Lovereading.co.uk
Helping you choose your next book

You loved your last book...but what are you going to read next?

Using our unique guidance tools, Love**reading** will help you find new books to keep you inspired and entertained.

Opening Extract from...

The Last Good Kiss

Written by James Crumley

Published by Black Swan

All text is copyright © of the author

This Opening Extract is exclusive to Love**reading**.
Please print off and read at your leisure.

TRANSWORLD PUBLISHERS
61–63 Uxbridge Road, London W5 5SA
www.transworldbooks.co.uk

Transworld is part of the Penguin Random House group of companies whose addresses can be found at global.penguinrandomhouse.com



First published in the United States by Random House, Inc., and Canada by Random House Of Canada Limited in 1978
First Vintage Crime/Black Lizard edition published 1988

First published in Great Britain in 2016 by Black Swan
an imprint of Transworld Publishers

Copyright © James Crumley 1978

James Crumley has asserted his right under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988 to be identified as the author of this work.

'Degrees in Gray in Philipsburg', from *The Lady in Kicking Horse Reservoir* by Richard Hugo. Copyright © 1973 by Richard Hugo. Used by permission of W.W. Norton & Company, Inc.

This book is a work of fiction and, except in the case of historical fact, any resemblance to actual persons living or dead, is purely coincidental.

Every effort has been made to obtain the necessary permissions with reference to copyright material, both illustrative and quoted. We apologize for any omissions in this respect and will be pleased to make the appropriate acknowledgements in any future edition.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN
9781784161583

Typeset in 11/14pt Sabon by Falcon Oast Graphic Art Ltd.
Printed and bound by Clays Ltd, Bungay, Suffolk.

Penguin Random House is committed to a sustainable future for our business, our readers and our planet. This book is made from Forest Stewardship Council® certified paper.



1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

Introduction

by Ian Rankin

It was like a moment from a Woody Allen movie.

I was queuing at a busy bar and struck up a conversation with the American guy behind me. He eventually introduced himself as Jim Crumley. I snorted and said something like 'No, you're not – I *know* what Jim Crumley looks like.' Which is when someone else in the line leaned towards us and said 'He really is James Crumley, you know.'

This was the autumn of 1994, in a hotel in Seattle which was playing host to the annual Bouchercon (*aka* the World Mystery Convention). I'd been through the programme and would certainly have noticed if Crumley's name had been on the list of participants. But he wasn't a delegate; he was just there to hang out. So I apologized for my mistake and offered to buy him a drink, explaining that he didn't look identical to the passport-sized author photo on the back of *James Crumley: The Collection*. That book, a bundle of his first three crime novels, had been published in the UK the previous year and I had devoured it, savouring the heft of the prose and the doomed romanticism of his take on the American Dream and the men who chased it.

Crumley fell into crime fiction almost by accident, serving for three years in the US Army before enrolling at the University of Iowa Writers' Workshop. His first novel, *One To Count Cadence*, started life as his thesis there. Published in 1969, it was a tale of Vietnam, and, according to its author, a work of hoped-for 'high literary purpose'. Two years previously, however, a poet he admired, Richard Hugo, had told him how jealous he was of Raymond Chandler's prose style. Crumley started on the Philip Marlowe books and liked them, but it was 1974 (in Seattle, coincidentally) before he sat down to write *The Wrong Case*. That book features a PI called Milo Milodragovitch, who lives and works in Meriwether, Montana. For his second crime novel, Crumley turned to a new character with an equally rococo name – Chauncey Wayne Sughrue. Sughrue was a PI who, like Milo before him, called Meriwether home. The two men would eventually share an adventure and a novel – 1996's *Bordersnakes* – but 1978 belonged to Sughrue and *The Last Good Kiss*, with its frontispiece dedication to Richard Hugo ('grand old detective of the heart'), along with some apposite lines from one of his poems.

The book's opening is much-quoted as a near-perfect example of the Chandler school. Crumley himself has said that the first paragraph took him two years to write, and the rest of the book a 'frenzied' twelve months. Sughrue, just shy of forty years old and a Vietnam vet, walks into a seedy bar at the end of a quest to find a missing writer called Abraham Trahearne. Trahearne has been on one of his peripatetic benders and the three women in his life (mother, current wife and ex-wife)

want him back on the straight and narrow. What follows is akin to a skewed buddy movie as Sughrue and Trahearne hang out, drinking, cussing and reminiscing. But another client has fallen into Sughrue's lap – the bar owner lost touch with her daughter a decade back and would like the investigator to track her down. Betty Sue stepped out of a boyfriend's car in San Francisco and simply vanished from the world. With the incendiary Trahearne in tow, Sughrue hits the road, meandering around the west coast, encountering the twilight of the hippy era along the way. One creek-side commune is being sold off as building plots, while another on a hillside provides shelter for young people who have crashed and burned. Everywhere Sughrue looks, there are secrets to be uncovered and lies to be brought into the light.

While the book's structure nods back to Chandler and his ilk, the writing and themes seem closer to Hunter S Thomson and other freewheeling commentators of the period. (The action of the book feels like it's taking place early in the decade of its writing.) Here's Trahearne, as Sughrue drives them to their next destination:

'Hit the road, right? Move it on. And here I am wandering around America with an alcoholic bulldog, a seedy private dick, and a working quart of Wild Turkey.'

Trahearne, with his wild-eyed poetics and lust for life, reminds me of another fictional novelist – Roger Wade, from Robert Altman's woozy cinematic revision of Chandler's *The Long Goodbye*. There are certainly resonances between the two plots (the film was released in 1973, five years before Crumley's novel) and I find it

hard to read *The Last Good Kiss* these days without seeing actor Sterling Hayden in the part of Trahearne. Booze, dope and sex play their parts in both narratives, though Philip Marlowe (as brought to befuddled life by Elliot Gould in Altman's film) is a city dweller, while Sughrue dreams of a simpler existence.

One of the most elegant (and elegiac) sections of *The Last Good Kiss* sees Sughrue spending time at his unfinished cabin in the wilderness. This is his own idyll and retreat from the world's chaos, one he shares with precious few (Trahearne excepted). The two men cleave to the moody romanticism of their kind. After a fling with Trahearne's ex-wife, Sughrue considers his condition:

Nobody lives forever, nobody stays young long enough. My past seemed like so much excess baggage, my future a series of long goodbyes, my present an empty flask, the last good drink already bitter on my tongue.

No fan of the genre will have missed that teasing use of 'long goodbyes', just as the title of Crumley's book seems to echo Chandler's. 'I wrote the novel [*The Wrong Case*],' Crumley has said, 'against the genre and found myself captured by it.' Chandler, too, was 'captured' by the crime novel, once explaining that:

I wrote melodrama because when I looked around me it was the only kind of writing I saw that was relatively honest and yet was not trying to put over somebody's party line.

Chandler famously saw the American detective story as being 'dark and full of blood', in contrast to its 'lithe and clever' English cousin. There is certainly a good

amount of darkness and blood in Sughrue's world, though violent death only comes towards the end of the book, by which time Trahearne seems to realize that he has been in the company of a tarnished knight, one whose 'grand quest' has seen him 'find the fair lady in love with the dragon'. Again, Chandler would approve. Schooled in England, he knew about knights and quests and even at one point considered the name Malory rather than Marlowe (after Sir Thomas Malory, author of *Le Morte d'Arthur*).

For all its sense of tradition and roughneck poetry, however, *The Last Good Kiss* is very much of its period, making it far from politically correct to contemporary eyes. This is a story of macho, hard-drinking men and the women who will do anything to ease their way through life. The *Washington Post* once said that 'you don't read Crumley for plot . . . you read him for his outlaw attitude'. Chandler's plots aren't always of the tightest and most coherent quality either, but the prose crackles and, as with Crumley, there's a central character you're glad to share time and a drink with, whatever his world-view. Sughrue would appear in three further novels (including his duet with Milo), the last published only three years before the author's death. His first outing, however, is the most resonant and lyrical, with a satisfyingly circuitous plot and a cast of secondary players who linger in the mind.

Picking up my copy of *The Last Good Kiss*, readying to re-read it in preparation for this introduction, I found that I'd underlined just one short passage: 'Trahearne and Fireball were as drunk as dancing pigs.' The reason

being that, between 1978 and 1979, I was the singer in a punk band called the Dancing Pigs, a phrase I plucked out of the air one night while not entirely sober. I wish I'd remembered that coincidence, so I could have shared it with James Crumley as we talked in that bar in Seattle – but I'm pretty sure I didn't.

The convention came to a fuzzy-headed end on the Sunday afternoon, and I told him I was packing up my hangover and taking it back to my home in France. He insisted on a fiercely-hugged farewell, the kind I could imagine Abraham Trahearne giving, and told me to stay in touch, though we hadn't got round to exchanging contact details. Maybe he expected me to walk into an afternoon bar in some small, dusty town and find him seated on a stool there, an alcoholic bulldog lazing watchfully nearby . . .

James Crumley, as sweetly profane a poet as American noir could have asked for, stuck around the world a further fourteen years, but I never saw him again.

April 2016

You might come here Sunday on a whim.
Say your life broke down. The last good kiss
you had was years ago. You walk these streets
laid out by the insane, past hotels
that didn't last, bars that did, the tortured try
of local drivers to accelerate their lives.
Only churches are kept up. The jail
turned 70 this year. The only prisoner
is always in, not knowing what he's done.

Richard Hugo, *Degrees of Gray in Philipsburg*

1

When I finally caught up with Abraham Trahearne, he was drinking beer with an alcoholic bulldog named Fireball Roberts in a ramshackle joint just outside of Sonoma, California, drinking the heart right out of a fine spring afternoon.

Trahearne had been on this wandering binge for nearly three weeks, and the big man, dressed in rumpled khakis, looked like an old soldier after a long campaign, sipping slow beers to wash the taste of death out of his mouth. The dog slumped on the stool beside him like a tired little buddy, only raising his head occasionally for a taste of beer from a dirty ashtray set on the bar.

Neither of them bothered to glance at me as I slipped onto a stool between the bulldog and the only other two customers in the place, two out-of-work shade-tree mechanics who were discussing their lost unemployment checks, their latest DWI conviction, and the probable location of a 1957 Chevy timing chain. Their knotty faces and nasal accents belonged to another time, another place. The dust bowl '30s and a rattletrap, homemade Model T truck heading into the setting sun. As I sat down, they glanced at me with the narrow eyes

of country people, looking me over carefully as if I were an abandoned wreck they planned to cannibalize for spare parts. I nodded blithely to let them know that I might be a wreck but I hadn't been totaled yet. They returned my silent greeting with blank eyes and thoughtful nods that seemed to suggest that accidents could be arranged.

Already whipped by too many miles on the wrong roads, I let them think whatever they might. As I ordered a beer from the middle-aged barmaid, she slipped out of her daydreams and into a sleepy grin. When she opened the bottle, the bulldog came out of his drunken nap, belched like a dragon, then heaved his narrow haunches upright and waddled across three rickety stools through the musty cloud of stale beer and bulldog breath to trade me a wet, stringy kiss for a hit off my beer. I didn't offer him any, so he upped the ante by drooling all over my sunburnt elbow. Trahearne barked a sharp command and splashed a measure of beer into the ashtray. The bulldog gave me a mournful stare, sighed, then ambled back to a sure thing.

As I wiped the dogspit off my arm with a damp bar rag that had been used too lately and too often for the same chore, I asked the barmaid about a pay telephone. She pointed silently toward the gray dusty reaches beyond the pool table, where a black telephone hung from ashen shadows.

As I passed Trahearne, he had his heavy arm draped over the bulldog's wrinkled shoulders and recited poetry into the stubby ear: 'The bluff we face is cracking up . . . before this green Pacific wind . . . this . . . The

whale's briny stink . . . ah, Christ . . . dogged we were, old friend, doggerel we became, and dogshit we too shall be . . .' Then he chuckled aimlessly, like an old man searching for his spectacles.

I didn't mind if he talked to himself. I had been talking to myself for a long time too.

That was what I had been doing the afternoon Trahearne's ex-wife had called me – sitting in my little tin office in Meriwether, Montana, staring across the alley at the overflowing Dempster Dumpster behind the discount store, and telling myself that I didn't mind if business was slow, that I liked it in fact. Then the telephone buzzed. Trahearne's ex-wife was all business. In less than a minute, she had explained that her ex-husband's health and drinking habits were both bad and that she wanted me to find him, to track him down on his running binge before he drank himself into an early grave. I suggested that we talk about the job face to face, but she wanted me on the road immediately, no time wasted driving the three hours up to Cauldron Springs. To save time, she had already hired an air-taxi out of Kalispell, which was at this very moment winging its way south toward Meriwether with a cashier's check for a retainer, a list of Trahearne's favorite bars around the West – particularly those bars about which he had written poems after other binges – and a dust-jacket photo off his last novel.

'What if I don't want the job?' I asked.

'After you see the size of the retainer, you'll want the job,' she answered coolly, then hung up.

When I picked up the large manila folder at the

Meriwether Airport, I glanced at the check and decided to take the job even before I studied the photograph. Trahearne looked like a big man, a retired longshoreman maybe, as he leaned against a pillar on the front porch of the Cauldron Springs Hotel, a drink shining in one hand, a cigar smoking in the other. His age showed, even through his boyish grin, but he clearly hadn't gone to Cauldron Springs for the waters. Behind him, through the broad darkened doorway, two arthritic ghosts in matching plaid bathrobes shuffled toward the sunlight. Their ancient faces seemed to be smiling in anticipation of dipping their brittle bones into the hot mineral waters.

In the years that I had spent looking for lost husbands, wives, and children, I had learned not to think that I could stare into a one-dimensional face and see the person behind the photograph, but the big man looked like the sort who would cut a wide swath and leave an easy trail.

At first, it was too easy. Back at my office, I called five or six of the bars and caught the old man up in Ovando, Montana, at a great little bar called Trixi's Antler Bar. Trahearne had left, though, by the time I drove the eighty miles, telling the bartender that he was off to Two Dot to check out the beer-can collection in one of Two Dot's two bars. I chased him across Montana but when I reached Two Dot, Trahearne had gone on to the 666 in Miles City. From there, he headed south to Buffalo, Wyoming, to write an epic poem about the Johnson County War. Or so he told the barmaid. As it turned out, Trahearne never made a move without discussing it

with everybody in the bar. Which made him easy to follow but impossible to catch.

We covered the West, touring the bars, seeing the sights. The Chugwater Hotel down in Wyoming, the Mayflower in Cheyenne, the Stockman's in Rawlins, a barbed-wire collection in the Sacajawen Hotel Bar in Three Forks, Montana, rocks in Fossil, Oregon, drunken Mormons all over northern Utah and southern Idaho – circling, wandering in an aimless drift. Twice I hired private planes to get ahead of the old man, and twice he failed to show up until after I had left. I liked his taste in bars but I was in and out of so many that they all began to seem like the same endless bar. By the middle of the second week, my expenses were beginning to embarrass even me, so I called the former Mrs. Trahearne to ask how much money she wanted to pour down the rolling rathole. 'Whatever is necessary,' she answered, sounding irritated that I had bothered to ask.

So I settled back into the bucket seat of my fancy El Camino pickup for a long siege of moving on, following Trahearne from bar to bar, down whatever roads suited his fancy, covering the ground like an excited redbone pup just to keep from losing him, following him as he drifted on, his tail turned into some blizzard wind only he felt, his ear cocked to hear the strains of some distant song only he heard.

By the middle of the second week, I had that same high lonesome keen whistling in my chest, and if I hadn't needed the money so badly, I might have said to hell with Abraham Trahearne, stuck some Willie Nelson into my tape deck, and tried to drown in a whiskey river of

my own. Taking up moving on again. But I get paid for finding folks, not for losing myself, so I held on his trail like an old hound after his last coon.

And it made me even crazier than Trahearne. I found myself chasing ghosts across gray mountain passes, then down through green valleys riddled with the snows of late spring. I took to sleeping in the same motel beds he had, trying to dream him up, took to getting drunk in the same bars, hoping for a whiskey vision. They came all right, those bleak motel dreams, those whiskey visions, but they were out of my own drifting past. As for Trahearne, I didn't have a clue.

Once I even humped the same sad young whore in a trailerhouse complex out in the Nevada desert. She was a frail, skinny little bit out of Cincinnati, and she had brought her gold mine out West, thinking perhaps it might assay better, but her shaft had collapsed, her veins petered out, and the tracks on her thin arms looked as if they had been dug with a rusty pick. After I had slaked too many nights of aimless barstool lust amid her bones, I asked her again about Trahearne. She didn't say anything at first, she just lay on her crushed bed-sheets, hitting on a joint and gazing beyond the aluminum ceiling into the cold desert night.

'You reckon they actually went up there on the moon?' she asked seriously.

'I don't know,' I admitted.

'Me neither,' she whispered into the smoke.

I buttoned up my Levis and fled into the desert, into a landscape blasted by moonlight and shadow.

Then in Reno I lost the trail, had to circle the city in

ever-widening loops, talking to bartenders and service-station attendants until I found a pump jockey in Truckee who remembered the big man in his Caddy convertible asking about the mud baths in Calistoga. The mud was still warm when I got there, but his trail was as cold as the eyes of the old folks dying around the hot baths.

When I called Trahearne's ex-wife to admit failure, she told me that she had received a postcard from him, a picture of the Golden Gate and a cryptic couplet. *Dogs, they say, are man's best friend, but their pants have no pockets, their thirst no end*. 'Trahearne has this odd affinity for bar dogs,' she told me, 'particularly those who drink as well as do tricks. Once he spent three weeks in Frenchtown, Montana, drinking with a mutt who wore a tiny crushed officer's cap, sunglasses, and a corncob pipe. Trahearne said they discussed the Pacific campaign over shots of blackberry brandy.' I told her that it was her money and that if she wanted me to wander around the Bay Area looking for a drinking bar dog, I would surely comply. That's what she wanted, so I hooked it up, headed for San Francisco, a fancy detective hot on the trail of a drinking bar dog, a fool on her errand.

I should have guessed that the city of lights would be rife with bar dogs – dancing dogs and singing dogs, even hallucinating hounds – so it wasn't until three days later, drinking gimlets with a pink poodle in Sausalito, that I heard about the beer-drinking bulldog over by Sonoma.

The battered frame building was set fifty yards off the Petaluma road, and Trahearne's red Cadillac convertible was parked in front. In the days when the old highway

had been new, back before it had been rebuilt along more efficient lines, the beer joint had been a service station. The faded ghost of a flying red horse still haunted the weathered clapboard walls of the building. A small herd of abandoned cars, ranging from a russet Henry J to a fairly new but badly wrecked black Dodge Charger, stood hock deep in the dusty Johnson grass and weeds, the empty sockets of their headlights dreaming of Pegasus and asphalt flight. The place didn't even have a name, just a faded sign wanly promising BEER as it swung from the canted portico. The old glass-tanked pumps were long gone – probably off to Sausalito to open an antique shop – but the rusted bolts of their bases still dangled upward from the concrete like finger bones from a shallow grave.

I parked beside Trahearne's Caddy, got out to stretch the miles out of my legs, then walked out of the spring sunshine into the dusty shade of the joint, my boot heels rocking gently on the warped floorboards, my sigh relieved in the darkened air. This was the place, the place I would have come on my own wandering binge, come here and lodged like a marble in a crack, this place, a haven for California Okies and exiled Texans, a home for country folk lately dispossessed, their eyes so empty of hope that they reflect hot, windy plains, spare, almost biblical sweeps of horizon broken only by the spines of an orphaned rocking chair, and beyond this, clouded with rage, the reflections of orange groves and ax handles. This could just as easily have been my place, a home where a man could drink in boredom and repent in violence and be forgiven for the price of a beer.

* * *

After I had thought about it, I stuck my dime back in my pocket, walked back to the bar for another beer. I had found bits and pieces of Trahearne all along the way and I felt like an old friend. It seemed a shame not to enjoy him, not to have a few beers with him before I called his ex-wife and ended the party. Whenever I found anybody, I always suspected that I deserved more than money in payment. This was the saddest moment of the chase, the silent wait for the apologetic parents or the angry spouse or the laws. The process was fine, but the finished product was always ugly. In my business, you need a moral certitude that I no longer even claimed to possess, and every time when I came to the end of the chase, I wanted to walk away.

But not yet, not this time. I leaned against the bar and ordered another bottle of beer. When the barmaid sat it down, a large black tomcat drifted down the bar to nose the moisture on the long neck.

'The cat drink beer too?' I asked the barmaid.

'Not anymore,' she answered with a grin as she flicked the sodden bar rag at the cat's butt. He gave her a dirty look, then wandered down the bar past the bulldog and Trahearne, his tail brushing across Trahearne's stolid face. 'Sumbitch usta drink like a fish but he got to be too much trouble. He's like ol' Lester there,' she said, nodding toward the shade-tree mechanic with the most teeth. 'He can't handle it. He'd get so low-down, dirty-belly, knee-walkin' drunk, he start up tom-cattin' in all the wrong damn places.'

The barmaid gave ol' Lester a hard, knowing glance,

then broke into a happy cackle. As he tried to grin, ol' Lester showed me the rest of his teeth. They weren't any prettier than the ones I had already seen. 'One night that crazy black bastard started up a-humpin' ever'thing in sight – pool-table legs, cues, folks' legs, anything that didn't move fast enough – and then he did somethin' nasty on a lady's slacks and somebody laughed and damned if we didn't have the biggest fistfight I ever seen. Ever'body who wasn't in the hospital ended up in jail, and they took my license for six weeks.' She laughed, then added, 'So I had that scutter cut off. Right at the source. He ain't wanted a drink since.'

'Is that Lester or the tomcat?' I asked.

The barmaid cackled merrily again, the other mechanic brayed, but ol' Lester just sat there and looked like his teeth hurt.

'Naw,' she answered when she stopped laughing. 'Ol' Lester there, he don't cause no trouble in here. He's plumb terrified of my bulldog there.'

'Looks like a plain old bulldog to me,' I said, then leaned back and waited for the story.

'Plain,' Lester squealed. 'Plain mean. And I mean *mean*. Hell, mister, one mornin' last summer I come in here peaceful as could be, just mindin' my own business, and I made the mistake of steppin' on that sumbitch's foot when he had a hangover, and damn if he didn't like to tore my leg plumb off.' Lester leaned over to lift his pants' leg and exhibit a set of dog-bite scars that looked like chicken scratches. 'Took fifty-seven stitches,' he claimed proudly. 'Ol' Oney here, he had to hit that sucker with a pool cue to get him off'n my leg.'

'Broke that damned cue right smack in two,' Oney quickly added.

'Plain old bulldog, my ass,' Lester said. 'That sumbitch's meaner'n a snake. You tell him, Rosie.'

'Listen, mister,' the barmaid said as she leaned across the bar, 'I've seen that old bastard Fireball Roberts come outa dead drunks and blind hangovers and just pure-dee tear the britches off many a damn fool who thought he'd make trouble for a poor woman all alone in the world.' When she said *alone*, Rosie propped one finger under her chin and smiled coyly at me. I glanced over her shoulder into the ruined mirror to see if my hair had turned gray on the trip. An old ghost with black hair grinned back like a coyote. Rosie added, 'He don't just knock 'em down, mister, he drags 'em out by the seat of their britches, and they're usually damn glad to go.'

'Well, I'll be damned,' I said, properly impressed, then I glanced at the bulldog, who was sleeping quietly curled on his stool. Trahearne caught my eye with a glare, as if he thought I meant to impugn the courage of the dog, but his eyes lost their angry focus and seemed to drift independently apart.

''Course now, if'n Fireball can't handle all 'em by his own damn self,' Lester continued in a high, excited voice, 'ol' Rosie there, she ain't no slouch herself. You get her tail up, mister, she's just as liable to shoot your eyes out as look at you.'

I nodded and Rosie blushed sweetly.

'Show him that there *pistole*,' Lester demanded.

Rosie added a dash of bashful reluctance to her blush, and for an instant the face of a younger, prettier woman

blurred her wrinkles. She patted her gray curls, then reached under the bar and came up with a nickel-plated .380 Spanish automatic pistol so ancient and ill-used that the plate had peeled away like cheap paint.

'Don't look like much,' Lester admitted gamely, 'but she's got the trigger sear filed down to a nubbin, and that sumbitch is just as liable to shoot nine times as once.' He turned to point across the bar to a cluster of unmended bulletholes between two windows above a ratty booth. 'She ain't had to touch it off but one damn time, mister, but I swear when she reaches under the bar, things do tend to get downright peaceful in here.'

'Like a church,' I said.

'More like a graveyard,' Lester amended. 'Ain't no singin' at all, just a buncha silent prayers.' Then he laughed wildly, and I toasted his mirth.

Rosie held the pistol in her rough hands for a moment more, then she sat it back under the bar with a thump.

''Course I got me a real pistol at home,' Lester said smugly.

'A German Luger,' I said without thinking.

'How'd you know?' he asked suspiciously.

The real answer was that I had spent my life in bars listening to war stories and assorted lies, but I lied and told Lester that my daddy had brought one back from the war.

'Got mine off'n a Kraut captain at Omaha Beach,' he said, his nose tilted upward as if my daddy had won his in a crap game. 'Normandy invasion,' he added.

'You must have been pretty young,' I said, then wished I hadn't. People like Lester might tell a windy tale now

and again, but only a damn fool would bring it to their attention.

Lester stared at me a long time to see if I meant to call him a liar, then with practiced nonchalance he said, 'Lied about my age.' Then he asked, 'You ever been in the service?'

'No, sir,' I lied. 'Flat feet.'

'4-F, huh,' he said, trying not to sound too superior. 'Oney here, he's 4-F too, but it weren't his feet, it was his head.'

'Ain't going off to no damn Army,' Oney said seriously, then he glanced around as if the draft board might still be on his trail.

'Ain't even no draft no more,' Lester said, then snorted at Oney's ignorance.

'Yeah,' Oney said sadly. 'By God they oughtta go over there to San Francisco and draft up about a hunnert thousand a them goddamned hairy hippies.'

'Now, that's the god's truth,' Lester said, and turned to me.

'Ain't it?' His eyes narrowed at the three-day stubble on my chin as if it were an incipient beard.

For a change, I kept my mouth shut and nodded. But not emphatically enough to suit Lester. He started to say something, but I interrupted him as I excused myself and walked over toward Trahearne. Behind me, Lester muttered something about *goddamned gold-brickin' 4-F hippies*, but I acted as if I hadn't heard. I reached over and tapped Trahearne on the shoulder, and his great bald head swiveled slowly, as if it were as heavy as lead. He raised an eyebrow, wriggled a pleasant little smile

onto his face, shrugged, then toppled backward off the bar stool. I caught a handful of his shirt, but it didn't even slow him down. He landed flat on his back, hard, like a two-hundred-fifty-pound sack of cement. Rafters and window lights rattled, spurts of ancient dust billowed from between the floorboards, and the balls on the pool table danced merrily across the battered felt.

As I stood there stupidly with a handful of dirty khaki in my right hand, Lester leaped off his stool and shouted, 'What the hell did you do that for?'

'Do what?'

'Hit that old man like that,' Lester said, his Adam's apple rippling up and down his skinny throat like a crazed mouse. 'I ain't never seen nothin' as chickenshit as that.'

'I didn't hit him,' I said.

'Hell, man, I seen you.'

'I'm sorry but you must have been mistaken,' I said, trying to be calm and rational, which is almost always a mistake in situations like this.

'You callin' me a liar?' Lester asked as he doubled his fists.

'Not at all,' I said, then I made another mistake as I stepped back to the bar for my beer: I tried to explain things. 'Listen, I'm a private investigator, and this gentleman's ex-wife hired me to . . .'

'What's the matter,' Lester sneered, 'he behind in his goddamned al-i-mony, huh? I know your kind, buddy. A rotten, sneaky sumbitch just like you tracked me all the way down to my mama's place in Barstow just 'cause I's a few months behind paying that whore I married, and

let me tell you I kicked his ass then, and I got half a mind to kick yours right here and now.'

'Let's just calm down, huh,' I said. 'Let me buy you boys a beer and I'll tell you all about it. Okay?'

'You ain't gonna tell me shit, buddy,' Lester said, and as if that weren't enough, he added, 'and I don't drink with no trash.'

'I don't want no trouble in here,' Rosie interjected quietly.

'No trouble,' I said. Lester and Oney might have comic faces, funny accents, and bad teeth, but they also had wrists as thick as cedar fence-posts, knuckled, work-hardened hands as lumpy as socks full of rocks, and a lifetime of rage and resentment. I grew up with folks like this and I knew better than to have any serious disagreements with them. 'No trouble at all,' I said. 'I'll just leave.'

'That ain't near good enough,' Lester grunted as he took two steps toward me and a wild swing at my face.

I ducked, then backhanded him upside the head with the half-full beer bottle. His right ear disappeared in a shower of bloody foam, and he fell sideways, scrabbled across the floor, cupping his ear and cursing. Oney stood up, then sat back down when he saw the broken bottle in my hand.

'Is that good enough?' I asked.

Oney agreed with a nervous nod, but Lester had just peeked into his palm and found bits and pieces of his ear.

In a high, thin voice, he shouted, 'Goddammit, Oney, get the gun!'

Behind me, I heard Trahearne stand up and dreamily wonder what the hell had happened. But nobody answered him. Oney and Rosie and I were locked into long silent stares. Then we all moved at once. Rosie dashed down the bar toward the automatic as Oney scrambled over it. I glanced at the bulldog, who still slept like a rock, then I lit out for open country. I would have made it, too, but good ol' Lester rolled over and hooked a shoulder into my right knee. We went down in a heap. Right on his ruined ear. He whimpered but held on. Even after I stood up and jerked out a handful of his dirty hair.

Behind the bar, Rosie and Oney still struggled for the pistol.

Trahearne had sobered up enough to see it, but as he tried to run, he crashed into the pool table, then tried to scramble under it just as Oney jerked the pistol out of Rosie's hands and shoved her away. As she fell, she screamed, 'Fireball!' I gave up and raised my hands, resigned myself to an afternoon of fun and games in payment for Lester's ear. But as Oney lifted the pistol and thumbed the safety, Fireball came out of a dead sleep and cleared the bar in a single bound like a flash of fat gray light. Still in midair, he locked his stubby yellow teeth into Oney's back at that tender spot just below the short ribs and above the kidney. Oney grunted like a man hit with a baseball bat, dropped his arms, and blanched so deeply that ancient acne scars glowed like live coals across his face. He grunted again, sobbed briefly, then jerked the trigger.

The first round blew off a significant portion of his

right foot, the second wreaked a foamy havoc in the cooler, and the third slammed through the flimsy beaverboard face of the bar and slapped Mr. Abraham Trahearne right in his famous ass. The fourth powdered the fourteen ball, the fifth knocked out a window light, and the rest ventilated the roof.

When the clip finally emptied, Oney sank slowly behind the bar, the automatic still clutched in his upraised hand, and Fireball still locked to his back like a fat gray leech. During the rash of gunfire, the tomcat had come out of nowhere and shot out the front door like a streak of black lightning, while Lester had hugged my knees like a frightened child. Or a mad whose war stories had finally come true.

'Goddammit, Lester,' I said when the echoes had stopped rattling the old beams, 'you're bleeding all over my britches.'

'I'm sorry,' he said quietly as if he meant it, then turned me loose.

As I handed him my handkerchief for his ear, Fireball came trotting around the end of the bar, his drooping jowls rimmed with blood. He scrambled onto the platform bar rail, a stool, then up on the bar. He worked his way along, tilting bottles, catching them in his muzzle, and drinking them dry. Then he lapped his ashtray empty, belched, then bopped down to the floor the same way he had gotten up. With a weary waddle that seemed to sigh with every step, he wandered over to the doorway and stretched out in a patch of sunlight, asleep before his belly hit the floor, small delicate snores rippling the dust motes around him.

‘I don’t believe I’ve ever seen anything quite like that,’ I told Lester.

‘Goddamned sumbitchin’ dog,’ Lester growled as he walked over to a booth to sit down.

I went behind the bar to check on Oney and Rosie. He had fainted and she lay on the duckboards like a corpse. Except that her hands were clasped to her ears instead of crossed on her chest.

‘Anybody dead?’ she asked without opening her eyes.

‘Some walking wounded,’ I said, ‘but no dead ones.’

‘If you’d wait till I get my wits about me before you call the law,’ she said, ‘I’d surely appreciate it. We got to figure some way to explain all this crap.’

‘Right,’ I agreed. ‘You got any whiskey?’

She nodded toward a cabinet, where I found a half-empty quart of Old Crow. I did what I could for Oney’s foot, took off his work shoe and cotton sock and poured some whiskey on the nubbins of flesh where his two middle toes had been, then wrapped the foot in a clean bar towel. After I washed out the dog bite with bar soap, I went over to help Lester clean slivers of glass out of the side of his head and tattered ear.

‘Ain’t no ladies gonna slip their tongues in that ear no more,’ I joked.

‘Never much cared for that anyway,’ he said primly. ‘How’s ol’ Oney?’

‘Blew off a couple of toes,’ I said.

‘Big’uns or little’uns?’

‘Medium sized,’ I answered.

‘Hell, that ain’t nothin’,’ Lester said as he gently touched his ear. ‘How ’bout Rosie?’

'I think she's taking a little nap.'

'Looks like the big fella is, too,' Lester said with a nod.

I thought it unkind to point out that 'the old man' had somehow become 'the big fella,' so I went over to see why Trahearne was still huddled under the pool table.

'Are you all right, Mr. Trahearne?' I asked as I knelt to peer under the table.

'Actually, I think I've caught a round,' he answered calmly.

I didn't see any blood, so I asked where.

'Right in the ass, my friend,' he said, 'right in the ass.' Then he opened his eyes, saw the bottle, and took it away from me. 'You drink this pig swill?'

I didn't, or at least hadn't, but he didn't have any trouble getting his mouth around the neck of the bottle. Not as much as I had trying to get his pants and a pair of sail-sized boxer shorts down so I could see the wound. The jacketed round had left a neat blue hole, marked with a watery trickle of blood, just below his left buttock. I had no way of knowing if the bullet had struck a bone or an artery, but Trahearne's color and pulse were good, and I could see the lead nestled like a little blue turd just beneath the skin below the hump of fatty tissue hanging over his right hip.

'What's it look like?' he asked between sips.

'Looks like your ass, old man.'

'I always knew I'd die a comic death,' he said gravely.

'Not today, old man. Just a minor flesh wound.'

'That's easy for you to say, son, it's not your flesh.'

‘In a few days, you won’t have nothing but a bad memory and a sore ass,’ I said.

‘Thank you,’ he said, ‘but I seem to have both those already.’ He paused for a sip of whiskey. ‘How is it that you know my name, young man?’

‘Why, hell, you’re a famous man, Mr. Trahearne.’

‘Not that famous, unfortunately.’

‘Yeah, well, your ex-wife was worried about your health,’ I said.

‘And she hired you to shoot me in the ass,’ he said, ‘so I couldn’t sit on a bar stool.’

‘I didn’t shoot you,’ I said.

‘Maybe not,’ he said, ‘but you’re going to get the blame anyway.’ Then he sucked on the bourbon until he curled around the empty bottle, adding his gravelly snore to Fireball’s quiet drone.