

How Many Light Bulbs?

Roland Menge

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for Jeanne

“And where was fuckin’ Gwendolyn?”

How Many Light Bulbs?

1

It was a cold, foggy night in midwinter San Francisco. There was so much fog that the tip of the Pyramid Building was hidden in clouds. On the corner of Ellis and Mason in the Tenderloin District, a doorman watched dully as the eenteenth cab of the night came racing by and slammed on its brakes at the corner, then lurched to the left down Ellis out of sight. All the cabdrivers knew they had to hit the corner on red in order to get the green's on Ellis Street, which was synchronized all the way to Van Ness. A lady with a bandage on her nose came muttering by. She gestured "five" and then "two" with long skinny fingers, pointed emphatically to the gutter, and then went muttering off again, elbowing her way through a bunch of laughing students dressed in tuxedo's and evening dresses. Just another crazy sight. The doorman regarded it all with a yawn through his half-closed eyes.

Inside the cab, the meter was ticking. "1.10" it said; then it clicked to "1.30". The driver was a Chinaman with a head as round as a melon. He was driving with both hands on the wheel and was leaning forward so intently that his forehead was pressed against the windshield. Bing-bing-bing. He was hitting all the stop-lights right on the button.

In the back seat of the cab, a thin man with thick glasses and a mop of black hair was engaged in an animated discussion with a woman in a pillbox hat who had a long, plain face like a draft-horse. The woman was much larger than the thin man, who was scrunched to one side of the seat. Her dumb-looking face was inclined heavily towards him. She gestured emphatically and grimaced as she talked. The thin man sometimes looked distractedly towards her, and sometimes looked frantically out the window. They were going past the little hamburger joint on the corner of Ellis and Leavenworth where all the nods and drag queens hung out. One big black queen with plastic boobs and mascaraed eyes dropped her pants and mooned him as the thin man looked angrily out.

“Fuckin’ nigger queen,” he muttered to himself.

The woman to his left was too busy talking to notice what was outside the window.

“And so you are going down there on Monday,” she said with an exasperated sigh. “Is that what I am led to believe, if I do so correctly?”

“Yes, for the cripe sake, on Monday,” the thin man said. “Yes, yes, yes.”

“And tell me this, then, if I may be so bold as to enquire, what if the Welfare won’t take you again? What if they are as tired of taking care of you as I am myself? Tell me that, Wilbur Krenton, what will happen then?”

“Nothin’ will happen, for the cripe sake. Nothin’ will happen.”

They turned left on Polk Street. A little group of wimpy-looking gay dudes with leather jackets and tight jeans was passing noisily along the street in front of the Travel Lodge Motel.

“Stupid little fruits,” the thin man muttered.

“You know you are 34,” the woman was saying, shaking a finger at him. “Isn’t it about time that you take care of yourself?”

“For the cripe sake, I do take care.”

“Isn’t it time, Wilbur Krenton? Isn’t it time? When we go to Miami, I want you to go up and stay with your father. I sincerely hope that you do not have intentions—”

“I ain’t got no intentions. I ain’t got no—”

“—of staying with me. And do you know why, Wilbur?”

The thin man sighed. There was a brief moment’ of silence.

“And do you know why, Wilbur?”

He glowered out the window.

“No, why? Please tell me why.”

She sat back in the seat, raised up her chin, and let out a long sigh. “Because I am tired to the bone.”

The cab had stopped at a red light on the corner of Eddy and Polk. A fat man in a stocking cap was standing on the corner pounding with his fist on a newspaper box. The

headline said, “New Corruption In The Capitol. At Last The Truth Has Come Out.” The fat man was built like a wrestler and was chanting in a monotone: “We don’t want that kind of sex here where you meet a gal and all she is is a hole... I’m talkin’ about virgin sex where you love her and everything!... We don’t want that hole sex here in the United States of America!”

Wilbur Krenton shook his head in disgust.

“Stupid creep,” he said under his breath.

“Perhaps you don’t know that I started working when I was 13. Perhaps you don’t know that, Wilbur Krenton.”

“I know it, for the cripe—”

“Since I’ve been 13, Wilbur, and I’m tired to the bone. And when I am so fortunate as to retire on social security, Wilbur, I will get... Do you know how much I will get? I will get 260 a month. And you get 300 on the Welfare. Now is that fair?”

“I never said it was fair. I been lookin’ for a job. For the Pete’s sake, Mother, gimme a break.”

“A job! A likely story! Wilbur Krenton, the big shot! Listen to him talk!” !

They had pulled up to a battered old hotel with a sign that said “Colonial Estates — By the Day, Week, or Month—Transients Welcome.” The meter said “1.90.”

The driver lifted up one yellow hand and said, “Two buck.” The woman continued to talk.

“In any case, I want you to go up and stay with your father in Memphis.”

“I ain’t gonna stay with that stupid Kraut.”

For some reason, this last comment aroused the Chinaman’s interest. With almost no movement of his shoulders, he turned his head a full half circle around like an owl. His round, yellow face looked intently at the thin man.

“Two buck,” he repeated.

They paid and watched the cab go off. It was orange in color and looked like it was about to fall apart. That is, Krenton was watching it. His mother was leaning over his head, shaking her finger at him.

“Well, at least you’re all right for right now. There’s

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nothing the matter with the Colonial Hotel. At least there's no bugs."

"There's roaches... There's roaches in the bathroom. There's roaches by the coke machine."

"Well, there are roaches everywhere, as you very well know, Wilbur Krenton. And anyway, I don't call roaches "bugs". I call them "insects... You will be hard pressed to find better than the Colonial Hotel."

"Insects," the thin man sneered.

"And now am I to understand Monday, if I do so correctly?"

"Yes, you are to understand Monday, for the cripe sake."

She arranged her pillbox hat above her long face, raised up her chin, closed her eyes and let out another long sigh.

"Sometimes, I wish to God that some kind of revolution would happen or something like socialized medicine. All those politicians aren't worth the dynamite to blow them up, and don't you tell me it isn't true, Wilbur. Just look at your poor mother for a moment. Can't you see that she's tired to the bone?"

"I didn't say nothin' about no politicians. What do I give a fuck about politicians?" Krenton yelled. He went angrily in, slamming the door behind him.

His mother looked exasperatedly at the door, arranged her hat and sighed another time, and then went huffily up the street with her black purse under her arm like a football. .

2

The next Tuesday this same thin young man was seated at a table with three other people at Ming's Cafe on the corner of Ellis and Leavenworth. Two of them were young men as thin as himself. They were dressed like hillbillies; they looked like they were straight out of the hills. The fourth person in the group was a thirtyish woman with pretty features, a long, thin body, and a pasty-white complexion like dough.

Wilbur Krenton was busy scolding her, and he was doing it so loudly that no one in the restaurant had any

choice but to be party to the conversation,—if such it could be called; he was the only one that was talking. There was a line of men sitting at the counter slouched like dogs over dishes of food. A crazy man at the end of the counter was mumbling away. “Beautiful, beautiful, beautiful.... So go ahead and tell me you’re so goddam beautiful.” Krenton hardly noticed him. He was glowering at his female friend and shaking his finger at her. She was looking out the window, puffing on a cigarette.

“Okay now, Billy, now you tell me this,” Wilbur was saying. “Now you be the witness. You be the witness to this. You seen her room. You was up there with me. Ain’t it a dump? Ain’t it a goddam, fuckin’, miserable dump? Ain’t that right, Billy? Now you be witness to everyone here. And you know it is, Gwendolyn. You know it’s a dump.”

“Geez, Wilbur—”

“You saw it, Goerge, didn’t you see it? Wasn’t you up there with me on of all the goddam times, on goddam Sunday night, right when the goddam God-boys was out there makin’ their goddam fuckin’ music in the street. Wasn’t they singin’ away, “At the Cross, At the Cross,” or some bullshit like that, and where was fuckin’ Gwendolyn? Wasn’t she layin’ on the goddam floor?

“Geez, Wilbur, why you bein’ so hard?”

“Why’m I bein’ so hard? Why’m I bein’ so hard? Why’m I bein’ so hard? Billy, you hillbilly asshole, you got to be kiddin’!”

“Don’t say things like that to Billy,” Gwendolyn broke in. “Holy Cow, Wilbur, why don’t you lighten up?”

She got up suddenly and went with long, gangly strides to the water cooler: Undaunted, Wilbur Krenton continued his diatribe in a high shrill voice, addressing his comments to his two hillbilly friends, who looked on with dumb attentive faces.

“Lighten up, she says. Lighten up, says Gwendolyn. Now who is goddam Gwendolyn to talk about light? You be witness to it, Billy. Wasn’t all the light bulbs out? Don’t anyone tell me all the light bulbs wasn’t out cuz just for the nuts of it, I was countin’ how many was out. Billy, wasn’t

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the hall as dark as sin? Wasn't the lamp in the kitchen all broke up? Wasn't it layin' on the floor?"

By this time, Gwendolyn had returned with a glass of water. She lit up another cigarette and looked nonchalantly out the window. Krenton turned his attention to her.

"And ain't the light out by your bed, Gwendolyn? Ain't there no light in the frig?"

"There ain't no goddam food in it neither," she said, "cuz you ate it all up."

"How many light bulbs is that anyhow? How many goddam light bulbs is that, Goerge? You be the counter. Let's see, there's the one in the hall..."

"For God's sake, Wilbur," she suddenly cried. "Will you shut your goddam little mouth!"

He went through all the light bulbs again.

"That's six light bulbs, Gwendolyn. Six light bulbs out in that little stinking hole. And everywhere you look, there's a goddam shoe-job with his goddam black dong hanging out."

"Holy Cow, Wilbur, will you just lighten up?"

She skunked back in her chair and shrugged her gaunt-shoulders like a plucked chicken while she lit another cigarette. She looked at him wearily with bloodshot eyes. Her upper cheeks were covered with pimples.

"Six goddam light bulbs," Krenton said. "So where is the seventh light bulb then? Where is the goddam light bulb number seven?"

She shook her head in exasperation.

"So now are you finished?" she asked.

He lit a cigarette.

"Just tell me this, Gwendolyn, ain't it true that I been good to you?"

"You been all right," she replied.

"Just tell me this, was I beatin' on you? Was I beatin' on you?"

"Sure you was beatin'..."

"Was I usin' my karate, Gwendolyn? Was I usin' my karate?"

"No, you wasn't using your goddam karate."

“All I want to know, Gwendolyn, is are you gonna give me that eight dollars.”

Now he was talking in a lower voice. “Are you gonna give me that eight dollars for some food and the bus. Cuz it’s just like I told ya, Gwendolyn, I start work at the car parts factory tomorrow, and it’s way out in the Mission, I got to take the bus. Then Friday I’ll be getting a check. You hear that, Gwendolyn? On Friday I’m gonna get me a check and we can go to the bank. Now all ;I want to know once and for all and for final is are you gonna give me eight dollars question mark period. Billy can witness...”

“For the Pete’s sake, Wilbur! Will you shut your goddam mouth?”

“Beautiful, beautiful, beautiful,” the crazy man at the end of the counter kept saying. Wilbur Krenton went on in his high-pitched voice, while the two men from the hills nodded obsequiously and Gwendolyn looked toward him with her dull white face and bloodshot eyes.

3

Later that evening, Wilbur Krenton was walking up Eddy Street toward the Colonial Hotel. He had put his blue jean jacket on, and he had the collar up because the fog had drifted lower and the wind was coming off the ocean. Scraps of paper somersaulted up the deserted pavement with a hollow rattle. It was 4 A.M. There were cardboard boxes stacked up for the trash man in front of every store. In fact, the trash man was already coming. The truck was whining from somewhere up on the side of Nob Hill.

“Fucking lightbulbs,” Wilbur muttered, looking off toward the south, where there was a ragged silhouette of three-story buildings. The-sky behind them was orange and purplish-red from the glow of the welding torches at the Third Street dry docks. Wilbur looked suspiciously to both sides, and then leaning toward a building for concealment, he carefully withdrew his hand from his hip pocket and fanned out four bills: a fin and three one’s.

“Beautiful, beautiful, beautiful,” the crazy man from Ming’s Restaurant walked by. He looked like an old, wasted-

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out hippy. He had long gray hair and a gray beard and he never wore shoes. He pushed his things around in a grocery cart. He always wore an Army field-coat. He was some kind of veteran of the Korean War. "Beautiful, beautiful, beautiful," he said.

"Up your ass, grandpa, up yer shitty ass!" Wilbur said as he glowered past, pushing the shopping cart out of his way. It got away from the crazy man and toppled over in the gutter. Krenton laughed. "Go fuckin' be crazy with somebody else!"

As Wilbur started to cross Leavenworth, he was almost hit by a Mercedes Benz that was taking its free right from O'Farrell. He stepped deftly aside, swooped his jacket at the windshield, kicked the side door, and spit on the window all in one spasmic motion.

His room was on the third floor. There was no elevator. On the way upstairs, he discovered a roach. He managed to smack just the back half of it. It was all smashed into the floor but the roach's front legs and long antennae were swaying back and forth. He took a piece of paper from the wastebasket and folded it over so he could scoop up the roach. Then he set the paper on the burner of his hot plate and watched until the flames curled the edge of the paper and in a diminishing circle of fire closed in on the roach.

When he got upstairs Wilbur laid on the bed and played with his cock for a little while. He went over to the closet and pulled out a girlie magazine. It was the kind he liked with pictures of asses. He liked to look at rear ends and assholes. He couldn't come so he just gave up the whole business, lit up a cigarette, and looked out the window. There was an all-night cafe across the street, "Courtesy Cafe and Coffee Shop". There was a bunch of spades standing around on the corner; one blond pro with hot pants and a fat ass was motioning with her anatomy to a passing car. He wound up his alarm clock and went to sleep.

The only thing Krenton did wrong was to put the bed table in the wrong place; he jumped up so hard when he heard the alarm that he whopped his eye on the corner of the table. So he had a black eye when he went out. Aside from

that he felt like he was ready for the day.

Every one was going to work. The streets were full of people. He felt like a new man. The fog was gone, but there was still a brisk wind. He buttoned up his coat and bent into the wind with a grimace.

A slight drizzle was coming down. He put up his collar. On Hyde Street at the Lafayette Hotel, he looked in the window and noticed that a whole bunch of men were sitting by the counter. There was one empty seat in the middle. He went in, and sat down. A big spade next to him was eating a huge stack of hotcakes with gobs of butter all over it. He was pouring out syrup like it was milk. Krenton looked at the pancakes and then ordered coffee. The waitress was Chinese. He sipped his coffee slowly, now and then watching the waitress go through various changes in posture, then he leaned over to look at the Spade's newspaper. There was some headline about the death of a Coptic bishop in lower Egypt on the Nile. There was an accompanying photograph of a bearded man with a black miter that had a gold star on the front of it. On the bishop's right hand there, was an ascetic-looking young man with hollow cheeks and dreamy eyes. He was holding a white scroll.

The car parts factory turned out to be a two-story brick building with an attached area where stacks of rusted car parts were piled up in various bins according to kind under high roofs of corrugated aluminum supported by naked I-beams of red steel. The roof kept out the rain but the wind came through. Wilbur pounded on the office door. A pretty young brunette with green eyes smiled and came out, closing the door behind her. Inside the office a fat man with a cigar was sitting by a desk, talking on the phone. The brunette was wearing a black dress with a low-cut neckline. When she leaned over to show him where his timecard was, he, could see inside her dress. She was wearing a black bra. She had little cone-shaped breasts.

His job consisted in lifting up parts with a hook, then moving the hooked part along a conveyor until it hovered over a vat of hot water. He dipped each part into three consecutive tanks, which were arranged one after another

along the line of the conveyor belt. The entire path of each part was about 115 feet.

When the little cunt was walking away, he kept his eye on her ass. He tried to imagine how she would look with her ass up in the air and wiggling around in front of his nose. He had a pretty good idea how she would fuck. He could imagine her on his lap and himself with his finger up her slit. He could imagine how he would fuck her. He would pull off her panties and ram it up there fast. He could just imagine himself screwing her little ass in the ground.

He watched the door close and then hooked up a carburetor and moved it slowly along the belt to the first tank. Once the part was on the hook, it was moved along by means of a rope attached to the hook. Each time he got to the end of the run, a meter next to him clicked up another number. When he first looked at it, the meter said "11002"; when the lunch bell rang, it said "11034". He looked at it for a moment with satisfaction. Then he went out in the yard to sit on pile of gas tanks and eat his lunch. The little broad came out and smiled at him. He kind of raised up his head and just gave a little Humphrey Bogart nod. She waved. He looked off toward the street. A bunch of spic kids were standing on the corner. They hooted at the cunt when she walked by.

Pretty soon the fat man came out. He had clammy white skin. He was wearing wrinkled gray pants that looked like a tent and a white shirt that was stained with yellow and open at the collar. He was wearing a solid blue tie. There were drop of sweat on his upper lip and in the wrinkles of fat on his neck and arms.

"So how was your morning, son?" he asked, wiping the perspiration from his face. He took out a pack of cigarettes.

"Not good and not bad."

"Boy, you got it just right there. Isn't that the way it always is on the first day? I agree with you on that... What's wrong with your eye, boy?"

Wilbur nodded. "I been in a fight," he mumbled. A blue newspaper truck slid to a stop at the corner and lurched off to the left. The driver waved at the fat man; the fat man nodded

his head. The fat man took out a cigarette and offered one to Wilbur. He took one and the fat man gave him a light. They stood in silence for a little while until the cigarettes were all smoked up.

“I suppose you noticed the productivity meter,” said the fat man, sitting down next to Wilbur on a gas tank.

“I noticed that little deal with the numbers on it, if that’s what you mean.”

The fat man took out another cigarette and lit up one and handed it to Wilbur.

“What I was going to tell you is that your ratio is off., but of course you’re a new man.”

“My ratio is off in what manner?”

The fat man gestured toward the three steaming pots of water with his cigarette.

“We call it “real time”. According to “real time” , you only worked two hours this morning, because “real time” is 15 per hour, and you only did 32.”

“But wasn’t I here since 8 A.M.? Didn’t I punch in on the clock at 8 A. M?”

“No, because the time clock is set on real time.”

The next morning, Krenton didn’t stop to eat at the Lafayette Hotel. He went hurriedly by and glanced in the window just long enough to get a quick look at the waitress’s ass and notice that the same spade was chowing down on hotcakes. He was packing gobs of butter on it. The waitress was bringing him another bottle of maple syrup.

“He eatin’ him them pancakes,” Wilbur mumbled. He was locking down Hyde Street toward Market where a green street car was passing through a stream of work-bound pedestrians. All the flags were flying in the Civic Center Mall.

Krenton was on the job by 7:45 A .M. By noon he had racked up 46 parts. That was three hours real work. Instead of going out to the yard for lunch, he decided to go back in the dark best part of the shelter where the brick wall on the side of the factory met a high cement wall that divided the parts warehouse from the alley. There were piles of rusted mufflers stacked along the wall. He sat down on an oil

barrel. It was quiet in this dark corner and he felt alone. He lit a cigarette.

4

After a while, Krenton noticed that the little brunette was watching him from behind a pile of tires. When she saw him notice her, she smiled impishly like a naughty child caught in a prank. She shrugged her shoulders and approached him smiling with her arms folded so they cradled her breasts.

“Sometimes during lunch I have no where to no.”

“Oh yea? So, you have no where to go? So don’t you get hungry? So why don’t you go to a cafe or something like that?” said Wilbur. He shook his head from side to side. He was standing with his hands in his back pockets. He lit up a cigarette and looked off toward the street. There was a hotel on the corner, and one block beyond its green canopy, a trolley was passing by.

She shrugged her shoulders again. For a moment, she looked directly at him. He was quite taken by her green eyes. They weren’t exactly green, but something more brilliant. They were flecked with blue and yellow.

“Yes, I do get hungry but the canteen is three blocks away and you know me... but you don’t really know me, do you? I get... I guess you would call it ‘impatient’... you know what I mean? I’m ready to go. I always feel so wound up. My mother used to say it was just my disposition. But what is ‘disposition’? I have to say I really don’t know. I just know I get lonely... ooh, did someone hit your eye?”

Krenton nodded; “You know how it is, babe, I been in a fight.” He took a long puff.”Yea, I know what you mean, doll. Sometimes I get feelin’ the same way. You and me, we got a lot in common. I can see that right off the bat.”

He puffed a little more on his cigarette.

“Yea, I can see that right off the bat,” he repeated.

She smiled impishly.

“You seem to know where you’re going.”

“Kind of basically, I do. I figure I’ll stay here in “parts” for a while, and then try for management.”

She came closer to him. She was wearing some kind of perfume. It reminded him of Candy. Candy was a girl he had known in high school who was always looking for a fuck.

“Oh, and you would be a good manager,” she said.

“Your glasses are so thick. They make you look smart, like you’re always reading.”

“Yea, well, that’s true. I read quite a bit. I got a bunch of magazines in my estate. I live at this place called the “Colonial Estates.”

A silence intervened.

“So you like working here?” asked Wilbur Krenton.

“Sometimes I do, and sometimes I don’t.”

“Boy, you got it just right there. Isn’t that how it always is? I agree with you on that. I feel the same way myself.”

They stood in silence for a while. Another trolley car passed on Mission Street.

“My neck’s been sore,” she said. “It’s from reading all them papers for the fat man.

“Where, right here by the backbone?” He felt where her neck hit her shoulders. The flesh on her neck was moist from perspiration. There were droplets of sweat standing out on her neck and some tiny hairs were standing up straight.

“No, lower in the middle more.”

She wiggled her shoulders, expanded her chest, and stuck out her rear end. He looked toward the street. The newspaper truck came by again. He saw the fat man nodding from the office; Then he looked back toward the little cunt. She was wearing a red sweat shirt and blue jeans that were tight at the crutch. After a while, he moved his hands around to the front and rubbed the outside of her bra. She made no attempt to push back his hands. She was very quiet. He did this for a while and then shoved his hand inside her bra. The nipple stood up as stiff as a piece of rubber. He ran his fingers lightly over the tip of her tits. Then she abruptly pushed down his hands, sighed, and sidled away.

“I didn’t plan for that, but now that you’ve done it, you’ve done it.”

“Yea, I guess I have,” Krenton said. He smiled foolishly at her. “I just got carried away.”

She backed off and turned towards the office, first walking, and then she broke into a little run. He watched her ass bounce up and down while she was running toward the office.

That afternoon, he discovered that if he pulled the hooker arm way toward the back of the belt and then jerked it suddenly forward as far as it would go, it registered one number on the productivity meter. He ran off thirty numbers, and then went over to lay on a pile of tires.

The fat man came out.

“We got no use for you, lazy man. You can go.”

“Whatta ya mean I can go? I just racked up thirty numbers.”

Oh, sure, nice numbers you racked up, without going nowhere,” the fat man said. “I was watchin you on our little TV.”

Wilbur got up and leaned towards him.

“So just what was you watchin’? Just what was you watchin’ anyhow on yer little TV?”

“I was watching everything,” said the fat man. He started to take out a pack of cigarettes.

Wilbur Krenton hauled off and popped the fat man in the nose. The fat man fell back into a pile of tires, which toppled over on top of him, so only his wriggling feet could be seen. Krenton went over to get some hot water to pour on the fat man but it was too hot to carry. He went huffing off, throwing the bird to the cunt as he came by.

On Mission Street, he looked for a cab. He had seven dollars in his pocket. All of a sudden, he discovered that the crazy man from Ming’s Restaurant was sitting across the street. His cart was in the gutter again. The crazy man was sitting with his face in his hands,, as though in some catatonic state. Krenton rushed across the street foaming with anger.

“Oh, for the cripe sake, get up off your ass, you crazy old man, you crazy old moron! I just gave you a shove! Goddamit, get up! How’d you like me to give you a swift kick in the ass? How would you like that, you crazy old moron? Get up, you lunatic, get up, get up! Nothin’ wrong

with bein' crazy, you stupid imbecile. Will you just get up? Here comes a kick!!"

The crazy man jumped up, rubbing his rear end. He went mumbling off, pushing his cart. "Beautiful, beautiful. Just tell me this. If you're so goddam beautiful, how come your asshole's so big?"

Krenton hardly paid attention. He spied an orange cab coming in his direction. The driver was a Chink.

5

Wilbur Krenton was surprised to see that this Chink driver was the same one who had given a ride to his mother and himself. They turned left unto Folsom Street and down Folsom toward downtown. All the fags were standing around on the corner by Hamburger Mary's. There was loud music coming from Cissy's Bar. A couple fruits were crossing the street from the Stud to Cissy's. The Chinaman aimed the cab at them; they hopped out of the way.

"Skew fuck-inn fluit-cake. Make him jump good!"

Krenton laughed. He was leaning forward in the back seat and looking out across the meter and over the charging orange hood of the taxi. The Chink was driving with his melon-shaped head almost pressed against the windshield again. The red lights were popping to green right on the button. They were going down like ducks in a carnival shooting range. Bing-bing-bing. Above the dark buildings, the skies were orange and purplish-red from the dry docks again. Now and then, something glowed yellow. The cab slid to a stop on the red light at 7th Street, then lurched up 7th toward the downtown skyline. All the lights in the buildings were lit but the tops of the tallest buildings were hidden in fog. A light rain was falling.

"Tonight China-town too many people," the driver said. "Too many people Fishman Woof. Fluck-inn too-wist. Walk-walk China-town. Walk-walk Fishman Woof."

"Yea, fuck the goddam tourists," Krenton said.

They finally hit a red light at Leavenworth and Golden Gate by the YMCA. The Chnk swiveled his round head around on his neck like an owl so that his yellow face was

looking directly at Wilbur Krenton. His wide mouth widened even more into a grimacing smile. His eyes were so squinted that they were almost shut.

“You German?” he asked.

“Me German? I guess you could call me a German. My goddam father was a Kraut. So what’s it to you, you nosy Slant Eye?

The round yellow face tilted to one side for a moment, still fixed in a smile, then rotated all the way back and tilted to the other side like a ship listing at sea.

“Me hate German,” he said.

“Oh yea? So I’m not even sure I’m a German. Come to think of it, my father was a Swede. Yea, that’s what he was. He was a goddam Swede.”

The Chink tilted to the other side again, still smiling. In back of him, in front of the cab, the semaphore turned from red to green. He started moving the car forward as if he had eyes on the back of his head.

“Me hate German,” he repeated. The head swiveled back.

Pretty soon they pulled up at Momma Ming’s Restaurant. Krenton signaled the driver to stop. \The meter said “1.70.” Krenton waited for •his thirty cents change.

The Chink watched him when he pulled out his fin and two one’s. Then Krenton stood on the corner and watched the orange cab disappear in the fog.

He passed quickly kiddy corner across Eddy Street to the Star Cafe and then up to Gwendolyn’s place in the Astoria Hotel. There was no elevator. He had to walkup the back stairs which were cluttered with scraps of papers and discarded tin cans.

Three flights up and down a half-lighted hallway. She lived way in the corner the alley on the far side of two empty rooms.

Looking down toward the end of the hall, he could see that the light bulb was still out. He shook his head in disgust. “Six fuckin’ light bulbs. Six fuckin’ light bulbs,” he muttered to himself. So where is the goddam light bulb number seven?”

When he got to the end of the hall, he could see that the door was slightly ajar, and hear sighs and grunting coming from the room, plus a loud slurping sound. He could smell that she was fucking. He kicked the door open, jumped into a karate position, and screamed, “Gwendolyn, you slut! You goddam fuckin’ slut!”

She looked up with a start. He could just barely make out her dull white face in the orange light that was coming in from the dry docks. She raised a skinny hand to her mouth. There was a big spade slurping away in her crotch like a pig in a trough. It was the spade who was always eating pancakes at the Lafayette Hotel.

The nigger jumped up and came menacingly toward him. He jumped back and rushed down the hall.

“Fuckin shoe-job!” he cried. He stopped for a second to throw him the bird. “Fuckin’ Gwendolyn! She ain’t nothin’ but a slut!”

Outside, in the middle of the deserted street, the God-boys were playing up a storm. There were two of them with trumpets, one with a trombone, and a tall, thin woman who was singing at a microphone with her hands clasped together in front of her, and her eyes turned heavenward. The man in the stocking cap was there, the same one that had been pounding on the newspaper box with his fists. He was playing the drum.

The thin woman was dressed in a red coat that reached all the way to the street. As she sang, she rocked back and forth like a pendulum. “At the cross, at the cross, where I first saw the light, and a vision of my life was revealed.” Her shrill voice rose in the fog-gray air. To this the man in the stocking cap chorused in a monotone, “was revealed, was revealed,” accompanying each syllable with a thump on the drum.

The crazy men from Ming’s Restaurant came by. “Beautiful, beautiful, beautiful.

So go ahead and tell me that you’re so goddam beautiful.” The trash man was coming, too. The truck was whining from somewhere up on the side of Nob Hill.

Wilbur Krenton took one look at this scene and threw

them all the bird. “So you can all get fucked! Ya hear. what I’m sayin’? Y’ can shove your tuba’s up yer goddam holy ass!”

Then he wheeled around and looked toward the Astoria Hotel where the green neon sign that said “Astoria” was glowing intensely against the orange and purple sky

“And you too, Gwendolyn, ya hear me? You can get fucked, ya hear me, Gwendolyn? Cuz yer nothin’ but a sleazy, stinkin’ cunt!”

6

Krenton walked up to Van Ness Avenue with his collar up against the rain, and stood on the corner looking down the deserted street toward the dome of City Hall, illumined with yellow lights but half-hidden in swirling fog.

Looking up in the other direction, Krenton could see the blinking yellow lights on the trash truck. The truck turned for a moment unto Van Ness by a stop-light that was blinking red, then it vanished in the fog. When the truck was gone, the stop-light kept blinking. Each time it came on, the buildings by the stop light were tinted with red. The sky above the city was still orange and purple. Far away, Krenton heard the sirens of fire trucks. They rose in the silent air with a hysterical insistency. Sirens shrieked from several different parts of the city. Then it was quiet again. The red light was still blinking.

Looking behind him, Krenton noticed that someone was standing in the shadows waiting for the bus. It was one of the spic kids who had been hooting at the cunt that worked at the car parts factory. The spic was holding a Bible. He was a little wiry guy with shiny black hair and smiling eyes. Krenton could only see one side of his face. Some light was coming down from an arc light on that side.

After, a while, the spic decided to be friendly.

“Me berry happy,” he said.

“That’s good,” said Krenton. “I like happy spics.”

“You know why me berry happy be?”

Krenton looked the other way. When he looked back, the spic began to gesture energetically in order to explain his

question. “You,” he said, jabbing his finger toward Krenton. “Know”: he put one thin brown hand to his brow.

When he was all done gesturing, he repeated:

“You know why be merry happy me?”

Krenton threw him the bird.

“I don’t know nothin’ about berry this, berry that, berry up yer spic brown ass. So get fucked. You hear me? Get fucked.”

He walked up Van Ness toward Nob Hill. He had gotten as far as Pine Street when he noticed an orange-colored vehicle was following in his wake. He took a glance back and saw it was the Chink. He pretended not to notice. He kept walking up the street. The fog was so low now it was swirling up the street. A steady rain was falling.

Krenton walked two more blocks in this way, with his head bent down against the rain, which was coming down harder now, and with the orange cab in his wake like some kind of official escort.

Finally a familiar voice came from the car:

“Where you go, German?”

Krenton kept walking. He could hardly see in the rain. A stream of water was trickling along in the gutter.

“I ain’t goin’ nowhere, you half-assed Chink.”

He shot an angry glance back toward the orange cab. The Chinaman still had both hands on the wheel but somehow he had managed to twist his head all the way over to the passenger window. His round face was floating like a yellow balloon on the side of the car. He was grinning from ear to ear like the Cheshire cat, and his eyes were squinted up into tiny slits.

1

“What mean “slaf-ass?”

“It don’t moan nothin’, lemon-head. It’s just a fuckin’ word.”

What your name, German?”

“My name is Wilbur Krenton. So what’s it to you, pot-head?”

“Wabbow Kanton,” said the Chink. “Wabbow Kenton.”

They kept moving up the street. The trickle of water in the gutter was larger now. A red light was blinking off and

on. Each time it came on, the semaphore clicked.

Mister German Wabbow Kenton.”

“I already told you I ain’t no goddam German. I already, told you that my fuckin’ father was a goddam Swede.”

The orange cab was now right beside Krenton. The Chink’s smiling face rocked from side to side.

“German like girlie?” he asked.

“What kind of girlie? Now I suppose your gonna tell me that you’re a pimp.”

“Nice China-town girlie. Can fuck, can suck.”

“Oh yea? Sure, sure. For how much? For fifty bucks?”

“Five buck. Can fuck, can suck. Fat ass, big boob.”

“Oh yea? Sure, sure. For how long? For fifteen seconds?”

“Two hour, German. Can fuck, can suck. Long leg, fat ass, big boob. German like?”

“Y’ gotta be kiddin’. Y’ gotta be kiddin’. You handin’ me some kind of a line?”

“Five.buck,” repeated the Chink. He held up an extended hand to signify “five”.

“Two hour.” He held up two fingers and pointed to the back of the cab.

“Y’ gotta be kiddin’. Y’ gotta be kidding” said Krenton.

He opened up the back door and got in.

7

The rain was pouring down so hard now that Krenton could hardly see out of the side window. He leaned forward and looked ahead over the charging orange hood. The Chink was driving intently with both hands on the wheel and his forehead smack dab against the windshield. The windshield wipers were creaking back and forth. They turned right unto Broadway and roared through the Broadway tunnel. On the far side of the tunnel, Krenton could see some of the neon lights on the Strip shrouded in the pouring rain.

Neon lights or not, the Strip was deserted. One undaunted barker was standing out in the rain. He saw the approaching cab and rushed towards it to make his bid. “See. it here in the flesh. See it here in the flesh! See it here in the

flesh!" His voice rose and then faded off behind them. The orange cab screeched right unto Stockton Street. Then they turned left at Washington and popped down into Chinatown.

Brightly-painted Chinese characters floated above the dark shops in the rain. The Chink pulled to a stop at a white apartment building across from Portsmouth Square. Some old Chinese women in rain coats were standing under a street lamp doing Tai-Chi. The trash man was coming down Washington. The yellow lights on the truck were going round and round. The semaphore on Grant Street clicked. The corner had been green; now it was bathed in hazy red. A great stream of water like a small river was rushing down the hill. The Chinese women were making gathering gestures with their hands.

The Chink opened his door and began getting out of the cab. He moved his leg slowly and winced.

"War Two me bang-bang shoot German. Me got wooden leg."

Krenton was already outside the cab. He saw the crazy man go by on Grant Street. His Army coat was sopped with rain, and his grocery cart made a loud creaking sound.

"Oh yea. Y' mean yer leg ain't real?"

He leaned over to feel it. The Chinaman stopped him with his hand.

"German fluit?"

Krenton sneered.

"I ain't no fuckin' faggot. Gimme a break."

"Bang-bang army shoot Gorman. Him bang-bang shoot Chinaman leg. Cut him off. Chinaman sad.... House up slair," he said pointing. "Kanton help, bing-bing open Chinaman gate."

There was an iron gate in front of the door. The Chink unlocked the gate. Krenton swung it out. It made a long creaking sound. The Chink went through. On the other side of the door, a long narrow stairway went straight up to the second floor. The Chink began slowly, ever so slowly ascending the stairs. The hallway was dark.

"How many light bulbs," Krenton muttered, following the limping figure upward. Now it was silhouetted against

the light on the top of the stairs. The walls by the steps were painted a dull white. Upstairs the hallway was painted the same dull white. There was a long narrow hallway, bordered on one side by a blank wall and on the other side by a row of plain doors, each with a white number on it, and all of them painted firehouse red. The Chinaman's room was at the very end of the hall. On it was a large number "7".

When at last they got to the end of the hall, Krenton followed the Chink in. There were only two rooms. The first one was apparently not used very often. There was a card table in the middle piled high with boxes. In the next room were several loose kitchen chairs which had no table to go with them. There were empty boxes on some of the chairs, and a glass cannister filled with moldy potato chips. On the far wall was a couch made into a bed. There were a couple covers on it and one battered pillow. The Chink sat down on the couch and picked up a phone.

"Me call girlie." He tilted his yellow face sideways and blinked one beady eye.

Krenton stood with his hands in his hip pockets, looking out the window toward Washington Street. Now the trash man was right below the building. The yellow light was going around, flashing against the brick walls of the buildings across the street. Krenton could see the huddled figures of the Chinese women going through their Tai Chi positions under the street lamp. The rain was still pouring down.

He looked around the room. There was just one light bulb in the room, a bare one that hung from a cord in the exact middle of the ceiling. On the far side of the room, across from the couch, was a display of pictures that had been cut from a magazine and taped on the wall in an upside-down "V". A picture of a battered American flag was at the apex. It was pock-marked with bullet-holes. To either side of it were picture of Jesus and Mary. Further down were pictures of two Zen Chinese paintings of waterfalls and birds.

Krenton went over to look at the display. "Hey, there's Old Glory," he said, laughing. He was in a great mood. He

was starting to think about what a great lay he was going to get off the Chinese cunt. He could just imagine how he would fuck her little ass. He'd ram his cock up in there hard and stick his finger up her ass.

"German got five buck?" The Chink asked. "Girlie in the hall."

Krenton pulled out the fin and flourished it over his head. "Sure, sure. Here's the fuckin' fin. Good-bye and good riddance." He gave it a kiss.

The Chinaman smiled.

"Hey, by the way, how about givin' me a look at yer wooden leg?" Krenton said. The Chinaman loaned over and pulled up his pants leg. There was a big scar on the leg, a hideous scar, but the leg was flesh-and-blood. It was real.

"Leg not wood. Bang-bang bullet go here. Chinaman cry."

"And here ya was makin' such a big deal about yer wooden leg!"

Tho Chink laughed, a little chuckling laugh. He settled back in the couch. "Sar-root frag, German," he said.

Krenton looked at the picture of the tattered flag and leaned way back, laughing, in an exaggerated salute. "Oh, say can you see," he intoned.

When he looked back, he saw that the Chink had a gun, and that the gun was pointed at his head.

"Hey, what is this?" he laughed.

Just then a shot rang out and the smiling face of the Chink began moving around in a circle. The next thing Krenton knew, he was lying on the floor, staring at the light bulb which glowed intensely yellow, while the face of the Chinaman swirled around it like a top. For just a second he saw this, and then the bulb went out.