

ANY BETTER THAN THIS

A Summer of Love Story

ERIC SEAN RAWSON



Black Rose Writing | Texas

©2022 by Eric Sean Rawson

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means without the prior written permission of the publishers, except by a reviewer who may quote brief passages in a review to be printed in a newspaper, magazine or journal.

The author grants the final approval for this literary material.

First printing

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, places, events, and incidents are either the products of the author's imagination or used in a fictitious manner. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or actual events is purely coincidental.

ISBN: 978-1-68513-067-1

PUBLISHED BY BLACK ROSE WRITING

www.blackrosewriting.com

Printed in the United States of America

Suggested Retail Price (SRP) \$19.95

Any Better Than This is printed in Garamond

*As a planet-friendly publisher, Black Rose Writing does its best to eliminate unnecessary waste to reduce paper usage and energy costs, while never compromising the reading experience. As a result, the final word count vs. page count may not meet common expectations.

Praise for Rawson's previous novel,
BANANA REPUBLIC

“Like Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction*, Eric Rawson's *Banana Republic* incorporates irony, humor, and the lurid and seedy conventions of schlock to create a wonderfully entertaining, unputdownable novel.”

—Ron Hansen, author of *The Kid*, *Desperados*, and *The Assassination of Jesse James by the Coward Robert Ford*

“*Banana Republic* is an absolute delight, as funny as it is apt, as inventive as it is entertaining.”

—Amy Meyerson, author of *The Bookshop of Yesterdays* and *The Imperfects*

“A debut novel that sings with polish on every page.”

—Aimee Bender, author of *The Particular Sadness of Lemon Cake* and *Willful Creatures*

ANY BETTER
THAN THIS

*“An assumption of ‘chance’ encapsulates
all the inevitable unpredictability of the world.”*

–Sir David John Spiegelhalter

PART ONE

Pasadena, May 15, 2020

Nowhere is the mixture of fact and fiction more potent and ineluctable than in episodes of family history, the telling of which necessitates a willingness to embrace the sentimental, the absurd, and the factually false. I don't pretend that the adventure that follows here—this story of murder and miscommunication—is an accurate record of events. It unfolds over three days in 1967, during the Summer of Love, when, as we all know, reality was more elastic than normal—as it is in memory and imagination, where family stories reside.

Hunkered down in the San Gabriel Valley with my seventeen-year-old daughter, Talia, waiting for the pandemic to burn out, I have been thinking a lot about my family and the precariousness of life-as-we-know-it. Fifty-three years ago my parents, a computer engineer and a colorblind marketing executive, married. In 1971, they produced me. My father, Elliot Ames, died of cancer at the beginning of this year, and for the last few weeks I've been going through boxes of his things at my childhood home in Encino, reconstructing a past that might somehow reassure me—of what, I don't know. That I've inherited the right stuff for navigating unstable times? That like my parents' marriage, my own might somehow be salvaged from the ashes of betrayal? That there's a "reason for everything"? (How I hate that phrase.)

I've spent most of the lockdown—between excruciating Zoom meetings—watching Korean soap-operas and conscientiously nurturing my microbiome. I've also done a lot of reading. An inveterate bedtime reader

and anxious night owl, I empathize with all those who, on the threshold of dreamland, struggle to calm the heart and engage the mind. Meaning: would these insomniacs appreciate, say, my finishing a novel about a harrowing episode in my parents' lives? A quick survey over toast and orange juice reveals what I already know: Talia prefers audiobooks and doesn't remember what she's recently listened to. If she had to read, *for fun*, she guesses she'd pick up an old Harry Potter book or maybe something with a kick-ass girl who lives in the future.

I doubt this story will capture her interest.

Like me, both my parents had a bedtime reading habit. My father developed his to relieve boredom during an involuntary stint in the Army in the late 1950s, when he was stationed in Germany. He was of the generation of "middlebrow" readers who did not expect to plumb the depths for spiritual meaning or messages of social improvement. He simply liked the experience of reading—invariably a Book of the Month Club selection or a *New York Times* bestseller. When my father finished a book, he made a practice of inking on the flyleaf his name and the date. He shelved the volumes in strict chronological order in an old walnut bookcase. When he died, his modest library, along with his record collection and his audio diary on reel-to-reel tapes, went into the cardboard boxes along with his awards and souvenirs from trips abroad. Last month, when I drove over to Encino to check on the house while my mother shelters in place at her A-frame in Big Bear where she can "get something done for a change," I retrieved the boxes marked 1966 and 1967, so I have a good idea of what my father was reading immediately prior to my parents' marriage. During these weeks of coronavirus lockdown, I've been working my way through the books, continually surprised, letting other minds shape me and, therefore, the narrative that follows here. For those who are interested, my father read the following: *Cancer Ward*, *Unsafe at Any Speed*, *The Naked Ape*, *S Is for Space*, *The Ghost in the Machine*, *The Freelance Pallbearers*, *Up Above the World*, *Office Politics*, *Octopussy & the Living Daylights*, *In Cold Blood*, *Wide Sargasso Sea*, *The Chinese Looking Glass*, *The Old Man and the Bureaucrats*, *Paper Lion*, *The Moon Is a Harsh Mistress*, *The Last Picture Show*, *Inside South America*, *Phyllis Diller's Marriage Manual*, *The Tolkien Reader*, *The Art of Memory*, and *Rosemary's Baby*.

In the mid-Sixties, there was a lot in the California air about fate and predestination and synchronicity. Perhaps such thinking helped relieve the anxiety of peak affluence and American global domination, or maybe an Aquarian precession of the equinoxes really was generating psychic skeins of random connections. I suppose such thinking was—and is—valid in the sense that unseen chains of events cross, and occasionally tangle, creating the knots that are our significant life events. Indeed, the tale I tell here is basically a series of knots of family testimony and allusion, desultory research in the digital archives, and my own imagination.

What follows is a personal entertainment, a fact-based fabrication. But having known my parents well, I imagine that what happened to them in June 1967, when they were young and America had burst its seams and was beginning to fall apart, was something like what I have put down here. Or not. Imagination is not witness.

• • •

Redondo Beach, June 7, 1967

Everybody knew it didn't get any better than this.

The Peking Palace was packed with engineers and draftsmen, supervisors, and secretaries from Pacifydyne, Inc., the secretaries in skirts and closed-toe shoes, the supervisors in suits and ties, the engineers and draftsmen in short-sleeved white shirts, drab pants, and brow-line eyeglasses. Every day at noon the Research, Development, and Design Division disgorged nineteen hundred of Pacifydyne's thirty thousand employees onto the sun-flattened Southern California landscape for one hour of hysterical conviviality. Although it was only Wednesday, all of them were planning, at the top of their lungs, for a weekend of country clubs and beaches and barbecues, while they drank beer and dipped egg rolls in sweet-and-sour sauce. Gusts of laughter and lascivious comments about Pacifydyne's female employees filled the back room, which was reserved for packs of smart, vaguely patriotic analysts and aerospace engineers, their faces veiled in clouds of cigarette smoke, glistening in the heat, all complacent in the knowledge that their jobs were secure, their wives were the best people on

the planet, and that even if their children were going to hell, as was obviously the case, the hell they were going to was provisioned with every luxury of the modern world.

• • •

Westwood

The large orange tabby cat, wearing a collar with the name *Kismet* tooled on the blue leather, had spent the night patrolling the neighborhood, searching, it might be assumed, for food, water, and a mate. It had been a fine moonlit night, made for adventure, but the day had grown hot, so he returned through a torn window screen to the kitchen of the ground-floor apartment where he lived with the person who provided him with irregular meals. At the moment, this benefactor was seated at the kitchen table, topless, counting twenty-dollar bills into tidy stacks, which she secured with rubber bands. Glancing up at him, she stowed the bundles in a crumpled brown paper bag. Kismet sat on the counter next to a pile of the dirty dishes and watched her with blank green eyes. As she folded the top of the bag, once, twice, a knock sounded on the door. She looked up and gave him a happy smile. Kismet yawned and climbed into the sink to lap water from the dripping faucet.

• • •

Redondo Beach

Freddy Happ raised his camera and pointed the telephoto lens across the expanse of parking lot at the front of the Peking Palace. The morning marine layer had burned off and the parking lot was scorching. He was a pudgy man with thin hair and a face the color of a basketball, and he was sweating through his shirt. The slump of his shoulders suggested that his birth had been a stroke of bad luck. He sat behind the wheel of a six-year-old white Ford Falcon with carburetor problems and a rear tire that would not hold air for more than twelve hours.

As Elliot Ames crossed the street from Pacifydyne Building C, a charmless edifice faced with phony tan bricks and topped with a complex array of ventilators and air-conditioning units, which occupied two city blocks where once had been St. Clotilde Catholic school—and before that a salt marsh—Happ pressed the shutter. His target, Ames, waited for a refrigerator truck to back into the alley beside the restaurant. Then he walked on rapidly past the defeated pygmy date palms to the front door, where a group of Building C stragglers was trying to enter while a group of early birds was trying to exit. Happ pressed the shutter again and laid the camera on the car seat so that he could pencil a notation on the clipboard that rested on his meaty round thighs.

On the eastern edge of the parking lot, an Econoline delivery van (FRANCO'S—FLOWERS WITH SOUL) reposed in the glaring light. The rear of the van was occupied by F.B.I. Special Agent Bert Armbruster, and the front passenger seat by Special Agent Don Clegg. Both had Koss electrostatic headphones over their ears. It was hot in the van. The agents' suit jackets sagged on wire hangers on the rear door; their ties drooped from their collars.

Armbruster was wearing mirrored aviator glasses to hide the inflamed blood vessels in his eyes, and he was chewing wintergreen gum to kill the smell of alcohol. Clegg, neat and competent even in the heat, raised a camera with a long lens and pointed it through the windshield.

Armbruster snapped his gum. "Whaddya got, Don?"

"Dunno. Same guy we've seen all week."

Clegg twisted the focusing ring, and Freddy Happ's automobile came into sharp relief. The shutter clicked. Clegg thumbed the film-advance lever.

In the back of the van Armbruster leaned toward the bank of electronics and turned a knob the size of a salad plate, tuning in snatches of conversation from the tables in the Peking Palace:

"... best bladder man in Los Angeles. . . [*break up*]. . . now Reagan's governor he's gonna crack down on these... see [*static*] still get three-percent loans in the Valley... [*shrieks of laughter*]... I told her, baby, you either take that off or [*dissolving in static*]. . ."

"Goddamn mikes," Armbruster muttered. He twisted another, smaller knob, which had no effect on the signals from the restaurant.

Armbruster leaned over the back of the seat to peer through the windshield. "Where is he?"

"Two o'clock. The white Falcon. It's been here every day. I thought it belonged to one of the restaurant staff, but I can see the guy's got a Nikon with a three-hundred-millimeter lens."

"Not bad."

"Not as good as ours. I'm guessing C.I.A."

"He might be Army intelligence. They could've tumbled onto this place."

"Maybe someone tipped off D.I.A."

"Goddammit." Armbruster snapped his gum. "Who's that guy going in the restaurant? We've seen him too."

"I count about five-hundred guys we've seen."

"The one holding the door. Caucasian, thirty years old, handsome."

"Handsome?"

Armbruster turned his head so that his partner's face was reflected on the twin surfaces of his mirrored shades. "Handsome. Yeah. I said it."

• • •

Elliot Ames was swept through the doorway on a seething wave of techno-whiz energy. The late-arriving engineers dispersed through the room, shouting for their lunchmates, who shouted back, guiding them with frantic heartiness through the steamy restaurant.

Elliot stopped to talk to the man behind the register. "Hey, Percy. What's wrong with the air conditioning?"

Percy Wu grunted. He tugged at the black vest he was wearing. "The compressor always goes out the first hot day of summer."

Elliot jerked his head toward the rear. "Are they back there?"

“What do you think? You come in here every damn day. I don’t know why you defense guys are so crazy for Chinese. Go eat a hamburger once in a while, why don’tcha.”

• • •

On the western edge of the parking lot, a man known in his organization as Pegasus peered through high-powered Swiss military binoculars. Pegasus—who in ordinary life had appropriated the name Albert Carpenter from a child who had died of polio in 1926—was wearing a golf hat, a golf shirt, plaid trousers, and white soft-soled shoes. His clubs were on the back seat of the Buick. As soon as he finished his business for the day, he planned to hit the links. Along with tacos, mom-and-pop gun stores, and dental anesthesia, year-round golf was one of the things Pegasus liked most about California.

When he had cruised past the rear of the Peking Palace on his regular sweep the week before, looking for the chalk mark that signaled a drop from his anonymous asset in Pacifidyne, he had identified at least two surveillance vehicles. One was a flower-delivery van that did not belong there; the other was a sun-damaged Ford Falcon positioned at the north edge of the lot. The driver, a seedy, moon-faced man, had his sausage-like fingers wrapped around an expensive Nikon F2. He was here again, taking photos.

Pegasus laid down the binoculars. The situation was not good. They were watching the restaurant. That meant they had knowledge of the asset in Pacifidyne, a man Pegasus knew only by his designation, Canis Minor. Canis Minor provided a steady stream of classified material—about what Pegasus never knew. The microfilms were sealed when he retrieved them from the dead-drop in Culver City, which he visited whenever he spotted the chalk mark. In turn, he handed the films off to Sagittarius—at least he thought it was Sagittarius—at a dead-drop in San Francisco. From there they went to the consulate in Pacific Heights and into the diplomatic pouch for transport out of the country. He did not know who Canis Minor was, but obviously someone in American intelligence did.

If Pegasus had been a man who trembled, he would have trembled.

Elliot slid into the horseshoe booth. He pulled out his wallet, as thick as a paperback, and laid it on the table. Like the other men in the booth, he had loosened his necktie and was perspiring. A gust of Mennen aftershave blended unpleasantly with the miasma of hair tonic, tobacco, and chow mein.

Unlike Arthur Reuhl and Gordon Blackmon, who were working on their third beers, Elliot Ames was feeling anxious this Wednesday noon, three days before his marriage to an absolutely wonderful, admirably intelligent, physically appealing—he could not emphasize this enough—woman named Constance Campbell. She had been nominated by an IBM 1401 computer at Operation Matchmaker in Cambridge, Massachusetts, as the ideal mate for Elliot, a selection confirmed by Elliot's own after-hours labor on the CDC 6600 supercomputer at Pacifydyne, Inc., RD&D Division. He and Connie had a 92.4 percent compatibility rating and a predicted marital success rate of 88.1 percent, the numerical difference between compatibility and success attributable to the possibility that one or both of the spouses might, in the unknowable future, stumble across someone with a higher match score. That possibility, a statistician would tell you, was negligible. Operation Matchmaker, Eliot had no doubt, was the future of pair-bonding.

"The blushing bridegroom!" Arthur Reuhl cried.

Elliot signaled to the waitress to bring him a beer. Arthur and Gordon had eaten all the eggrolls. Their lips were shiny with cooking oil, their eyes with alcohol.

Elliot rubbed his hands together. He grinned. "I'm going to devour an entire duck, bones and all, that's how hungry I am. I can't tell you what kind of day I've had with the new interface message processors."

"Now we have to hear about it," Gordon said to Arthur.

"Nope," Elliot said. "Not gonna think about *imps*. All I wanna do is eat. This is my last Peking duck for three weeks. At six p.m., I'm wiping my mind clear. Not gonna think about work. Not gonna think about you jokers."

"What are you talking about?" Arthur blew cigarette smoke in Elliot's face. "You can't find a plate of duck in San Francisco?"

"Berkeley, my friend. Then on to Honolulu."

"L.A., Berkeley, Honolulu," Gordon shouted drunkenly. "It's all one party!"

. . .

Berkeley

Constance Campbell held a smoldering, lipstick-stained cigarette in her outstretched right hand. Her left hand was wrapped around a banana-yellow telephone receiver connected to the wall-mount in the kitchen by an extraordinarily long cord. She wore a sleeveless blouse and capri pants, and she was folded onto a chaise longue in the sunroom overlooking the backyard of the Campbell home. Below, the city stretched into the hazy blue distance.

"Honestly, Sheilah," she said in an aggrieved voice, "I don't see anything wrong with hiring a private investigator. You can't be too sure. Look what happened to you and Philip. I'd like to know *before* the wedding is what I'm saying. No surprises."

She took a drag on her cigarette. Her intelligent gray eyes gazed out the window through lashes furred with mascara. In the yard a hairy guy without a shirt slouched on an Adirondack chair, annotating a paperback book (which, if she had had better eyesight, Connie Campbell would have spotted as her copy of *Games People Play*) with a ballpoint pen. He had a patchy, infuriating beard. Her brother, Frank.

"What do you mean—*predictable*? I am not!"

She listened.

"Well, of course, I love Elliot. Who do you think I am?" Connie unfolded into a standing position and, holding her cigarette so that she did not burn a hole in the fabric, pulled at her waistband. She leaned on one hip and shook her leg to get the blood flowing again.

"Sheilah. Sheilah! Let me stop you right there. You know perfectly well I believe trust is the basis of a relationship. It may not be original, but that

doesn't make it less valid. But can you really trust a computer to get the details right? It seems so gimmicky. I want to make sure I have a *basis* is all."

She emitted a cloud of smoke, which settled around her blond bob-and-bangs hair.

• • •

Westwood

A wisp of smoke curled from the cone of sandalwood incense smoldering on a porcelain saucer and touched the heaving shadowy forms entwined on the mattress on the floor. Thumbtacked to the wall above the mattress was a promotional poster for *Blow-Up*. The orange tabby cat squatted by the saucer and sniffed delicately. Through the open window came the sound of a garbage truck's hydraulic packer, drowning out the strains of the flamenco guitar someone was playing in the next apartment. The mood was spoiled.

Fortunately, the heaving forms had finished, with a long mutual exhalation, like air hissing from an inner tube. The woman pushed herself off the damp and, now that she noticed it, unwashed body of the man on the mattress, feeling at her groin a familiar stickiness, which she supposed she should rinse off before it became uncomfortable. She crossed her legs and sat back on the mattress.

"What was your name again?" she said.

"Jim." He reached out an arm and felt around on the floor for his underwear.

"Names," she sighed. She ran her hand between the mattress and the wall and pulled out a cloth bag. It was embroidered with explosive red and green mandalas. Uncrossing her legs, she crawled over to the dresser, on which rested two bricks of Afghan Primo hashish sheathed in aluminum foil and Saranwrap. She jumped up and slid the bricks into the bag.

She chuckled. "Thank you for the home delivery, Jim. This will truly be a gift worth giving."

"You're giving that shit away? Five grand of Primo?"

"Why not?"

He stood up and pulled on his underwear and yawned. "Yeah, why not?"

“I’m heading to San Francisco. I’m going to donate these babies to the Grateful Dead as thanks for all the amazing vibes they’re putting into the world. I heard they’re seriously short of dope.”

“Far out. What was your name?”

She stretched her naked arms and tilted her head back and forth. “I’ve been thinking about it,” she said. “I like the sound of Morning Star.” The name—bright, slightly mystical, referencing both Venus and the Virgin Mother—promised, she thought, a way of organizing the incoherent pieces of herself into a new person. Her therapist, Dr. Malcolm (Tuesdays and Fridays), had not been much help in that regard. If anything, he might have been taking advantage of her, although she was trying to stop making that kind of judgment.

“Morning Star. That’s cool. Did you have fun?”

“Except for the spanking part.”

“Oh. Sorry. It seemed like you’d be into it.”

Morning Star thought about Dr. Malcolm, plump and leering. “I guess I should be,” she said.

Jim pulled on his pants and looked around for his shirt.

“Hey, Jim?”

“Yeah.”

“Do you want to crash here while I’m gone? I need someone to take care of Kismet.” Morning Star leaned down and swept up the orange tabby and kissed him on the neck. The cat yowled and scratched frantically at her bare shoulders, drawing blood. She dropped him with a cry, and he bolted onto the windowsill and began to lick himself.

Jim hopped on one foot as he pulled on a boot. “When will you be back?”

“Maybe.”

“Maybe?”

“Yes.”

“Far out.” Jim pulled on his other boot.

“He’s allergic to milk.”

“No problem. I can’t stay. I’m allergic to cats,” Jim said, wiping his nose with the back of his hand. “I gotta roll, baby.”

Morning Star flopped back on the mattress and rubbed her breasts and inhaled the sweet scent of sandalwood. She smiled. "See you in another dream."

. . .

Freddy Happ rewound the exposed film and unlatched the back of the camera. He took out the yellow roll of and dropped it into its black plastic canister, then maneuvered a fresh roll into place, clumsily fitting the leader onto the take-up spool, and advanced it two turns and closed the camera back. He was drenched in sweat.

Pegasus watched through the Swiss binoculars. He wondered if the operative would develop the film himself or send it directly to Langley and wait for instructions. He was C.I.A. Or, more likely, some kind of freelancer. Maybe D.I.A. He did not look like F.B.I. Those guys maintained a semblance of professionalism. For instance, the guy with the camera in the passenger seat of the flower-delivery van. A necktie? Who was he fooling?

And who was the slender man who had caused both the fat man and the F.B.I. agent to lift their cameras when he approached the restaurant? He was a Pacifydyne engineer, no question about it: white shirt, pocket protector full of pens, healthy. Was he Canis Minor?

Special Agent Clegg, tracking Happ, his eighteen-inch lens resting heavily in his careful hands, wondered why it was that whenever the Bureau opened a domestic surveillance case, every other intelligence agency on the face of the earth piled into the game. But seriously: this sweaty donkey?

. . .

The men fell to their food like wolves on three little lambs. Gordon Blackmon's order was, actually, lamb, with cumin and broccoli. Arthur Reuhl had the egg foo young with shrimp—the second most popular dish at the Peking Palace. Elliot Ames reduced his Peking duck to a heap of bones. Wiping the grease from his fingers with a red paper napkin, he leaned back and drained his beer and groaned.

Arthur pushed away his plate. "So how're you holding up, Elliot?"

"I remain confident in my decision," Elliot declared. "At this point on the timeline, marriage is mandatory. I don't mind telling you guys that I never understood what my life was missing until I met Connie."

"But if you get married now, you'll never know what alternatives you have yet to discover," Arthur objected. "No more dreams."

"Nothing kills romance like marriage, is that it?"

"It's true," Arthur said morosely.

"Half true," Gordon corrected.

"You think everything is half true."

"That's true." Gordon nodded. "Half true."

"Jesus, Gordon," Elliot said, "what kind of engineer are you? I don't want to fly to Hawaii on an airliner that's half true."

"Granted," Gordon said. He belched. "But engineering and—whaddaycallit?—propositions!—propositions about the world are two different beasts. You can't engineer the truth."

"You might be wrong about that."

"You computer guys think you know the mind of God," Arthur said. He meant to amuse, but Gordon nodded solemnly.

"Anyway!" Arthur said brightly. "Gordon and I—"

"And our better-halves—"

"—Will swoop into Oakland airport on Saturday morning for moral support."

"Halves."

"I see on the news the hippies are swarming San Francisco like some kind of goddamn plague," Arthur said. "Don't get caught up in that."

"No danger. I'm getting off the 101 in San Jose," Elliot said.

"Smart man. What's the itinerary?"

. . .

"First thing when I get there," came the thin sound of a man's voice, "I'm stopping on campus for Knizner's seminar."

Armbruster, cursing under his breath and wishing he had a double whiskey sour and a couple of Dexedrines, fiddled with the knobs on the control panel. He had finally found a table mike with a partially intelligible signal, and now it was swallowed in a rush of whining interference.

The man's voice re-emerged: "... wasting time with arpurghleshshsh."

"I'm telling you, the key is distributed networks. It's this... [*garbled*]... in the U.K. . . ."

"Goddammit," Armbruster bellowed. "What's going on?"

Clegg laid down his three-pound hunk of photographic technology and climbed into the back of the van. He finessed one of the dials, his other hand pressing the headphone against his left ear. "Busboy probably poured water on the flowers again. Those artificial displays look too real."

"...if you can use it to figure the vector sheer, we could. . . ."

"...in any case, that's the theory. How it performs under real-world conditions hasn't been established. . . ."

Armbruster beat his fists on his thighs in frustration. "These've gotta be the most boring guys in the world. This chop-suey joint is bullshit."

"It's called surveillance." Clegg used his patient voice. "It's called an investigation."

"Says who?"

"Says whoever figured out that the leak at Pacifydyne was running through this joint. They found signals on the back of the building or something. Jesus, Bert, don't you read the reports?"

"There's gotta be twenty-thousand people work across the street. They don't all show up at noon every day to discuss their spy plans. We're wasting time. Let's get out there and do some work. Rattle the owner and see what falls out."

Clegg frowned. "If you can't shoot something or beat it up, you think you're wasting your life. This is not the time to cowboy it, big guy. We don't want to tip off this son of a bitch, give him a head start."

Armbruster patted his shoulder holster and spoke to his .38 Smith & Wesson: "It's all right, sweetie. He's so silly, isn't he?"

The feed from the table mikes was now nothing but a high-pitched wash of sound. Armbruster snatched off his headphones and threw them to the floor.

"I'm gettin' outta this stinkin' place," he said, lunging toward the rear door.

"Nope!" Clegg's hand shot out and grabbed his partner by the belt. "You blow our cover, and I will sure as shit hunt you down and slice off your virile member. If I can find it."

Armbruster paused. He snapped his gum. Shrugged. "It ain't much, but it's all I got," he said and flopped back on the floor of the van.

. . .

"I'm telling you," Elliot said, "avionics'll be deader'n God as soon as NASA lands a man on the moon. The money'll vanish. The future, my tin-bender friends, is communications."

"Spoken like a static man," Arthur said. "The Signal Corps, for chrissake. That's barely real Army."

"Half true," Elliot said.

The waitress brought three fortune cookies on a lacquered tray with a picture of a man in a robe smoking an opium pipe.

The crowd was thinning.

Arthur tore the cellophane and cracked open the cookie. He read from the slip of paper: "*You will find peace in labor.* Ugh."

"*Expect water and ask for wine,*" Gordon read.

"Depressing. Whaddya have?"

Elliot munched his fortune cookie. He held out his hand, and Arthur and Gordon dumped the shards of their own cookies onto his palm, a daily ritual. To the others they tasted like dried glue, but Elliot loved the flavor. He swallowed and read from his slip: "*Keep your soul bright as air.*"

"That's wisdom?" Gordon said.

"You dumb missile-head," Arthur said. "You got no poetry."

"I got poetry. Listen: 'There once was a girl from Madras, who had a magnificent ass—'"

While they were talking, the three friends had been counting money onto the lacquered tray. Now they slid out of the horseshoe booth, stretching, cracking knuckles, tightening the knots of neckties.

Elliot slipped his paper fortune into his shirt pocket. He picked up his wallet, hefted it, and slid it into his rear pocket.

“Three and a half hours till traffic,” Arthur said. “Then I’m in my pool till beddy-bye.”

As they headed across the room, Elliot picked up the unopened fortune cookies from the lunchtime ruins on the next table. He pocketed one and cracked open the other, glancing at the paper slip before depositing it in his shirt pocket. He stuffed the cookie in his mouth and crunched noisily.

. . .

Clegg, peering through his lens at the white Ford Falcon, saw Freddy Happ raise his camera and point it at the front door of the restaurant. He swung his own camera around in time to capture an image of the three engineers stepping into the afternoon glare. They were talking animatedly as they moved past the pygmy date palms towards the crosswalk. Clegg wondered why these particular pointy-headed types warranted attention from national intelligence, but he decided not to discuss the matter with Armbruster, who was lying on the floor of the van, whispering to himself. Clegg figured they could go inside as soon as the lunch crowd had vacated the restaurant and check out the microphone situation on the q.t. Maybe have a bite to eat and cool their testicles.

Pegasus watched Freddy Happ lay down his camera, wipe his face with a plaid handkerchief, and lean forward to start the engine. It took several minutes.

As the Falcon moved across the parking lot, Pegasus, too panicked now for nine holes with the club pro, turned the key in the ignition and followed, checking the perimeter for signs of additional surveillance. Just the forlorn delivery van. He cruised slowly by, taking a good look at the individual in the passenger seat with the camera—definitely F.B.I.— and plunged into the traffic on the boulevard.

As he passed through the spic-and-span expanse of Design Room Six, Elliot was thinking about Connie Campbell's muscled, mathematically perfect thighs. Draftsmen on tall stools bent over the islands of their desks. Engineers with pieces of chalk in their hands clustered, arguing, around blackboards. A Muzak version of "Good Vibrations," arranged for strings and vibraphone, wafted through the air.

Elliot passed into the secretarial bullpen. Accompanied by the chattering of Selectric typewriters and the chuffing of a mimeograph machine, he progressed along the ranks of desks, three dozen pairs of eyes following his progress, while three dozen sets of fingers missed not a single keystroke. Elliot Ames was marrying the woman who had occupied the most despised position at Pacifydyne, Inc. As the Assistant to the Head of Personnel, Connie Campbell had been, until a month ago, the secretaries' immediate superior and an all-round pain-in-the-keester, who had established mandatory overtime the last week of each month and banned champagne at birthday parties, despite the fact that she herself drank Tom Collinses on Friday afternoons with the executives in the Wing (into which Elliot now stepped, on his way to the computer lab). Connie Campbell had no well-wishers in the secretarial bullpen; it was a humongous relief to see her go.

Elliot continued down a corridor lined with the glassed offices of mid-level executives, all of whom had telephones glued to their ears, possibly talking to one another. He pushed open the door of his chilly research lab, home of the massive CDC 6600, which Elliot knew for a fact cost in excess of two-and-a-half million dollars. The guys over at Boeing had a 6600, but he suspected they did not understand its full potential. At RAND, they knew what to do with one of these babies. He was not sure about the Air Force—they never shared their research—but he had a pal at Los Alamos who had made some wizardly modifications for them, diagrams of which he sent to Elliot via the unsecured channels of the U.S. mail.