICK: Now I'm afraid I'm going to have to object, your Honor. That's argumentative, the way it's framed.

THE COURT: All right, sustained.

A. The fact is that I earn what is—

THE COURT: Now just a minute, Doctor. The objection was sustained.

A. Oh. Sustained. Thank you.

THE COURT: Perhaps you could rephrase the question, Ms. Lattimann.

Q. Do you get sixty dollars an hour, Professor, for the time you sit here on the witness stand and testify?

MR. MASSICK: Now I do apologize Your Honor but on second thought I'm also going to have to object to the substance of this question on grounds of relevance, I think.

MS. LATTIMANN: I'm willing to strike that last question, Your Honor.

MR. MASSICK: Well, thank you.

THE COURT: The jury will kindly disregard Ms. Lattimann's question.

Q. Professor, you yourself as a psychologist are not allowed to prescribe drugs, are you?

A. That's a little like asking the candlestick maker if he is allowed to sell pastries. It's not my line of work. It's not what I do.

Mike sniffed and said, "Speed. STP. Crank. Goofballs. PCP once and never fucking again. Here." He held out his powdered knuckle to Strickland.

"No, no thanks. I'm good." He patted his stomach and laughed. "I'm stuffed."

Mike snorted what was left and went on, "Mescaline, at least I think it was mescaline. LSD, all that hippie shit. Weed."

Strickland looked around the room. The surfaces were all mirrors and light. "Marijuana?" he said. "I've never smoked marijuana. This is a beautiful environment."

"There it comes." Mike rolled his head around on his neck and rotated his shoulders. He slapped Strickland on the back and said, "Vamos, amigo.

You can't get shit like we got in the army anymore but we'll find you some kind of shit somewheres."

Out in the street, Strickland confided, "I like being happy."

Q. Could Mr. Burger be cured by means other than drugs, or will he always have this problem?

A. He can, I believe, like any of us, be helped to realize that emotional arousal, including various forms of anger, has a mediating, cognitive element, and is therefore capable of being sublimated or redirected. He could, I think, with the aid of a skilled therapist, be led to adopt a task-oriented or problem-solving attitude instead of an ego-oriented one. I'm sorry: to answer your question as briefly as possible, I would say that yes, absolutely, he could learn to not take things personally, to control his anger —to use his brain.

Q. And how long would that take, Professor?

A. It is difficult to say.

Q. And how many times would he blow up, and how many more people would he be likely to beat to death before he had learned to as you say not take things personally?

Mike and Roz and their friends waiting to be seated at the White Grape.

Antonio DiRosa coming in with his group, asking Roz, Is it a long wait?

Roz looking at him meaningfully with moist eyes, and with moist lips saying, Depends what you're waiting for. Roz looking at Mike defiantly.

The maitre-d' saying, Ah, Mr. DiRosa! Your party's table is ready.

Mike clenching his fists, gritting his teeth.

DiRosa, passing by, stopping to whisper, I'm gonna fuck your wife till she screams.

"Huh?" said Mike, passing him the joint.

"Nothing." Strickland puffed at it with an air of responsibility. Then he sat back.

"It's like," he said, "I can feel my peristalsis."

"Totally." A shrewd look came into Mike's eyes. "It's like a total proclivity, right?"

They were in a once-sumptuous hotel room, but the white carpet and leather furniture looked like they hadn't been cleaned since they were installed. There were a few other people in the room but they appeared to be asleep, despite the loud music.

"Proclivity?"

"Yeah, you know what I mean, like a proclivity to swear."

Strickland blinked. "You read my report."

"So that's like a, a proclivity to swear, that's like, what, I say fuck a lot, is that it?"

"Hell, it's not a judgement, Mike. Of course you swear a lot—relative to myself and other people of my particular . . . cultural and socio-economic background. But if I'd lived the life you've lived, no doubt I'd probably cuss a lot too."

"Man," said Mike, "you don't know shit about my fucking life."

Mike jumped up and punched a street sign.

"Sometimes I feel like I'm not even anywheres," he said. "Like I'm not even, like there's not even . . . anything. You know what I mean?"

Strickland considered, then said, "When I hold my eyes open it feels like the wind is blowing right into my skull."

"Man," Mike said, "you should shave that fucking beard off. It makes you look like a fucking A-rab."

"That's quite a statement, coming from a man of . . . of a minority group."

"You mean a nigger?"

"No."

Mike laughed at him. "See, I can be a racist but you can't get away with it. Actually I'm not a racist—some of my best friends are ragheads!"

After a moment, Strickland laughed too.

"I'm not even really a nigger," Mike said. "My old man was a fucking wetback."

He smashed a street sign thoughtfully.

They were in another bar. Mike returned to the table.

"Okay, so she wants to play it that way? Okay."

"She does, huh?"

Mike whistled restlessly for a minute. "Man," he said, "I promised myself I was gonna get all the fucking pussy I can while I'm still in the world."

After a long pause, Strickland said slowly, "I think my wife is having an affair."

"Man, what you fucking looking at?," Mike muttered. Then he shouted it across the bar: "Man, what you fucking looking at, man?"

"What are *you* looking at?" came the reply.

Mike rose, as if lifted by a crane. "I'll look at whatever the fuck I feel like, my friend."

"Oh my," Strickland giggled.

"I'm not your friend and if you want to look at my woman then you can take a fucking photo."

Mike started across the room with the poise and footing of someone crossing a rope bridge.

"Mike . . ."

"Maybe I'll buy one," Mike suggested. "She sell them after her strip show?"

"Fuck, man, you better back off, man."

"Yeah? Or what."

"I'm just telling you now, you better just about back the fuck off, man."

"Mike, come on, this is stupid." Strickland looked to the woman for support, but she was watching the argument with the disengaged engrossment of a referee.

"You think you can tell motherfuckers what they can and can't look at, motherfucker?"

"Now you're getting in my face and that's something I don't like."

"All right, both of you, this is silly, childish—"

"Yeah, what about this, you like this?"

Mike shoved the guy.

"That's ENOUGH!," Strickland screamed.

They looked at him.

"I mean, I mean, what are you doing, Mike? Have you forgotten that you're out on, I mean out on fucking bail?"

"Oh *yeah,* you mean for *killing* that fucker?"

"Come on," said the woman, "forget this shit."

"Watch your back," the man muttered as they left.

Mike laughed and clapped Strickland on the shoulder. "Dan my man! You see that fucker's face?"

"I mean, what do you want to go and get all worked up for? How am I supposed to . . . What are you thinking?"

"Aw shit, man. Come on now, don't be like that. That was some fucking A-1 shit right there, admit it. Admit it."

Mike shook him by the shoulders till he smiled.

In the cafeteria, Strickland, hungover, said, "And can I get a salad instead of the fries?"

"Sure, but it costs a dollar."

"That doesn't make any sense. The side salad costs less than the side fries."

"Man, I just do what they tell me."

"Yeah," Strickland muttered, "that's what they said at Belsen."

The anxious young man said, "And I can't even drive anymore because of the yellow lights. I know it's stupid, but whenever I stop for one I feel like I should have gone through and whenever I go through I feel like it was really too late and I should have stopped. And green lights are no good because they could turn yellow at any moment so I'm constantly re-evaluating whether—"

Strickland rubbed his neck and said, "I've got an idea. Why don't we jump straight to the relaxation exercises we've been working on."

Strickland looked in the mirror and touched his beard.

Someone said, "The main thing is you don't treat sex like a big deal, or make more of a secret of it than any other thing that they don't understand yet."

"But you can't deprive them completely of television—it's ostracizing."

"Milgram, Asch, Schachter . . . All the best experimental work has been done with stooges."

"My twelve-year-old boy now. Our bathroom light switch is outside in the hall, and Alfie and his little pal would turn off the light when his fourteen-year-old sister took a shower, so of course she has to come out in the buff, which is the point. Well, when Frank and I had had about enough of her caterwauling I told her: That's enough now, open that door, and I hauled the two little hoodlums in by the ear and I said: There! Get a good eyeful! That's a perfectly ordinary female naked body and nothing to get so excited about, is it? And to *her* I said: And that's a perfectly ordinary couple of twelve-year-old boys with a perfectly natural and ordinary curiosity and nothing to get so riled up about, is it? You're not the bloody queen."

"I don't know, maybe we've handled ours with kid gloves."

"Oh but you *gotta* handle kids with gloves!"

Strickland, beardless, went to the punch bowl.

Trace said, "Oh, all over the place. I collect them."

Martie said, "And they're all polar bears?"

"I love polar bears. I love how white and fluffy they are."

Strickland went away from the punch bowl.

Someone said, "It's the only time in your life when you get to stand in front of a roomful of people who are guaranteed to know less than you. I can tell them *anything*—and they have to believe it."

Someone said, "I know that guy! You mean the Resto-Rage guy?"

Martie said, "I guess that's what the newspapers call him . . ."

Someone said, "Childhood is just an example of Stockholm

Syndrome."

Everyone laughed.

Nigel said, "I don't get it."

Everyone laughed.

Strickland said, "That doesn't make any sense. I thought Stockholm Syndrome was when you gradually over time started to sympathize and identify with your abductors. But with children the process is exactly the reverse."

No one laughed.

Trace said, "Sit still. See if you can keep your eye open while I lick your eyeball.

Martie was watching them from across the room.

Strickland laughed and said, "Yuck!"

One of the women cried, "Let's pick keys already—I want a goddamn drink already."

Trace pressed herself against Strickland and said, "What do we do?"

Strickland said, "Just make sure you pick last."

The women lined up and withdrew keys from a convoluted Chinese teapot.

Trace said, "Oh, you go ahead, dear."

Martie said, "No no, that's fine, you first."

Nigel said, "Wait a second. Who's actually left? Just Dan and I? Well, we can't very well let you and Martie go home together, can we heh heh?"

Strickland grabbed the teapot and turned it upside down. Nothing came out.

"I knew it."

Nigel pushed his glasses up his nose and said, "Guess we forgot to put our keys in, hey pal?"

Strickland punched him on the chin.

Nigel took a step back.

"Ow," he said. "What was that for?"

Strickland looked at his wife, then left the room.

Trace said, "Where's he going?"

Nigel called, "Are you okay to drive, buddy?"

Martie went to the window and said, "Don't be stupid."

Strickland drove.

"Glasses up with their ring finger?" he muttered.

"I'll have a little chat with Mr. Daniel."

But the bartender didn't recognize him.

"A little chat with Mr. Daniel, please."

"Mr. Daniels, you mean."

"No," said Strickland, "there's an apostrophe."

Strickland parked on an embankment and looked down at Los Angeles.

Then he drove home.

Martie was sitting in the kitchen over a cup of coffee.

"Good," she said when he came in.

Strickland went to the window. "Your friend give you a ride home?"

"No. *Your* friend. Nigel was drunk. So were you."

He turned around. "The guy is a . . . He pushes his glasses up with his ring finger, Martie. His *ring* finger. Any other finger would make sense—"

"What about *her*? She collects polar bear knick-knacks."

"We didn't even sleep together."

"Oh no?"

"No." After a pause he said, "It's worse than that."

"You like her."

He sat down at the table. "I liked the idea of liking someone again."

She slapped him, then laughed through tears at the look on his face.

He tried to slap her, but she blocked him, then slapped him again. He reeled back, knocking his chair over. He righted it, then pushed it across the

floor at her. She jumped out of the way, grabbed the nearest thing to hand—half a loaf of bread—and threw it at him. He swatted it out of the air and ducked the toaster which followed.

"You're crazy!"

"*You're* crazy!"

She emptied the cutlery drawer onto the floor at his feet. He tore the dish tray out of the dishwasher and threw it at her legs.

Ben sat up in bed, in the dark.

"I wasn't sleeping with him either!"

"Oh, come on!"

"For someone with such a big brain you can be a real idiot. I only kept going with him because he was the only one who said we didn't have to!"

The phone rang.

He said, "Is that true?"

"I'm not getting that," she said.

"Well, neither am I."

They sat at opposite ends of the table, the floor around them scattered with broken dishes.

Martie said, "Why can't we make each other feel like that again?"

"You mean anymore?"

"I mean again."

He touched her arm.

She said, "I don't know what I want."

"Maybe that's because you don't want anything."

The phone rang again.

Martie returned and said, "That was the hospital."

In the bright, cluttered waiting room, Martie said, "Atrocious the way these places are run. Like a bus station."

Strickland frowned and nodded. Ben wriggled in his lap.

A doctor entered and Martie stood up.

"Mrs. Esposito?"

She sat down and muttered, "Do I look like a Mrs. Esposito?"

"They're doing the best they can."

"That's what they said at Auschwitz."

"Mr. and Mrs. Endicott?"

"Can she hear us?"

Melanie said, "I can hear you."

The doctor said, "She'll be a bit groggy for the next twenty-four hours or so, but no harm done."

"Thank you," said Strickland.

"A . . . psychologist will want to talk to the three of you, before she checks out."

"I am a psychologist," said Martie, "and so is my husband."

"Then you'll understand."

"I understand that you must have a bloody good union here."

The doctor left and Martie sat down beside the bed.

"Oh, you stupid, stupid girl."

"Leave me alone."

Strickland said to Ben, "Let's wait outside."

"What were you thinking? You little idiot. You stupid, stupid, stupid, stupid, stupid—"

In the waiting room, Ben ate dirt out of a potted plant. Strickland slapped his hand.

"You . . . You'll spoil your appetite."

The boy looked at his father in amazement, then started to cry.

After a long pause, Massick shifted his bulk behind the desk and said, "With all due respect, I think you've got the wrong end of the stick on this one, Doctor. I don't believe I ever said anything about insanity."

"But," said Strickland, "you're pleading insanity. You're pleading Mike not guilty by reason of insanity."

"That's a technicality. What we fundamentally have here is a jury trial. That means twelve bozos deciding guilty or not guilty. Simple as that. Never mind this by reason of insanity bushwah. Juries don't understand it. Remember, they're laymen—another word for bozos. Every day of every year a jury somewhere finds a crazy man guilty and a guilty man crazy. If they like you, they find you not guilty. If they don't, you're going to jail. Simple as that. What sort of people do they dislike? Monsters. Weirdos. Madmen. Sickos. People *not quite right* in the old nobby-noodler. People they fear and hate because they don't understand them—because no one was able to *help* them understand them. In other words, the very sort of people who should be in a mental hospital. They're the ones who get sent to jail. What sort of people do they let off? I'll tell you. People they feel sorry for. People they recognize. People like them. People who did what they would have done themselves in the same circumstances. So you see. This isn't about sane or insane, or even guilty or not guilty. There is no guilty or not guilty in this case—the guy did it. All there is is a yay or a nay. Is this guy a bad guy, or is this guy a good guy. All you have to do is show them that this guy isn't a bad guy."

"But I don't think Mike belongs in a mental hospital."

"Neither do I. Neither does he. I know and you know and probably even he knows that he'll be a lot more miserable in the nuthatch than in the slammer. In the slammer he'd have regular exercise and phone privileges and conjugal visits and a shot at bail. In the booby hatch—who the hell knows? And they might keep him in longer than he would have spent in jail anyway because they won't be able to figure out what's wrong with him. But what can we do? The guy wants a trial and is entitled to a trial. He wants to go before a jury of his so-called peers and what does he want? He wants them to give him the thumbs-up. He wants them to say he's not a bad guy. Do you think he's a bad guy?"

Strickland said, "No."

"All right. There we are. So tell me, Doctor. What's the story?"

"Story?"

"Why did he do this thing? What was he thinking? If they're going to understand him they're going to need the story. What made him do it?"

"I don't know."

"Then you haven't done your job."

Roz opened the door. "Oh," she said. "He ain't here."

"I need to talk to him."

"Well, I don't know. I should just about guess he's probably at work."

Q. Professor, can you offer any scientific evidence that your psychological diagnoses are in fact correct?

A. Well, in my clinical opinion, I would say that as a general rule one knows one's diagnoses are correct when the treatment offered for the diagnosed disorder is effective. I think it would be difficult for anyone to go on practicing psychology if they were wrong most of the time.

Q. You are familiar with the practice of bleeding, Professor, which was practiced for two hundred years even though it was ineffective and wrong?

A. If that is a question, then yes, I am familiar with it.

Q. Did the doctors or barbers or whoever performed those bleeding or leeching operations know they were wrong, Professor, or did they believe they were helping their patients?

A. If you mean is it possible that I am wrong even though I think I am right, yes of course, but the same could be said for anyone at any time in human history.

Q. That is very generous of you, Professor.

A. I think perhaps you could stop calling me Professor now.

The bar was not open yet. He knocked on the front door, then went around to the back of the building, picking his way past garbage cans and garbage.

On the back wall, someone had spray-painted the words SPICK KILLERS.

He knocked.

A large man opened the door and looked at him.

"Is this . . . Does Mike work here? Mike Burger?"

The large man closed the door.

"Good union," Strickland muttered. He was picking his way back through the garbage when the door opened again and Mike came out.

"Shit, man. What the fuck?"

A group of men were seated around a pool table covered with piles of paper. One of them rolled a toothpick back and forth in his mouth without seeming to move his tongue. They all looked at Strickland as if they had been waiting for him.

Mike shook his thumb at Strickland and said, "Aw, shit, this guy's okay. Friend of mine. We'll be in the back, okay, Andy? Shit."

Strickland waited in a dirty, derelict kitchen stacked to the ceiling with cases of alcohol. Mike came in holding a VCR in one hand, its power cord dragging behind like a tail.

"Here," he said. "I wanted to give you this."

"A VCR?"

Mike pulled at his teeth and said, "Roz said I should get you something, you know, so I thought: shit."

"Thank you," Strickland said. "Actually, we don't own a television."

"Aw, fuck it. Pawn it if you want. You know how women . . ."

"We've been thinking of buying one, though. And now we could rent movies. It's very thoughtful."

"Aw, fuck off, man. It was just an idea."

Strickland put the VCR down on the edge of a dusty grill. "Listen, Mike."

"But you should blow out, man. You shouldn't really ought to be down here right now anyway."

"I'm dropping your case, Mike."

"Come back some night, I'll run you up a tab."

"I said I'm dropping the case. I just came from Massick. I'm not going

to do it."

"Huh?"

"I'm not going to testify. Go to court. Say that you're insane. I don't think you're insane."

"Insane?"

"I can't do it. I'm sorry. It wouldn't be honest. I want to help you but . . . Jesus, my life is more fucked up than yours right now. I have no right to sit in judgement on . . . anyone. I'm sorry."

"But it starts next week. I'm on trial *next week*."

"I know. I'm sorry. But it wouldn't be right. I don't think you belong in a ment— I don't think you have a psychol— I don't think you're crazy and it would be dishonest, unprofessional, and, and, and wrong for me to pretend otherwise. And probably illegal."

"You saying you ain't gonna testify."

"That's what I'm saying."

"But man, I'm going to court next week!"

"I heard you the first time. I don't think you heard me."

Mike put his hand delicately on a stack of Jack Daniel's boxes, as if it were the head of a child.

"I understand if you're angry."

"What the fuck are you talking about?" He was breathing heavily. "You talking about quitting?"

"I am quitting."

"Man, what the fuck you *talking* about? Who said you could quit? Who the fuck hired you? Who the fuck pays your bills?"

"Well," said Strickland, "Massick."

Mike began tapping the lowest box in the stack with his shoe; bottles tinkled. "Let me just get this straight here for a minute. I gotta go and get my ass dragged into court next fucking week and you want to blow off?"

"I was hired by Massick, and I never promised that I would— Everything was contingent on whether or not I, on the results of— I'm sorry it took so long, but these things take time."

Mike kicked the box; glass broke.

"Man, what, the fuck, you talking about! Who you think hired Massick, man? Who the fuck you think pays *his* bills?" He kicked the box again. "Not me! That's for sure as fucking sure. You think I got money? I don't got shit. It's that motherfucker out there who's got the money. I don't got shit, I ain't shit, unless that motherfucker says I'm shit."

He punched the top box and the whole stack came crashing down. Jack Daniel's came gurgling out of the boxes and spread slowly across the floor.

"There! That's what I'm talking about! Now who the fuck you think's going to pay for *that* shit? It sure, as fuck, ain't gonna be fucking Massick!"

He began kicking and stamping on the fallen boxes.

"And I sure, as fuck, ain't going, into, fucking, clink again, and getting my other, fucking, kidney, cut the fuck out, by one of that spic, fag, DiRosa's, fucking, brothers!"

Panting, fists clenched, he turned on Strickland.

Strickland took a step back and said, "I don't think this is a very intelligent way to discuss this."

As the sound of breaking bottles reached them, the men around the pool table looked at one another, then at the man with the toothpick. The man with the toothpick took the toothpick out of his mouth. He placed it on the edge of the table. He said, "Shit."

Mike went limp when the door opened, which allowed Strickland to get out from under him and grab him by the throat.

"What's all this fuss?" said the man with the toothpick.

Strickland let go. They got to their feet.

"You need some help with this . . . friend of yours?"

"Naw, Andy," said Mike.

Strickland tugged his shirt into place. "We're fine, thanks."

The man with the toothpick said to Mike, "You need to take a little time out?"

Mike said, "Naw, Andy."

"Let me see. How about this. Take yourself a little time out. Work

whatever this shit is out. Just be back before first rush. Then clean this fucking mess up."

Out in the street, they shuffled towards Strickland's car, blinking and shielding their eyes from the sun. Strickland had the VCR under one arm.

"I just about had you there," Strickland said.

"Aw man, forget that."

"No kidding. Another two minutes . . . Did you like that hold?" Strickland cocked his free arm to show which hold he meant.

"You fight like a fucking school kid. Kicking a guy's fucking legs out."

"That's because I haven't been in a fight since school!"

They stood next to the car, looking down at the city as the sun set.

"So what am I supposed to tell them?" said Strickland. "I can't—I won't lie."

"Shit, man. Who the fuck said shit about lying? Tell them the fucking truth. Tell them that asshole got what he fucking asked for."

"Mike," Strickland said. "What happened on July ninth?"

"Man, what the fuck do I know from July ninth? How the fuck do I know what I'm doing July ninth or tenth or any other fucking day? That shit's a long time ago."

"You know what day I mean."

"Man, you mean the night I *killed* that motherfucker, say so."

Mike Burger and Antonio DiRosa in the foyer of The White Grape, shouting into each other's faces.

Man, what you fucking looking at, man?

What you think *you* looking at?

I'll look at whatever the fuck I feel like, my friend.

I'm not your friend and you better back off, man.

Yeah? Or what.

I'm just telling you now, you better just about back the fuck off, man.

"Nobody talks to me like that, man."

Strickland said, "But what did he say?"

You think you can tell motherfuckers what they can or can't look at, motherfucker?

Who you calling motherfucker, motherfucker? Go fuck your own mother.

Mike's friends, who have been holding him back, suddenly meeting no resistance.

"Some punk piece of shit spic motherfucker tells me to fuck my mother, what the fuck you expect me to do? Take that shit lying down? Fuck that. Nobody says shit about my mother, man."

Mike got back in the car. Strickland joined him.

"She got enough of that fucking shit when she was alive."

"All right," said Strickland. "All right, all right, all right," he said. "Tell me about your mother."

Q. Are you familiar with the phrase begging the question? Strike that. How do you know when your treatment has been effective? Do you do follow-up studies? Do you get other psychologists to assess your results? Do you in fact make use of any of the tools of science? Analysis, comparison, evaluation, validation—do these play any part in your clinical work, Dr. Strickland?

MR. MASSICK: Now I do beg Your Honor's pardon but—

A. Let me explain something to you, Ms. Lattimann—

THE COURT: Now just a minute, Doctor. There is I believe going to be an objection to what was clearly a compound question.

MR. MASSICK: Thank you, Your Honor.

MS. LATTIMANN: Your Honor, with all due respect I would appreciate it if you left the objections to the defense counsel. I have my hands quite full enough without—

THE COURT: Ms. Lattimann, I would advise you to stop right there. Anyone can see that that was a compound question and therefore improper.

You may rephrase, provided you limit yourself to one question at a time.

DR. STRICKLAND: May I say something, Your Honor?

THE COURT: Jesus and Mary. No you may not, until you are asked a direct question.

DR. STRICKLAND: It seems to me I was asked several, and it seems to me that everyone else in this court is given a chance to speak up whenever they like whereas I am not even allowed to elaborate on my answers, when it should be obvious to anyone with a, it should be obvious to anyone that there are some questions that cannot be answered with a simple yes or no, and I would also like to say for the record in respect to Ms. Lattimann's, well I don't know, I want to say argumentative and sarcastic question that yes—

THE COURT: I will decide what is argumentative, Doctor, thank you.

DR. STRICKLAND: As a matter of fact I do know what begging the question means, and furthermore that if she means to imply that my method is not scientific because I do not use double-blind studies or choose to hop my patients up on speed or downers or goofballs—

MS. LATTIMANN: Mr. Massick, perhaps you could please control your witness.

THE COURT: Ms. Lattimann, it is not for you to make requests of that nature to Mr. Massick.

DR. STRICKLAND: You give a hundred people a drug in a double-blind placebo-controlled study and lo and behold, sixty of them seem to do a little better, so the drug works, and a hundred doctors start prescribing it to a hundred patients each, but what about the forty it doesn't help, or makes feel worse? That's modern medicine. The individual is swamped by the average. And that's what you'd have us turn psychology into, Ms. Lattimann. Let me tell you, there is more wisdom, and compassion, and insight in one good case study of one unique and troubled person than in any number of tables of figures added up and smoothed over by mathematical frippery . . .

THE COURT: Thank you, Doctor, that will do nicely.

DR. STRICKLAND: All right, Ms. Lattimann, we all see what you're

trying to do. You want to discredit psychology as a science? Fine. I'll do it for you. Not just clinical psychology but I'll throw in experimental, and popular, and social and personality and depth and all the other kinds of psychology for free. They're all bunk. Of course they are. They're just stories we make up to explain why we do things, but none of us even knows why we do things ourself so how can we expect to make a science out of why everyone does everything that they do?

THE COURT: This is not the way things are done in a court of law, Doctor.

DR. STRICKLAND: You think if you find it in the DSM then it's science? Do you know anything? Yes, let me ask you some questions for a change. Did you know, Ms. Lattimann, that the manual was produced by committee consensus? That means they chatted about the different categories and decided by vote what should be included and what should not—isn't that correct? And isn't it true that there were disagreements, and that in fact a few years ago, wasn't there a big outcry when the Committee on Nomenclature voted that homosexuality was not a mental disorder, and wasn't that controversy resolved by sending ballots out to members of the American Psychiatric Association and having them vote on whether or not homosexuality is or is not a mental disorder? Now, that is not a scientific procedure, is it, Ms. Lattimann?

MS. LATTIMANN: Your Honor, I trust that you will instruct the jury correctly when the time comes to strike this tirade from the record if you are not going to clear the courtroom now or hold Dr. Strickland in contempt of court.

THE COURT: Ms. Lattimann, the next person, male or female, white or black, witness or counsel or juror or bailiff, who tells me how to do my job, will be the one held in contempt of court. As for you, Professor, Doctor —

DR. STRICKLAND: All right. Just let me say one more thing. Ms. Lattimann wants to quibble over definitions and diagnoses. It should be clear by now why I do not. Call it impulse dyscontrol or explosive personality type or any of the hundreds of things it's been called. None of

the names says anything. A label isn't an explanation. The point is this. Could Mike Burger have acted differently? Could he have conformed his conduct to the law? My answer, in my professional, clinical opinion, is no. He could not. Not when you know who he is, what he has been through, how he relates to the world. A man in a restaurant told him to fuck his mother. So he beat him up, and the man died. He had no choice, when you consider his upbringing. His father was a violent, hateful man who beat his wife when their children—*her* children, he called them—acted up, or acted out, or did not behave exactly as he wanted them to behave—that is, as blocks of wood. Mike Burger as a child saw his mother thrashed till she was black and blue for *his* mischief, for *his* misdeeds. So when Antonio DiRosa told him to fuck his mother, something snapped. Maybe DiRosa became in that moment Mike's father. Maybe the man's unfortunate choice of words seemed to accuse Mike of himself being his father, or like his father. In either case, he was not a child any longer and he was not going to stand for anyone insulting or harming his mother anymore. So he attacked. What else could he do? Now tell me, Ms. Lattimann. Where are you going to find any of that in a textbook of psychological disorders?

THE COURT: Now we've simply got to have some kind of order and reason here. This isn't the way things are done. We've got to have order, or we'll be left with nothing but chaos.

MIKE BURGER: I'm sorry, man, but that's a load of fucking shit. I hated that bitch.

The judge cleared the courtroom.

SIX WEEKS LATER

The anxious young man said nothing for a long time. "It helps me sleep, too."

"Well, that's fine," said Strickland. "Just, you know. Be careful. Those things can be addictive."

"I guess."

". . . Should we work on relaxation?"

"I don't know. I guess I'm probably relaxed enough already."

"Well . . . I'm moving to a new office. So, if you want, we can meet there from now on."

The young man looked around his kitchen. "I don't mind."

Melanie and Ben helped Strickland carry boxes from the interview room out to his car.

"Blind corner!"

"Beep beep, coming through!"

"Oops—head-on collision!"

The phone rang. Melanie ran to get it.

"It's . . . the *police*," she whispered.

They both looked at the box in his hands. On top was the VCR that Mike had given him.

"Joy ride," the cop explained. "Probably dumped it hours after they grabbed it. Drove it halfway into an aqueduct, otherwise somebody'd've spotted it sooner."

Strickland looked at the car. "And this—you're sure it's mine?"

The cop handed him the registration. "Glovebox," he said.

On the little stage, Ben said, "In the skirts of Norway, here and there, sharked up a list, of lawless res-o-lutes . . ."

Beryl stood at the back of the room, squeezing her hands.

Later, alone with Strickland, she cried.

"They were terrible. *So* terrible! I always thought bad acting was bad directing, but those children . . . They're not even believable when they're being themselves!"

Strickland told his class, "Don't ask them how they are. Don't ask them how they feel. Though their problems come from inside, they don't feel it that way. Ask them how *life* is. Ask them how the *world* is treating them."

The girl in the black turtleneck wrote everything down.

Strickland sat at his new desk in his new office, thinking.

He wrote something down, sighed, and rubbed his neck.

"Despite its appearance," he muttered, "it is actually a reaction to distressing feelings of weakness, Ms. Lattimann . . ."

There was a tap at the door.

"Mind if I come in?"

Martie sat on his couch and said, "Such an unbearably tedious woman. Her only contact with the outside world is the six-o'clock news, and she only watches that so she can have something to be afraid of. The other night—this is good, you'll love this—she heard some pundit say that the only reason there's a recession is because everyone says so. You know: everyone is told there is a recession, so they don't spend anything, and so there is a recession. Oh, she puzzled over this for nearly the entire hour. She couldn't understand why we didn't just call it something else, use a different word—something 'upbeat,' she said. As if, instead of a recession, we could all agree that what we were in the middle of was actually a *carnival*, and if everyone just said it and believed it, it would come true . . ."

They chuckled. She sighed and said, "It's actually quite endearing, though, if you think about it."

Strickland was about to ring the doorbell again when at last he heard footsteps coming from inside the house. The chain was eventually unlatched, the locks unlocked, and the door opened.

"Oh!" said the little old woman. "It's Danny!"

"Hello, mother."

Strickland said into his tape recorder, "We tell ourselves we're not going to be like our parents."

"I'll make tea," she said. "Aren't you cold in only that? Oh, but you

shouldn't have come all this way, not just for a visit."

"I was in the neighborhood. How are you feeling?"

"Oh, bosh."

"But when the time comes, you find your primary concern is not what a robot you're turning your kid into, but how to keep them alive long enough to someday hate your guts."

"Sit down. You always look flushed after that drive. Let me make you something to eat. No, sit down. And turn that nasty thing off. It's nothing but bad news. Did you hear about this young man who tried to shoot the president? Maybe he did shoot the president, I don't know, they don't tell you anything. It's beyond me why anyone would go and do a thing like that. Why, the man was only inaugurated last month. He hasn't had a chance to do anything to deserve it yet. Not that I think shooting anyone is the answer to anything, but you would think you could at least wait and see what he actually *does*. Shooting a man like that a month after his inauguration! It doesn't make any sense. Why would someone go and do a thing like that?"

Strickland frowned and shook his head.