

Twenty-Six

He emerged from unconsciousness by slow degrees, like a body drifting up from the bottom of a deep pool. Feeling immensely heavy and lethargic, he groped for the end of his dream—a weight that would pull him back into the depths where he wanted to be—but it slipped away. As he stretched out with a groan, his feet met an obstacle, and it took him a moment to identify it: the back-seat door, of course. Suddenly alarmed, realizing that the car was motionless, he sat up and looked around.

And wondered if he wasn't still dreaming after all.

The car was sitting in a hollow between three rocky hills dotted with low pines, clumps of brown weeds, and shadowed pockets of decaying snow. Looking through the rear window, he saw no sign of a road—or even a trail; the weeds the car had been driven over had sprung up again behind it.

You wanna go up into the mountains?

His hitchhiking pals had driven him up into the mountains and abandoned him there.

Panicked, he reached for his billfold and found it was in place and still stuffed with bills. The car keys dangled from the ignition; he retrieved them and went out to check the trunk. His suitcase hadn't been touched. Evidently the old man was only a humorist, not a thief.

But why? Revenge?

Revenge for what?

For buying them food, maybe. Perhaps it seemed a patronizing gesture: *Here, eat, since you obviously can't afford to feed yourselves.* Yes, it had to be that, though the punishment seemed excessive for the crime.

Shrugging this away, David checked his watch. Five thirty—four thirty mountain time—time enough to get back on the road to civilization before nightfall. He assumed he couldn't be more than half a mile from that road— *some* road. Perhaps even less than that. After all, what price vengeance? The farther in they took him, the farther they'd have to walk out.

The car faced the westering sun; he turned it around and, in second gear, began to feel his way back—searching for the path of least resistance among the boulders and bushes. The ground rose slightly as it approached the saddle between two hills. At the crest of the saddle he paused, frowning. The descent on the other side was too steep—not too steep to be negotiated, too steep to be the right way. He'd be able to get the car down it, but no one would have been able to get the car up it in the first place—not a two-wheel-drive Volvo.

He backed to his original position and thought about it. Clearly his humorous friends hadn't just driven the car in and switched the engine off; they'd turned it around to mask the direction they'd brought it from. He couldn't have foreseen such subtlety, but he should have checked for tracks before doing his own turning around; they'd be hopelessly muddled now—if he could read them at all.

He got out and made a circuit of the area at a radius of twenty yards from the car. To the trained eye, he was sure, the back-trail would stand out like a scorch mark on a white sheet. To his own eye, however, it was invisible. There was no conveniently-placed patch of smooth clay or sand to catch a tread mark, and if the tough-looking vegetation had been crushed by a car's passage, it had quickly sprung back to stand shoulder to shoulder with the rest.

He assessed the sun and the three hills around him. By the time he'd scaled the hill to the east, the land below might well be in shadow; but if he scaled the hill to the west, the land below would still be in sunlight. Nevertheless, his inclination was toward the eastern slope, and he wondered why. Maybe because it looked toward home and security.

He changed into jeans, tennis shoes, and wind-breaker and headed west. It was a dusty climb but not an arduous one, though he took it cautiously, not eager to complicate matters with a twisted ankle. The sun was just touching a distant mountain on the horizon when he reached the top. There was nothing in the intervening space to encourage him—no lights, no roads, no houses, no fences—just range after range of barren hills. Behind any one of them could be hidden a superhighway, a village—even a whole city. But from this vantage point it might as well have been a vista on Mars.

Looking to his right, he saw that he was standing on a ridge that led, after what appeared to be a shallow dip, to the crest of the northern hill, perhaps half a mile away. Although the sun would be gone by the time he got there, he judged it would be light enough to make out a road. But ten minutes later he discovered that his eye had been deceived. Hidden in the shallow dip was not an unbroken ridge to the northern crest but the root of still another hill jutting westward and then up to the summit he wanted to reach. He scowled down at the car sitting obscenely useless in the valley below and then up at the hill to his left. Except for perhaps the last two hundred yards, he'd have the car in sight the whole time. He glanced at his watch, set it back an hour to mountain time, knowing as he did it that, whatever the

hands said, there was less than an hour of daylight left. Even so, there was no reason why he couldn't make the ascent and return to this spot in forty minutes.

Still, he looked back wistfully at the Volvo, wishing he'd had the good sense to turn on the hazard lights as a guide.

Staying on the high ground, he reached the northern crest twenty minutes later and found nothing encouraging in the view; empty hills extended to the horizon like a rough cloth carelessly folded. Some fifteen miles away a single light flickered on a hilltop like a dim star, hopelessly beyond reach. Turning around, he was mildly surprised to find that the valley in which the car rested was not so much in front of him as to his left, which meant that retracing his steps would be to take the long way round. He studied the descent thoughtfully. What had appeared from below to be a single hill was in fact two hills; he was looking at his car over the shoulder of the lower hill. He would descend the first and go around the second to the left to reach the valley floor.

By the time he'd completed the first leg of the journey it was fully dark, and he paused, trying to remember when the moon had risen the night before. He seemed to recall seeing it well up on his arrival in Hays. Or had that been on leaving Hays?

Then, looking down, he realized the question was irrelevant. Against expectation, he could dimly make out the shape of the car below him, a glossy roundness against the surrounding rubble. It dropped from sight a few minutes later, however, when he descended into a watercourse cutting through the valley floor. The far side of the arroyo was only some eight feet high, but it was a sheer wall of rock, and, bearing right, he was a few minutes finding a safe way up. The car, he calculated, would be to his left, and it was.

Except that it wasn't a car, it was a shelf of rock angled up out of the weeds. Looking around bleakly, he understood what every traveler lost in the mountains learns: in the dark, all hills look alike.

Still winter up there, man. Freeze your ass off.

Already shivering, he sat down on the rock to assess his chances of surviving the night. He carried no matches, no cigarette lighter, and dismissed his prospects of redeveloping some ancient fire-making technique from scratch, in the dark. He'd seen nothing like a cave he could block up to conserve body heat. What he had plenty of was weeds. He could trample vast quantities in the hours ahead and use the duff to pack inside his clothes. It wouldn't be as effective as down (and would be hellishly uncomfortable), but it would probably save his life. He could find a crevice and fill it with weeds that he could crawl under to spend the night. He did this first, figuring that he'd be virtually immobile once he'd stuffed his clothes with insulation.

All these chores were vastly easier to imagine than to accomplish, and it was midnight by the time he squirmed into his nest, completely exhausted. Ten minutes later he squirmed back out, choking on pollen and dust. He tore off another strip of shirt-tail (he'd already used two to tie off his pant legs), found a patch of snow, and froze his hands melting enough to moisten it. Then he crawled back inside and, with the icy mask over his mouth and nose, began to feel a sickening premonition of defeat.

Curiously, he found the situation more humiliating than terrifying. Lying there encased in weeds, every square inch of flesh burning either with irritation or with cold, he felt like a booby, unable to get through even three days outside his petty routine without bungling his life away.

There was a rock burrowing into the right side of his back, just below the kidney.

Naturally there would be. It was moving in on him, making a place for itself as a new organ, alongside spleen and liver—an organ of cold, designed to process heat away. Of course it wasn't really moving in on him; he was moving in on it—forcing himself on it. But that wasn't exactly right either. Something about equal and opposite forces there. He was pushing on the rock and the rock was pushing back—had to be or it'd be sinking into the ground. On the other hand . . . *there is no force, however great* . . .

What the devil was that?

There is no force, however great. . . .

Poetry? Something.

Could he really lie there (*there is no force*) absorbing that rock (*however great*) into his body for the next seven hours without going insane? It didn't seem possible. Seven hours: four hundred minutes, twenty-four thousand seconds. If he could count slowly to twenty-four thousand, the night would be over.

One, two, three, four. . .

There is no force, however great. . . .

Then the solution to the puzzle came to him, and he smiled blearily. Poor William Whewell of Trinity College—a fellow bungler. He'd wanted to be remembered as a poet but had achieved only

derisory fame for a piece of inadvertent doggerel that had slipped into his *Elementary Treatise on Mechanics*. After hearing it recited for the amusement of his fellow dons in an after-dinner speech, he frantically revised it for later editions but never managed to expunge it from the literature of ineptitude.

*There is no force, however great,
Can stretch a cord, however fine,
Into a horizontal line,
Which is accurately straight.*

This anecdote was absolutely true, David knew. If he were at home, in the spare bedroom that had served as his office, he could have gone directly to the bookcase and the volume in which it could be found.

Although he couldn't sense it, his thoughts were moving with glacial slowness. William Whewell's unfortunate rhymes hadn't been recollected (as he imagined) in a minute or two; they'd floated together over a period of three quarters of an hour, like particles suspended in a heavy liquid.

He was interested to discover that he no longer felt unbearably cold. It occurred to him that the loss of any sense of discomfort is a classic symptom of hypothermia, but he discounted that; it was simply that his precautions, after all, were proving more effective than he'd hoped. Of course it was early yet. The real test would come, if it came, in the bitter hour before dawn, when

*There is no force, however great,
Can keep a man, however warm,
From abandoning his mortal form
To the comfort of a wooden crate.*

His greatest worry had been for his feet, poorly protected in their tennis shoes. But that had been taken care of at some dimly-remembered point when he detached them and tucked them up into the hollow between buttocks and thighs, one to each side. He could feel them there quite distinctly. But now something was nagging at him for attention, which seemed unfair just when he was finally becoming comfortably settled at last.

A smell. The smell of the sea.

Absurd.

It was the bells that had put him in mind of the sea.

Six bells and all's well, cap'n.

Having found the right sense to focus on, he listened. Not bells. A piano. An old rinky-tink piano, playing some ghastly Victorian ditty.

I'm only a bird in a gilded cage.

Now that he'd identified the sound, others began to collect around it like moths around a light: people talking, someone laughing, the stir of feet on a wooden floor.

What the hell?

David sat up, throwing aside his cocoon of weeds, and realized that he wasn't dreaming it. Somewhere off to the right, not far away, there was a party going on. He kicked away the rest of the weeds with dead feet and spent the next few minutes massaging them back to agonizing life, terrified that at any moment the sounds would terminate with the suddenness of a tape-end flashing past the play-back head. Then he shook the debris out of his clothes and started toward them.

At the brow of the next hill he paused, dumbfounded, having to check his senses once again to confirm that he really was awake. In the valley below stood what looked like a segment of a Western movie set. A segment: thirty yards of street and square-front buildings, chopped off at either end as if by a giant chainsaw. Livery stables, alley with horse and wagon, saloon, hotel—*half a hotel*, sliced off from top to bottom at mid-room. All of it completely dark, except for a lantern hanging in the alley beside the wagon and the yellow lights streaming from the saloon.

As David stumbled down the hill, a tenor joined the pianist in *Silver Threads Amongst the Gold*, and a woman called out, "Drat you anyway, Jimmy Joe!" provoking a roar of masculine laughter.

When he pushed through the swinging doors, the noise stopped as if a plug had been pulled, and a dozen faces turned to him, blank with astonishment. They were all there:

The rouged tart in red velvet and net stockings.

The mustachioed piano player in bowler and sleeve-garters.

The dandified card-sharp—deck frozen in mid-shuffle under his hands.

The crooked, frock-coated banker, surrounded by his henchmen.

The cowpokes in for their booze-up from a long, dirty cattle drive.

The beefy bartender, gravely studying David for trouble, his hand on a sawed-off under the bar. All gazing at him like switched-off clockwork figures—except for one, the only one not in period costume, a slight, elderly gentleman with the face of a benign old sheep, dressed in a cardigan sweater, shirt, and tie. Leaning casually against the bar, he was shaking his head at David with a look midway between disappointment and kindly amusement.

This old gentleman flapped an impatient hand at the others, and they resumed their roles with obvious reluctance, whispering over their drinks as the pianist groped for his place in the melody.

"I'm afraid," he said, taking David's arm, "that you really don't belong here."

"But . . . I'm lost."

The old man smiled tolerantly. "Well, of course you are. And of course I know that you are. But you really must go back."

"Back?" David stared at him open-mouthed and for the first time in many years felt a tingling behind his eyes that signaled the approach of tears. "You don't understand. I *can't* go back."

"Of course you can, my boy," the other said, nodding sympathetically. "It will all be arranged."

"Arranged?"

"Certainly. Just let me think a bit." After blinking into a space above David's head for a few moments, he turned and said, "Ted, Hilly, will you give me a hand?"

Two of the cowpokes exchanged a glance and stood up.

"Come along then," the old man said, steering David outside and into the alley, where the horse and wagon stood waiting. The horse, a massive old gray, turned a baleful eye to them, and David saw that the wagon was loaded with a long wooden crate.

"Ted, Hilly." The old man nodded at the two cowpokes as if identifying them for David's sake. "It seems we're going to need Mike's box."

Ted, a neckless troll with a torso like a barrel, glared at David reproachfully, but said nothing.

Hilly, a tall, rangy man with impossibly wide shoulders, muttered, "Shit."

"Come on now, it's no big deal."

The two men shrugged, climbed up onto the wagon, and started to shift the box off the end, but the old man said, "No, no, leave it where it is."

"Aw, Christ." Hilly looked around the bed of the wagon, picked up a pry bar, and attacked the lid, which came up with nails shrieking. "Come on, Ted, Goddammit, grab it."

Ted pulled the lid off and carefully set it aside.

Then, as David watched in horror, they wrestled a nude male body out of the box and pitched it face down into the dirt at his feet. A red neck-rag tied around one wrist made its nakedness doubly obscene.

The old man tilted his head confidentially toward David and said, "We were having a wake, you see."

Twenty-Seven

"Jesus God," David whispered, unable to tear his eyes away from the corpse, obscenely hairless, its backside empurpled with settled blood.

Ted and Hilly had climbed down from the wagon and were leaning against it casually, bored. The old man looked at them with disapproval and snapped, "Well, get him up."

Ted rolled his eyes, shuffled over to the corpse, and gave it an unenthusiastic kick.

"Come on," the old man said impatiently. "It's cold out here."

The barrel-shaped cowpoke growled, hunched his shoulders, and leaped into a kick that stove in the ribcage with a sickening crunch.

"Jesus," David breathed, sagging at the knees.

"For Christ's sake, get him up!"

Ted shrugged helplessly. Hilly shook his head in disgust and said, "Grab his arms."

"Fuck it, *you* grab his arms."

"Oh, shit."

Together they managed to grapple the body into an upright position, with Ted holding him in a bear hug from behind.

"Come on," Hilly said, "hold him up."

"I *am* holding him up, asshole."

"I mean *higher*."

"Goddammit, I can't *go* higher."

"Oh fuck, give him to me."

The old man sighed as the two wrestled with the body again until Hilly had taken Ted's place, holding it from behind.

"Okay," Ted said, massaging his fist. "Ready?"

"Hold on." Hilly switched his grip on the body so that he was holding it on his hip. "Okay."

Ted twitched his shoulders up and down a few times to loosen them, then reared back and delivered a blow to the corpse's belly that would have felled a gorilla. In spite of Hilly's grip, the body folded up over Ted's fist, and a torrent of foul liquid erupted from its mouth to soak his shoulder.

"Oh, shit!" he screamed hysterically, trying to dance away from the drenched shoulder. "The fucker *puked* on me!"

Laughing, Hilly released the body, which dropped to hands and knees barking hoarsely, like a dog trying to bring up a bone.

"Go change your shirt, Ted," the old man told him calmly and walked over to hunker down beside the still-quaking corpse. He studied it for a few moments, then said, with great intensity: "*Mike*."

Hilly, leaning against the wagon, his arms folded, chuckled as Mike went on retching convulsively.

"Mike, come on." The old man rapped him sharply on the head with his knuckles. As if electrified by this trivial blow, Mike stiffened to a catatonic rigidity.

"Mike. *See!*"

When he didn't move, the old man rapped his skull again.

"See, you idiot!"

Mike raised his head, his mouth hanging completely open.

"Come on." The old man knelt down beside him, took Mike's head in his hands, and turned it around to point up at David.

"See!" Mike gazed up, his eyes pools of staring blackness, and David shrank back, shuddering uncontrollably.

Still holding his head, the old man leaned forward to look first into Mike's face then up into David's, as if checking the angle. "Did you see?"

"Ungh," Mike groaned, his mouth still hanging open.

"Good, good," the old man said, releasing him to collapse into the dust. He stood up, brushed off his knees, and went over to confer with Hilly. As the two of them talked in low tones, David and Mike stared at each other. Both seemed equally horrified by what they saw.

"Well, that's all settled then," the old man said, taking David's arm. "There'll be time for a drink now."

"Time?" David croaked.

The old man chuckled. "I dare say you can use one."

Numbly, David allowed himself to be led inside and deposited at a table. The music and hilarity around him failed to penetrate his overloaded senses, and he gazed about in a stupor, feeling insubstantial, only superficially present, like an image projected on the wall. He wasn't thinking about what had happened in the alley. In a sense, he *couldn't* think about it; his mind simply rejected what his eyes had taken in.

When the old man arrived with glasses and a bottle of whiskey, David looked up and asked, "What *is* this place?"

The old man looked around doubtfully. "Why, I believe you could say that it's the Dead Man Saloon."

"I mean, what town?"

He smiled. "Oh, it's not a town, of course. You can see that."

"But where *are* we?"

"My dear fellow, I don't know what to tell you. Not every place on the earth has a name. If it's any help to you, we're in the mountains about a hundred miles west of Denver."

"I see." David took a sip of the whiskey and savored its fiery tingle as a confirmation of his reality. "Can someone help me get out of here?"

"All being taken care of, my boy."

David took another, larger sip and looked around cautiously. "Who *are* these people?"

"I'm afraid I don't understand your question."

"What are these people *doing* here?"

The old man frowned, puzzled. "I'd say they're . . . enjoying themselves."

His confidence returning, David poured himself another drink. "You seem to be deliberately misunderstanding me."

"Am I?" The old man pursed his lips in an innocent smile. "Perhaps you and I simply have different perceptions of the duties of hospitality."

"You'll have to explain that, I'm afraid."

"Really? How would you react to a stranger blundering into one of your own haunts and demanding to know who your companions were and what they were doing there?"

David paused. "Yes, but. . ."

"Yes? Go on."

"I mean . . . this is the middle of nowhere."

"Is it indeed? An amusing concept, that. And if it is?"

"Well . . . naturally I'm curious."

"You mean your curiosity is aroused by all this activity taking place in what you call the middle of nowhere."

"Yes, that's right."

The old man's aura of kindness seemed to dissolve as he fixed David with a chilly stare. After sitting through two minutes of it, David asked what was wrong.

"Merely an attack of revulsion for those of your kind, I'm afraid."

"My kind?"

The old man cocked an eyebrow at him sardonically. "Surely you know what *kind* you are."

"Well, no, I guess I don't."

He gave him a bleak smile. "Perhaps that is the reason for my revulsion."

David shook his head, bewildered. "I'm sorry. I just don't understand."

The old man turned in his chair to survey the room, pausing when he spotted an enormous blanketed Indian sitting by himself in a corner.

"Horse Killer!" he called out. "Would you come here for a moment?"

The Indian glanced up without moving his broad, massive head. Then he rose, approached their table, and stood looking down at them in silence, his smallpox-ravaged face unreadable.

"Horse Killer, tell me: Do you know what kind I am?"

The Indian eyed him somberly for a moment. "I know."

"And do you know what kind you are?"

"Yes."

He flicked a finger in David's direction. "This one doesn't. He doesn't know what kind he is."

The Indian studied David gravely, his saturnine eyes filled with distaste, as if he were inspecting a not very promising hunting dog.

"Do you think you'd be able to enlighten him on this point?"

"Maybe. Probably not."

"Why not?"

He shrugged heavily and pushed his lips out in disdain. "Too old. Too ignorant."

The old man transferred his gaze to David and nodded. "Yes, I'm afraid you're right. Thank you."

As Horse Killer lumbered back to his own table, David frowned down into his drink, feeling bitter over this unjustified attack and wondering how he could defend himself against a charge so ill-defined. Before he could find a place to begin, the old man pushed back his chair and stood up.

"I believe they're ready for us now."

David looked around doubtfully and turned to the swinging doors. After a moment Hilly's knobby red face appeared above them and nodded once in their direction.

Walking out into the frigid air, David felt a tense expectancy around him, as if he were an actor making his entrance in a critical scene. The wagon had been drawn up in front of the saloon, and the steaming gray turned to look at him reproachfully. Ted watched from the driver's station, his face shadowed by a heavily stained cowboy hat. Hilly was propped up against the back of the wagon, his arms folded, a toothpick working in his mouth, but his eyes belied the nonchalance of the pose. Although he seemed to be completely engrossed in studying the horse, the old man was obviously waiting for someone to begin the action, to deliver the anticipated line.

David, not knowing what else to do, started to climb up into the seat beside Ted but stopped when he felt the old man's hand on his arm.

"You'll be more comfortable in the back," he said quietly.

David looked into the wagon and saw that the wooden crate was still in place. Then his eyes

grew wide as he looked again. The crate was filled to the top with *weeds*. He felt the breath leave his lungs as if he'd been punched in the stomach.

"No," he said in a choked whisper.

Hilly climbed up into the wagon, lifted off the top layer of weeds invitingly.

"No," he said again, edging away.

"But you must go back," the old man insisted.

"No."

The three of them watched with intense interest as David continued to back away. When he reached the mouth of the alley, the old man spoke a single word.

"Mike."

As David turned, Mike was already gathering his feet under him, his black gaze fixed on David as if he were an apparition of horror.

"Mike," the old man repeated. "*Bring him.*"

David turned and ran.

At the crest above the town that wasn't a town, he stopped, panting, and looked back. The resurrected corpse—almost luminescent in its paleness—was easily visible two hundred yards away, shambling toward him, lurching grotesquely with each stride to compensate for its crushed ribcage. Ted, Hilly, and the old man lounged around the wagon, watching casually, like spectators at an egg-and-spoon race.

While catching his breath, David tried to formulate a strategy. Judging from Mike's progress, he felt he could stay ahead of him indefinitely, just by walking at a brisk pace, but the image of the two of them traversing the endless hills ahead, forever two hundred yards apart, was not an appealing one. He couldn't risk making it into a simple test of endurance.

Coming up the hill, he'd seen the moon ahead of him, presumably setting. As long as he kept marching toward it, he was in no danger of walking in circles, and this gave him an edge. Once out of visual contact with David, Mike wouldn't know what direction he'd taken and would soon be wandering through the hills at random, completely lost. David figured a ten minute jog would be enough to shake Mike off his trail.

It was also enough to do him in, and at the end of it he sank down into the dirt, panting, his throat as raw as if he'd swallowed a red-hot poker. As he waited for his heart to stop hammering and for his breath to return to normal, he wondered if it was necessary to move on at all. Checking his watch, he was astounded to see that it was only three o'clock—plenty of time to freeze to death if he didn't keep moving. He sighed and closed his eyes, deciding a ten-minute rest would be safe enough.

When he woke up twenty minutes later, it was because a pair of icy hands had closed around his ankles. David screamed and gave a convulsive kick that sent Mike spinning into the dirt. Then, once again, he was up and running.

After five minutes he stumbled over his own leaden feet, pitched headlong down the last twenty feet of an embankment, and lay there panting helplessly.

A man can walk down a deer.

His father, not a hunter but a tireless collector of unrelated bits of information, had told him this when he was a child. In his father's mind, it was proof of something or other—of the superiority of brains over speed, perhaps; of man's superiority over the rest of creation.

A man can walk down a deer. Was that what the old man was thinking?

Surely you know what kind you are.

Do you know what kind I am?

Is there a kind that can walk a *man* down?

David pulled himself up onto an elbow and looked around. Nothing moved; the air was as still and silent as if life had never been born on this planet. As far as he could tell, he'd left his pursuer far behind. But of course that's what the deer thinks too; spotting the hunter, it sprints ahead and imagines itself safe—until the hunter, moving at his own tireless pace, reappears and sends it into flight again—and again and again, until its energy is entirely spent.

He sank back into the dirt and gazed up at the remote, uncaring universe overhead, wondering if there was any stimulus at all that could get him back on his feet and running again. He was still wondering when he heard Mike scabbling in the rocks above him.

He turned around so that he was on his knees, and sought out the black pits of Mike's eyes. *Do you know what kind you are? Do you know what kind I am?*

The creature that had once been a man named Mike and that now was of some other kind stared back in slack-jawed despair, appalled, as if confronting the vilest horror of hell.

And he kept coming without a pause.

Groaning, David pushed himself up and stumbled away. He was running, but he knew it was only a ghastly caricature of a run—the sort they must have done at Dachau for the amusement of the guards.

Pick 'em up and put 'em down.

Pick 'em up and put 'em down.

Come on folks, do *The Dead Man's Shuffle!*

He was only half aware that he was running with his eyes closed, but he became fully and painfully aware of it when he blundered into something waist-high that sent him sprawling through the air. The wind knocked out of him, he lay face down gasping for a minute. Then he turned over to see what he'd run into and began laughing breathlessly. He'd run into the loveliest thing he'd ever seen.

A dusty, dark green 1988 Volvo sedan.

He got in, turned the key still in place, and listened with ecstatic disbelief to the crash of ignition, the symphonic thrum of life itself. After opening the windows a crack for ventilation, he turned on the heater, climbed into the back, locked the doors, and curled up on the seat, stroking the velour with heartfelt affection.

If you can get me now, Mike, you're welcome to me.

He was asleep within seconds.