

a CAREFUL MAN
DIES



1946

YOU SLEEP ONLY FOUR HOURS A NIGHT. You go to bed at eleven and get up at three and everything is clear as crystal. You begin your day then, have your coffee, read a book for an hour, listen to **the** faint, far, unreal talk and music of **the** predawn stations and perhaps go out for a walk, always being certain to have your special police permit with you. You have been picked up before for late and unusual hours and it got to be a nuisance, so you finally got yourself a special permit. Now you can walk and whistle where you wish, hands in your pockets, heels striking **the** pavement in a slow, easy tempo.

This has been going on since you were sixteen years old.

You're now twenty-five, and four hours a night is still enough sleep.

You have few glass objects in your house. You shave with an electric razor, because a safety razor sometimes cuts you and you cannot afford to bleed.

You are a hemophiliac. You start bleeding and you can't stop. Your father was the same way—though he served only as a frightening example. He cut his finger once, fairly deeply, and died on the way to the hospital from blood loss. There was also hemophilia on your mother's side of the family, and that was where you got it.

In your right inside coat pocket you carry, always, a small bottle of coagulant tablets. If you cut yourself you immediately swallow them. The coagulant formula spreads through your system to supply the necessary clotting material to stop the seepage of blood.

So this is how your life goes. You need only four hours of sleep and you stay away from sharp objects. Each waking day of your life is almost twice as long as the average man's, but your life expectancy is short, so it comes to an ironic balance.

It will be long hours until the morning mail. So you tap out four thousand words on a story with your typewriter. At nine o'clock when the postal box in front of your door clicks you stack the typewritten sheets, clip them together, check the carbon copy and file them under the heading NOVEL IN PROGRESS. Then, smoking a cigarette, you go for the mail.

You take the mail from the box. A check for three hundred

dollars from a national magazine, two rejections from lesser houses, and a small cardboard box tied with green string.

After shuffling over the letters you turn to the box, untie it, flip open the top, reach in, and pull out the thing that is inside it.

“Damn!”

You drop the box. A splash of quick red spreads on your fingers. Something bright has flashed in the air with a chopping movement. There was the whir of a metal spring, whining.

Blood begins to run smoothly, swiftly from your wounded hand. You stare at it for a moment, stare at the sharp object on the floor, the little bestial contraption with the razor embedded in a springed trap that clipped shut when you pulled it out, and caught you unawares!

Fumbling, trembling, you reach into your pocket, getting blood all over yourself, and pull out the bottle of tablets and gulp several down.

Then, while you are waiting for the stuff to clot, you wrap the hand in a handkerchief and, gingerly, pick up the contraption and set it on the table.

After staring at it for ten minutes you sit down and have yourself a cigarette clumsily, and your eyelids jerk and flicker and your vision melts and hardens and remelts the objects of the room, and finally you have the answer.

. . . Someone doesn't like me. . . . Someone doesn't like me at all . . .

The phone rings. You get it.

"Douglas speaking."

"Hello, Rob. This is Jerry."

"Oh, Jerry."

"How are you, Rob?"

"Pale and shaken."

"How come?"

"Somebody sent me a razor in a box."

"Stop kidding."

"Seriously. But you wouldn't want to hear."

"How's the novel, Rob?"

"I won't ever finish it if people keep sending me sharp objects. I expect to get a cut-glass Swedish vase in the next mail. Or a magician's cabinet with a large collapsible mirror."

"Your voice sounds funny," says Jerry.

"It should. As for the novel, Gerald, it is going great guns. I've just done another four thousand words. In this scene I show the great love of Anne J. Anthony for Mr. Michael M. Horn."

"You're asking for trouble, Rob."

"I have discovered that only this minute."

Jerry mutters something.

You say, "Mike wouldn't touch me, directly, Jerry. Neither would Anne. After all, Anne and I were once engaged. That was before I found out about what they were doing. The parties they were giving, the needles they were giving people, full of morphine."

"They might try to stop the book, though, somehow."

"I believe you. They already have. This box that came in the mail. Well, maybe they didn't do it, but one of the other people, some of the others I mention in the book, they might take a notion."

"Have you talked to Anne recently?" asks Jerry.

"Yes," you say.

"And she still prefers that kind of life?"

"It's a wild one. You see a lot of pretty pictures when you take some kinds of narcotics."

"I wouldn't believe it of her; she doesn't look that sort."

"It's your Oedipus complex, Jerry. Women never seem like females to you. They seem like bathed, flowered, sexless ivory carvings on rococo pedestals. You loved your mother too completely. Luckily I'm more ambivalent. Anne had me fooled for a while. But she was having so much fun one night and I thought she was drunk, and then first thing I knew she was kissing me and pressing a little needle into my hand and saying, 'Come on, Rob, please. You'll like it.' And the needle was as full of morphine as Anne was."

"And that was that," says Jerry on the other end of the line.

"That was that," you say. "So I've talked to the police and the State Bureau of Narcotics, but there's a fumble somewhere and they're afraid to move. Either that or they're being handsomely paid. A little of both, I suspect. There's always someone somewhere in any one system who clogs the pipe. In the police department there's always one guy who'll take a lit-

tle money on the side and spoil the good name of the force. It's a fact. You can't get away from it. People are human. So am I. If I can't clean the clog in the pipe one way, I'll clean it another. This novel of mine, needless to say, will be what will do it."

"You might go down the drain with it, Rob. Do you really think your novel will shame the narcotics boys into acting?"

"That's the idea."

"Won't you be sued?"

"I've taken care of that. I'm signing a paper with my publishers absolving them of any blame, saying that all characters in this novel are fictitious. Thus, if I've lied to the publishers they are blameless. If I'm sued, the royalties from the novel will be used in my defense. And I've got plenty of evidence. Incidentally, it's a corking good novel."

"Seriously, Rob. Did someone send you a razor in a box?"

"Yes, and there lies my greatest danger. Rather thrilling. They wouldn't dare kill me outright. But if I died of my own natural carelessness and my inherited blood makeup, who would blame them? They wouldn't slit my throat. That'd be somewhat obvious. But a razor, or a nail, or the edge of the steering wheel of my car fixed and set with knife blades . . . it's all very melodramatic. How goes it with your novel, Jerry?"

"Slow. How's about lunch today?"

"Fair enough. The Brown Derby?"

"You sure ask for trouble. You know damn well Anne eats there every day with Mike!"

"Stimulates my appetite, Gerald, old man. See you."

You hang up. Your hand is okay now. You whistle as you bandage it in **the** bathroom. Then you give **the** little razor contraption a going-over. A primitive thing. **The** chance were hardly fifty-fifty it would even work.

You sit down and write three thousand more words, stimulated by **the** early morning events.

The handle of **the** door to your car has been filed, sharpened to a razor edge during **the** night. Dripping blood, you return to **the** house for more bandages. You gulp pills. **The** bleeding stops.

After you deposit **the** two new chapters of **the** book in your safety-deposit box at **the** bank, you drive and meet Jerry Walters at **the** Brown Derby. He looks as electric and small as ever, dark-jowled, his eyes popping behind his thick-lensed glasses.

"Anne's inside." He grins at you. "And Mike's with her. Why do we wanna eat here? I ask." His grin dries and he stares at you, at your hand. "You need a drink! Right this way. There's Anne at that table over there. Nod to her."

"I'm nodding."

You watch Anne, at a corner table, in a monk's cloth sport dress, interwoven with gold and silver thread, a link of Aztec jewelry in bronze units around her tan neck. Her hair is **the** same bronze color. Beside her, behind a cigar and a haze of smoke, is **the** rather tall, spare figure of Michael Horn, who looks just like what he is, gambler, narcotics specialist, sensualist par excellence, lover of women, ruler of men, wearer of

diamonds and silk undershorts. You would not want to shake hands with him. That manicure looks too sharp.

You sit down to a salad. You are eating it when Anne and Mike come by the table, after their cocktail. "Hello, sharpster," you say to Mike Horn, with a little emphasis on the latter word.

Behind Horn is his bodyguard, a young twenty-two-year-old kid from Chicago named Berntz, with a carnation in his black coat lapel and his black hair greased, and his eyes sewed down by little muscles at the corners, so he looks sad.

"Hello, Rob, darling," says Anne. "How's the book?"

"Fine, fine. I've got a swell new chapter on you, Anne."

"Thank you, darling."

"When you going to leave this big heel-headed leprechaun?" you ask her, not looking at Mike.

"After I kill him," says Anne.

Mike laughs. "That's a good one. Now let's get going, baby. I'm tired of this jerk."

You upset some cutlery. Somehow a lot of dishes fall. You almost hit Mike. But Berntz and Anne and Jerry gang up on you and so you sit down, the blood banging your ears, and people pick up the cutlery and hand it to you.

"So long," says Mike.

Anne goes out the door like a pendulum on a clock and you note the time. Mike and Berntz follow.

You look at your salad. You reach for your fork. You pick at the stuff.

You take a forkful.

Jerry stares at you. "For God's sake, Rob, what's wrong?"

You don't speak. You take the fork away from your lips.

"What's wrong, Rob? Spit it out!"

You spit.

Jerry swears under his breath.

Blood.

You and Jerry come down out of the Taft building and you are now talking sign language. A wad of stuff is in your mouth. You smell of antiseptic.

"But I don't see how," said Jerry. You gesture with your hands. "Yeah, I know, the fight in the Derby. The fork gets knocked on the floor." You gesture again. Jerry supplies the explanation to the pantomime. "Mike, or Berntz, picks it up, hands it back to you, but instead slips you a fixed, sharpened fork."

You nod your head, violently, flushing.

"Or maybe it was Anne," says Jerry.

No, you shake your head. You try to explain in pantomime that if Anne knew about this she'd quit Mike cold. Jerry doesn't get it and peers at you through his thick goggles. You sweat.

A tongue is a bad place for a cut. You knew a guy once who had a cut tongue and the wound never healed, even though it stopped bleeding. And imagine with a hemophiliac!

You gesture now, forcing a smile as you climb into your car.

Jerry squints, thinks, gets it. "Oh." He laughs. "You mean to say, all you need now is a stab in the backside?"

You nod, shake hands, drive off.

Suddenly, life is not so funny anymore. Life is real. Life is stuff that comes out of your veins at the least invitation. Unconsciously, your hand goes again and again to your coat pocket where the tablets are hidden. Good old tablets.

It is about now you notice you are being followed.

You turn left at the next corner and you're thinking fast. An accident. Yourself knocked out and bleeding. Unconscious, you'll never be able to give yourself a dose of those precious little pills you keep in your pocket.

You press the gas pedal. The car thunders ahead and you look back and the other car is still following you, gaining. A tap on the head, the least cut, and you are all done.

You turn right at Wilcox, left again when you reach Melrose, but they are still with you. There is only one thing to do.

You stop the car at the curb, take the keys, climb quietly out and walk up and sit down on somebody's lawn.

As the trailing car passes, you smile and wave at them.

You think you hear curses as the car vanishes.

You walk the rest of the way home. On the way you call a garage and have them pick up your car for you.

Though you've always been alive, you've never been as alive as you are now—you'll live forever. You're smarter than all of them put together. You're watchful. They won't be able to do a thing that you can't see and circumvent one way or an-

other. You have that much faith in yourself. You can't die. Other people die, but not you. You have complete faith in your ability to live. There'll never be a person clever enough to kill you.

You can eat flames, catch cannonballs, kiss women who have torches for lips, chuck gangsters under the chin. Being the way you are, with the kind of blood you have in your body, has made you—a gambler? A taker of chances? There must be some way to explain the morbid craving you have for danger or near danger. Well, explain it this way. You get a terrific ego lift out of coming through each experience safely. Admit it, you're a conceited, self-satisfied person with morbid ideas of self-destruction. Hidden ideas, naturally. No one admits outwardly he wants to die, but it's in there somewhere. Self-preservation and the will to die, tugging back and forth. The urge to die getting you into messes, self-preservation yanking you out again. And you hate and laugh at these people when you see them wince and twist with discomfort when you come out, whole and intact. You feel superior, godlike, immortal. They are inferior, cowardly, common. And you are a little more than irked to think that Anne prefers her narcotics to you. She finds the needle more stimulating. Damn her! And yet—you also find her stimulating—and dangerous. But you'll take a chance with her, anytime, yes, any old time. . . .

It is once again four in the morning. The typewriter is going under your fingers as the doorbell rings. You get up and go to answer in the complete before-dawn quiet.

Far away on the other side of the universe her voice says, "Hello, Rob. Anne. Just get up?"

"Right. This is the first time you've come around in days, Anne." You open the door and she comes in past you, smelling good.

"I'm tired of Mike. He makes me sick. I need a good dose of Robert Douglas. I'm really tired, Rob."

"You sound it. My sympathies."

"Rob—" A pause.

"Yeah?"

A pause. "Rob—could we get away tomorrow? I mean, today—this afternoon. Up the coast somewhere, lie in the sun and just let it burn us? I need it, Rob, badly."

"Why, I guess so. Sure. Yeah. Hell, yes!"

"I like you, Rob. I only wish you weren't writing that damned novel."

"If you cleared out of that mob I might quit," you say. "But I don't like the things they've done to you. Has Mike told you what he's doing to me?"

"Is he doing something, darling?"

"He's trying to bleed me. *Really* bleed me, I mean. You know Mike underneath, don't you, Anne. White-livered and scared. Berntz too, for that matter. I've seen their kind before, acting tough to cover up their lily guts. Mike doesn't want to kill me. He's afraid of killing. He thinks he can scare me out of this. But I'm going ahead because I don't think he'll have enough nerve to finish it. He'd rather take a

chance on a narcotics rap than go up for murder. I know Mike."

"But do you know me, darling?"

"I think I do."

"Very well?"

"Well enough."

"I might kill you."

"You wouldn't dare. You like me."

"I like myself," she purrs, "too."

"You always were a strange one. I never knew, and still don't know, what makes you tick."

"Self-preservation."

You offer her a cigarette. She is very near you. You nod wonderingly. "I saw you pull **the** wings off a fly once."

"It was interesting."

"Did you dissect bottled kittens in school?"

"With relish."

"Do you know what dope does to you?"

"I relish that too."

"How about this?"

You are near enough so it takes only a move to bring your faces together. **The** lips are as good as they look. They are warm and moving and soft.

She holds you away a bit. "I relish this also," she says.

You hold her against you, again **the** lips meet you and you shut your eyes. . . .

"Dammit," you say, breaking away.

Her fingernail has bitten into your neck.

"I'm sorry, darling. Hurt you?" she asks.

"Everybody wants to get into **the** act," you say. You take out your favorite bottle and tap out a couple pills. "God, lady, what a grip. Treat me kindly from now on. I'm tender."

"I'm sorry, I forgot myself," she says.

"That's very flattering. But if *this* is what happens when I kiss you, I'd be a bloody mess if I went any further. Wait."

More bandages on your neck. Out again to kiss her.

"Easy does it, baby. We'll take in **the** beach and I'll give you a lecture on **the** evils of running with Michael Horn."

"No matter what I say, you're going ahead with **the** novel, Rob?"

"Mind's made up. Where were we? Oh, yeah."

Again **the** lips.

You park **the** car atop a sun-blazed cliff a little after noon. Anne runs ahead, down **the** timber stairs, two hundred feet down **the** cliff. **The** wind lifts her bronze hair, she looks trim in her blue bathing suit. You follow, thoughtful. You are away from everywhere. Towns are gone, **the** highway empty. **The** beach below with **the** sea folding in on it is wide, barren, with big slabs of granite toppled and washed by breakers. Wading birds squeal. You watch Anne go down ahead of you. What a little fool, you think of her.

You saunter arm in arm and stand letting **the** sun get into you. You believe everything is clean now, and good, for a while. All life is clean and fresh, even Anne's life. You want to

talk, but your voice sounds funny in the salt silence, and anyway your tongue is still sore from that sharp fork.

You wade by the waterline and Anne picks something up.

"A barnacle," she says. "Remember how you used to go diving with your rubber-rimmed helmet and trident in the good old days?"

"The good old days." You think of the time past, Anne and yourself and the things that used to work out for you together. Traveling up the coast. Fishing. Diving. But even then she was a weird creature. Didn't mind killing lobsters at all. Took a relish in cleaning them.

"You used to be so foolhardy, Rob. You still are, in fact. Took chances diving for abalones when these barnacles might have cut you, badly. Sharp as razors."

"I know," you say.

She gives the barnacle a toss. It lands near your discarded shoes. As you come back up you skirt it, careful not to step on it.

"We could have been happy," she says.

"It's nice to think so, isn't it?"

"I wish you'd change your mind," she says.

"Too late," you say.

She sighs.

A wave comes in on the shore.

You are not afraid of being here with Anne. She can do nothing to you. You can handle her. You are confident of that.

No, this will be an easy, lazy day, without event. You are alert, ready for any contingency.

You lie in the sun, and it strikes through your bones and loosens you inside and you mold to the contours of the sand. Anne is beside you, and the sun gilds her tipped nose and glitters across the minute pellets of perspiration on her brow. She talks gay talk and light talk and you are fascinated with her; how she can be so beautiful and like a hunk of serpentine thrown across your path, and be so mean and small somewhere hidden inside where you can't find it?

You lie upon your stomach and the sand is warm. The sun is warm.

"You're going to burn," she says at last, laughing.

"I suppose I am," you say. You feel very clever, very immortal.

"Here, let me put some oil on your back," she said, unfolding the shiny patent leather Chinese jigsaw of her purse. She holds up a bottle of pure yellow oil. "This'll get between you and the sun," she says. "Okay?"

"Okay," you say. You are feeling very good, very superior.

She bastes you like a pig on a spit. The bottle is suspended over you and it comes down in a twine of liquid, yellow and glittering and cool to the small hollows of your spine. Her hand spreads it and massages it over your back. You lie, purring, eyes closed, watching the little blue and yellow bubbles dance across your shut eyelids as she pours on more of the liquid and laughs as she massages you.

"I feel cooler already," you say.

She continues to massage you for a minute or more and then she stops and sits beside you quietly. A long time passes and you lie deep, baked in a sand oven, not wanting to move.

The sun suddenly is not so hot.

"Are you ticklish?" asks Anne, behind your back.

"No," you say, your mouth turning up at the corners.

"You have a lovely back," she says. "I'd love to tickle it."

"Tickle away," you say.

"Are you ticklish here?" she asks.

You feel a distant, sleepy movement on your back.

"No," you say.

"Here?" she says.

You feel nothing. "You aren't even touching me," you say.

"I read a book once," she says. "It said that the sensory portions of the back are so poorly developed that most people couldn't tell exactly where they were being touched."

"Nuts," you say. "Touch me. Go ahead. I'll tell you."

You feel three long movements on your back.

"Well?" she asks.

"You tickled me down under one shoulder blade for a distance of five inches. Likewise under the other shoulder blade. And then right down my spine. So there."

"Smart boy. I quit. You're too good. I need a cigarette. Damn, I'm all out. Mind if I run up to the car and get some?"

"I'll go," you say.

"Never mind." She is off across the sand. You watch her

run, lazily, sleepily, in patterns of rising hot atmosphere. You think it rather strange she is taking her purse and bottled liquid with her. Women. But all the same you cannot help but notice she is beautiful, running. She climbs up the wooden steps, turns and waves and smiles. You smile back, move your hand in a brief, lazy salute. "Hot?" she cries.

"I'm drenched," you cry back, lazily.

You feel the sweat crawling on your body. The heat is in you now and you sink down into it, as into a bath. You feel the sweat pouring down your back in torrents, faint and far away, like ants crawling on you. Sweat it out, you think. Sweat it all out. Streaks of sweat well down your ribs and along your stomach, tickling. You laugh. God, what a sweat. You never sweated like this before in your life. The smell of that oil Anne put on you is sweet in the warm air. Drowsy, drowsy.

You start. You head yanks upward.

On top of the cliff, the car is started, put in gear, and now, as you watch, Anne waving to you, the car flashes in the sun, turns, and drives away down the highway.

Just like that.

"Why you little witch!" you cry irritably. You start to get up.

You can't. The sun has made you weak. Your head swims. Damn it. You've been sweating.

Sweating.

You smell something new on the hot air. Something as familiar and timeless as the salt smell of the sea. A hot, sweet,

sickish odor. An odor that is all the terror in the world to you and those of your kind. You cry out and stagger up.

You are wearing a cloak, a garment of scarlet. It clings to your thighs, and as you watch, it encases your loins and spreads and grows upon your legs and ankles. It is red. The reddest red in the color chart. The purest, loveliest, most terrible red you have ever seen, spreading and growing and pulsing along your body.

You clutch at your back. You mouth meaningless words. Your hands close upon three long open wounds cut into your flesh below the shoulder blades!

Sweat! You thought you were sweating. And it was blood! You lay there thinking it was sweat coming out of you, laughing about it, enjoying it!

You can feel nothing. Your fingers scrabble clumsily, weakly. Your back feels nothing. It is insensible.

"Here, let me put some oil on your back," says Anne, far away in the shimmering nightmare of your memory. *"You're going to burn."*

A wave crashes on the shore. In memory you see the long yellow twine of liquid pouring down on your back, suspended from Anne's lovely fingers. You feel her massaging you.

Narcotic in solution. Novocain or cocaine or something in a yellow solution that, after it clung to your back a while, deadened every nerve. Anne knows all about narcotics, doesn't she?

Sweet, sweet, lovely Anne.

"Are you ticklish?" asks Anne, in your mind again.

You retch. And echoing in your blood-red swimming mind, you give an answer: *No. Tickle away. Tickle away. Tickle away . . . Tickle away, Anne J. Anthony, lovely lady. Tickle away.*

With a nice sharp barnacle shell.

You were diving for abalones offshore and you scraped your back on a rock, in rough streaks, with a crop of razor-sharp barnacles. Yes, that's it. Diving. Accident. What a pretty setup.

Sweet, lovely Anne.

Or did you have your fingernails honed on a whetstone, my darling?

The sun bangs in your brain. The sand is beginning to melt under you. You try to find the buttons to unbutton, to rip away this red garment. Senselessly, blindly, gropingly, you search for buttons. There are none. The garment stays. How silly, you think, foolishly. *How silly to be found in your long, red woolen underwear. How silly.*

There must be zippers somewhere. Those three long cuts can be zipped up tight and then that sliding red stuff will stop sliding out of you. You, the immortal man.

The cuts aren't too deep. If you can get to a doctor. If you can take your tablets.

Tablets!

You fall forward on your coat, and search one pocket and then another pocket, and then another, and turn it inside out, and rip the lining loose and shout and cry and four waves come

pounding in on **the** shore behind you, like trains passing, roaring. And you go back through each empty pocket again, hoping that you have missed one. But there is nothing but lint, a box of matches, and two theater ticket stubs. You drop **the** coat.

"Anne, come back!" you cry. "Come back! It's thirty miles to town, to a doctor. I can't walk it. I haven't time."

At **the** bottom of **the** cliff you look up. One hundred and fourteen steps. **The** cliff is sheer and blazing in **the** sun.

There is nothing to be done but climb **the** steps.

Thirty miles to town, you think. Well, what is thirty miles?

What a splendid day for a walk.