

The Quallsford Inheritance, by Lloyd Biggle, Jr.

Intro: Watson, Holmes and the police are waiting for the criminals to appear.

An hour passed. The stone stairs made a painfully hard seat, but no one stirred, and I could hear no one breathing. Another hour passed, I thought. I kept straining my ears to hear the church chimes, but they were too far away, or the wind was wrong, or both.

Suddenly I heard heavy footsteps. Someone had entered the tower. He carried his own dark lantern, and risked a flash of light to make certain that the vast room was deserted. Evidently he saw no need for silence; he paced back and forth with a normal stride, and I passed the time by counting his footsteps.

That went on for fully half an hour, I thought, but afterwards Sherlock Holmes estimated twenty minutes. Then a lighter step was heard.

A man's voice said, "There you are."

A woman's voice said, "You fool! You have done everything wrong! Why did you murder them?"

"They were weaklings, both of them," Ben Paine, the mole catcher, said. "They would have talked. I had to shut their mouths."

"Why did you murder Edmund?" Emmeline Quallsford demanded. "Did you think that you had to shut his mouth?"

There was a moment of silence. "What got you onto that?" Paine demanded.

"Never mind. I know you did it. Why?"

"He was quitting on us. He threatened to sell us out."

"Nonsense," she said scornfully. "Edmund never would have talked. Never. His honour was involved. Surely you knew that. Where did you get the revolver?"

"Bought it from a chap in Rye."

"That was a mistake. We agreed in the beginning – no guns."

"I know. That was one of the reasons I had to kill that little rat Newton – he got jittery and carried a revolver with him. Fired it at a dog or something when we were crossing the Marsh. It was different with Edmund. He was going to give us an ultimatum. He said the smuggling had served its purpose. If we didn't stop, he would peach on all of us. He had to die, and I fixed it so the police wouldn't suspect a thing." Suddenly his voice became pleading, as though he knew that he faced a great wrath there in the darkness. "It had to be done, and I had that letter – he was of no more use to us, he had made that clear enough, and you know yourself that when a man is of no more use, he is a danger. I have heard you say it."

"Yes. I have said that. How did you manage it?"

"I met him to argue with him about his quitting us. It was no go – he had made up his mind. Finally he said he had a headache and wasn't feeling well and he was going home to try to sleep. He had mentioned that Larissa had gone somewhere with the children and I knew that you had gone to see old Emma, so there was no one else there but the servants. I followed him and got into the room without him hearing me, and –"

"And pulled the trigger."

"Well, yes. It had to be done. I was certain that you would see it my way when you had

thought about it."

"I have thought about it. You are a murdering fool, and you have ruined everything. When you pulled that trigger, you destroyed yourself and all that we were working for."

"Nonsense. The police have no suspicion of me. We can wait this out and find a way to start again."

"I can wait it out. You are doomed. If the police don't suspect you, I will tell them myself."

"You little traitor!"

There was the sound of a blow being struck, of a struggle, but it was mingled with the sounds of Sherlock Holmes and the police going into action. I snatched a lantern and lit it, but they had already seized Ben Paine and wrestled him away from his intended victim by the time I descended the stairs and flashed light on the scene.

Emmeline Quallsford stood at one side, looking on with a grim smile. She wore a man's clothing, and her hair was tucked away under a man's hat.

She said, still smiling grimly, "I told you, Mr. Holmes. If you did not catch him, I would."

"I believed you," Sherlock Holmes said quietly.

[I'm a Stranger Here Myself: Notes on Returning to America after Twenty Years Away](#), by Bill Bryson

WELL, DOCTOR, I WAS JUST TRYING TO LIE DOWN...

Here's a fact for you: According to the latest Statistical Abstract of the United States, every year more than 400,000 Americans suffer injuries involving beds, mattresses, or pillows. Think about that for a minute. That is almost 2,000 bed, mattress, or pillow injuries a day. In the time it takes you to read this article, four of my fellow citizens will somehow manage to be wounded by their bedding. My point in raising this is not to suggest that we are somehow more inept than the rest of the world when it comes to lying down for the night (though clearly there are thousands of us who could do with additional practice), but rather to observe that there is scarcely a statistic to do with this vast and scattered nation that doesn't in some way give one pause.

I had this brought home to me the other day when I was in the local library looking up something else altogether in the aforesaid Abstract and happened across "Table No. 206: Injuries Associated with Consumer Products." I have seldom passed a more diverting half hour.

Consider this intriguing fact: Almost 50,000 people in the United States are injured each year by pencils, pens, and other desk accessories. How do they do it? I have spent many long hours seated at desks where I would have greeted almost any kind of injury as a welcome diversion, but never once have I come close to achieving actual bodily harm.

So I ask again: How do they do it? These are, bear in mind, injuries severe enough to warrant a trip to an emergency room. Putting a staple in the tip of your index finger (which I have done quite a lot, sometimes only semi-accidentally) doesn't count. I am looking around my desk now and unless I put my head in the laser printer or stab myself with the scissors I cannot see a single source of potential harm within ten feet.

But then that's the thing about household injuries if Table No. 206 is any guide—they can come at you from almost anywhere. Consider this one. In 1992 (the latest year for which figures are available) more than 400,000 people in the United States were injured by chairs, sofas, and sofa beds. What are we to make of this? Does it tell us something trenchant about the design of modern furniture or merely that we have become exceptionally careless sitters? What is certain is that the problem is worsening. The number of chair, sofa, and sofa bed injuries showed an increase of 30,000 over the previous year, which is quite a worrying trend even for those of us who are frankly fearless with regard to soft furnishings. (That may, of course, be the nub of the problem-overconfidence.)

Predictably, "stairs, ramps, and landings" was the most lively category, with almost two million startled victims, but in other respects dangerous objects were far more benign than their reputations might lead you to predict. More people were injured by sound-recording equipment (46,022) than by skateboards (44,068), trampolines (43,655), or even razors and razor blades (43,365). A mere 16,670 overexuberant choppers ended up injured by hatchets and axes, and even saws and chainsaws claimed a relatively modest 38,692 victims.

Paper money and coins (30,274) claimed nearly as many victims as did scissors (34,062). I can just about conceive of how you might swallow a dime and then wish you hadn't ("You guys want to see a neat trick?"), but I cannot for the life of me construct hypothetical circumstances involving folding money and a subsequent trip to the ER. It would be interesting to meet some of these people.

I would also welcome a meeting with almost any of the 263,000 people injured by ceilings, walls, and inside panels. I can't imagine being hurt by a ceiling and not having a story worth

hearing. Likewise, I could find time for any of the 31,000 people injured by their "grooming devices." But the people I would really like to meet are the 142,000 hapless souls who received emergency room treatment for injuries inflicted by their clothing. What can they be suffering from? Compound pajama fracture? Sweatpants hematoma? I am powerless to speculate.

I have a friend who is an orthopedic surgeon, and he told me the other day that one of the incidental occupational hazards of his job is that you get a skewed sense of everyday risks since you are constantly repairing people who have come a cropper in unlikely and unpredictable ways. (Only that day he had treated a man who had had a moose come through the windshield of his car, to the consternation of both.)

Suddenly, thanks to Table No. 206, I began to see what he meant. Interestingly, what had brought me to the Statistical Abstract in the first place was the wish to look up crime figures for the state of New Hampshire, where I now live. I had heard that it is one of the safest places in America, and indeed the Abstract bore this out. There were just four murders in the state in the latest reporting year – compared with over 23,000 for the country as a whole – and very little serious crime.

All that this means, of course, is that statistically in New Hampshire I am far more likely to be hurt by my ceiling or underpants – to cite just two potentially lethal examples – than by a stranger, and, frankly, I don't find that comforting at all.

The Overloaded Ark, by Gerald Durrell, p112

Intro: "I" is the author, who is collecting animals in Africa for a zoo. Many animals have already been collected, and are being kept in cages. His lamp is a large and extremely bright one, perfect for illuminating night-time dances.

One evening I received a message that the villagers were putting on an extra special dance in my honour and would I, and my lamp, care to take part in the festivities? I said that I was honoured and that, even if I could not manage it, I would be represented by my lamp. It so happened that I finished work earlier than usual, and so I found I could attend. Before going down to the village I gave strict instructions to the watchman that, should anything happen in my absence, he was to call me immediately. Then, preceded by the lamp, and followed by my table and chair, I went to join the revels. The dance was good and prolonged. At length I decided that, if I wanted to get up early the next morning, I would have to return to bed. Leaving the light to the dancers I walked back to camp, proceeded by the hurricane lamp, and followed behind by my table and chair. On reaching the edge of the compound we discovered the watchman performing strange antics by the light of his lamp. He was dancing around, occasionally slapping himself and swearing roundly in Banyangi, and sweeping wildly at the ground with a small bundle of twigs.

"Watchman, na whatee?" I called.

"Na ants, sah, na plenty ants."

I rushed across the compound and found the watchman covered with driver ants and the ground a moving carpet. A steady stream of reinforcements was pouring out of the bushes. Already the ants were spreading over a wide area, and some of the advance parties were with a few feet of the animal-house wall. There was no time to be lost if I wanted to prevent the ants from getting in amongst the cages.

"Pious," I yelled, "Augustine, George, Daniel, come quickly!"

They came running across the compound. By this time I was also covered with ants, and there was nothing for it but to remove every stitch of clothing. Stark naked I organized my equally nude staff for battle.

"George, go get dry stick and leaf... quick... bring plenty. Pious, go get the tins of kerosene. Watchman and Daniel, go make the kitchen fire big and bring fire here... quick... quick!"

They ran to do what they were told, and I gathered a handful of leafy twigs and started an attack on the advance column nearest to the wall of the animal house, sweeping with all my might with one hand, trying to pluck the biting ants from my body with the other. George arrived with a great armful of dry branches and leaves, and these we piled on top of the main column which was streaming out of the forest. Grabbing a tin of kerosene I rushed round and round the animal house pouring it as I went, while Daniel ran behind piling sticks and setting them on fire. Having ringed the animals with fire I felt a bit better, but the fire had to be closely watched to see the sparks from it did not fall on the palm-leaf roof and set the whole house ablaze. It had been a near thing: another few minutes and the vanguard of the ants would have been through the wall and amongst the cages piled in tiers inside. Leaving Pious and George to keep the protecting ring of fire alight, I turned my attention to my tent. To say that it was full of ants means nothing: ants oozed from every part of it, and its green canvas walls were a black moving curtain of ants. Three boxes of skins pinned out to dry were full to overflowing with ants, and the skins were ruined. My bed was being explored very thoroughly by a party of several thousand soldiers, as also were my gun cases, my clothes box, the traps and nets, and the medicine chest. It took three hours to clear the tent alone; dawn was breaking before we had

the invasion under control. We gathered together, naked and dirty, and proceeded to pick the ants from each other's bodies.

A Colder War, by Charles Stross

Intro: The Earth has been destroyed by an alien horror, and only a very few human beings have managed to escape to another dimension. Roger was directly involved, but is not responsible for what happened.

The city of XK-Masada sprouts like a vast mushroom, a mile-wide dome emerging from the top of a cold plateau on a dry planet that orbits a dying star. The jagged black shapes of F-117's howl across the empty skies outside it at dusk and dawn, patrolling the threatening emptiness that stretches as far as the mind can imagine.

Shadows move in the streets of the city, hollowed out human shells in uniform. They rustle around the feet of the towering concrete blocks like the dry leaves of autumn, obsessively focused on the tasks that lend structure to their remaining days. Above them tower masts of steel, propping up the huge geodesic dome that arches across the sky: blocking out the hostile, alien constellations, protecting frail humanity from the dust storms that periodically scour the bones of the ancient world. The gravity here is a little lighter, the night sky whorled and marbled by the diaphanous sheets of gas blasted off the dying star that lights their days. During the long winter nights, a flurry of carbon dioxide snow dusts the surface of the dome: but the air is bone-dry, the city slaking its thirst on subterranean aquifers.

This planet was once alive – there is still a scummy sea of algae near the equator that feeds oxygen into the atmosphere, and there is a range of volcanoes near the north pole that speaks of plate tectonics in motion – but it is visibly dying. There is a lot of history here, but no future.

Sometimes, in the early hours when he cannot sleep, Roger walks outside the city, along the edge of the dry plateau. Machines labour on behind him, keeping the city tenuously intact: he pays them little attention. There is talk of mounting an expedition to Earth one of these years, to salvage whatever is left before the searing winds of time erase them forever. Roger doesn't like to think about that. He tries to avoid thinking about Earth as much as possible: except when he cannot sleep but walks along the cliff top, prodding at memories of Andrea and Jason and his parents and sister and relatives and friends, each of them as painful as the socket of a missing tooth. He has a mouthful of emptiness, bitter and aching, out here on the edge of the plateau.

Sometimes Roger thinks he's the last human being alive. He works in an office, feverishly trying to sort out what went wrong: and bodies move around him, talking, eating in the canteen, sometimes talking to him and waiting as if they expect a dialogue. There are bodies here, men and some women chatting, civilian and some military – but no people. One of the bodies, an army surgeon, told him he's suffering from a common stress disorder, survivor's guilt. This may be so, Roger admits, but it doesn't change anything. Soulless days follow sleepless nights into oblivion, dust trickling over the side of the cliff like sand into the un-dug graves of his family.

A narrow path runs along the side of the plateau, just downhill from the foundations of the city power plant where huge apertures belch air warmed by the radiators of the nuclear reactor. Roger follows the path, gravel and sandy rock crunching under his worn shoes. Foreign stars twinkle overhead, forming unrecognizable patterns that tell him he's far from home. The trail drops away from the top of the plateau, until the city is an unseen shadow looming above and behind his shoulder. To his right is a dizzying panorama, the huge rift valley with its ancient city of the dead stretched out before him. Beyond it rise alien mountains, their peaks as high and airless as the dead volcanoes of Mars.

About half a mile away from the dome, the trail circles an outcrop of rock and takes a downhill switchback turn. Roger stops at the bend and looks out across the desert at his feet. He sits down, leans against the rough cliff face and stretches his legs out across the path, so that his

feet dangle over nothingness. Far below him, the dead valley is furrowed with rectangular depressions; once, millions of years ago, they might have been fields, but nothing like that survives to this date. They're just dead, like everyone else on this world. Like Roger.

In his shirt pocket, a crumpled, precious pack of cigarettes. He pulls a white cylinder out with shaking fingers, sniffs at it, then flicks his lighter under it. Scarcity has forced him to cut back: he coughs at the first lungful of stale smoke, a harsh, racking croak. The irony of being saved from lung cancer by a world war is not lost on him.

He blows smoke out, a tenuous trail streaming across the cliff. "Why me?" he asks quietly.

Tsing-Boum!, by Nicolas Freeling

A detective novel.

Van der Valk was not best pleased: why did they have to go discovering crimes at dinnertime? That other people, too, had had their dinner interrupted — that someone, he had just heard, had got his life interrupted as well as his dinner... niggly old bastard, niggly old bastard, he repeated.

Aubergines too, done in the oven with a delicious cheesy chewy top layer. He still had his fork in his hand when he put the phone down; his wife had sniggered, so that he banged the fork down crossly and did not see anything funny in his own behaviour until he was outside the street door buttoning his raincoat. Raw grey day with a cold wind and constant heavy showers. Not really astonishing since it was late in the autumn, but since this was Holland, and since one was in a bad mood because of the aubergines, he said 'Typical August' in a loud cross voice: nobody heard because nobody was there.

He had to wait a good minute on his doorstep, getting himself into a more professional state of mind. Somebody was dead — who had not had dinner. The medical examiner would be putting his fork down too with deep regret (bet you he wasn't eating aubergines, though). And what about the car-patrol police? He was commissaire in charge of the criminal brigade, and there could not be too many buffers between him and a violent death.

He looked at his watch — two minutes to one and what was holding up the car? Where there is no vision the people perish, thought Van der Valk sententiously, taking his hat off and wedging it more firmly against gusts. A sodden cardboard box with gay liquorice allsorts printed all over it skittered along the pavement and came to rest at his feet. A Peugeot station wagon with its little lighthouse winking on the roof did the same thing and he got in just as it began to rain again.

'Whereabouts?' The telephone message had said it already but it had not stayed in his mind: getting a silly old bastard as well as bad-tempered.

'Van Lennepweg.' Of course. A dusty, wide, dreary boulevard on the outskirts of the town. New quarter, endless blocks of municipal flats, palaces of the people. A municipal murder.

No use asking the driver for any details; he was simply another man who had had to put down his knife and fork to answer the phone while his mouth was still full. The Peugeot turned into the Van Lennepweg; detestably dead: a ramshackle, cheap, unfinished look. Draughty bus-stops on pavements that were far too wide, an excuse to block them with carelessly parked cars, metal bicycle stands, tinny publicity hoardings. Hero lemonade, Caballero cigarettes, Wolf lawnmowers, and Pressing — One Hour filed before his eye as the auto slowed.

'There it is.' In front of Aspero stood an ambulance. A group of some fifty ghouls of all sexes and age groups were enjoying life, held in check by a uniformed policeman. Muttering and elbow-jogging broke out as Van der Valk arrived; he gave the front row a look of deep distaste. When younger he had often got irritated enough to hustle them off: quite useless — back they seeped like water the next moment. The people, getting a real sensual pleasure. Not — do them justice — from the sufferings of others, not even from their sudden skill at hindering the professionals. Just from being there, near enough to catch a word — good as appearing on television. The people — he had known them stand there watching a man bleed to death, apparently incapable of movement or emotion. They perished so easily and there was so little he could do about it.

It made Arlette, his wife, so angry and wretched that he recalled her shaking one of the

boys, about ten years old, shaking the child till his head was ready to come off, white with disgusted fury, hissing 'Let me catch you once again staring at people in trouble and I'll kill you, you hear me.' The child had been watching a fire...

He banged straight through and they shuffled back a step. 'Fourth floor,' said the policeman. There was no lift; it was one of the low blocks and the fourth floor was on top. On the landings were more people standing in open doorways, with the television ranting unheeded behind them. Chewing still, some of them. Van der Valk's leg hurt, as it always did on stairs. He ploughed on through a smell of frying margarine and tinned peas. Dutch beehive — no smell of dust; all the housewives kept their bit of passageway clean, and any backsliders would be dealt with by the Good Neighbours' Association.

On the fourth floor the doors were shut, dull little doors of plywood and pale grey paint. A policeman stood in the passage. 'In here.' The technical squad was already there, three or four of them with their bits of string and chalk and plastic bags, the cameraman flitting busily away. Ordinary municipal flat: tiny hallway with kitchen and lavatory, a fair-sized living-room on the Dutch pattern, half for sitting and half for eating. Passage to what would be either two or three bedrooms and a bathroom. There was plenty of light, for the big window ran the whole length, and in the kitchen a glass door led to a tiny balcony with a few clothes pinned to a washing line. The floor was woven fibre matting and everybody was looking at a scatter of bright metal shells. The sergeant straightened up as he came in.

'No footprints — wiped his feet very carefully before coming in. Cool you'd say. But he fired seven shots. Seven! What d'you think of that, chief?'

Van der Valk got the point. Even one gunshot is a rarity in Holland. Seven is exaggerating.

'Who's dead?'

'Housewife.'

'Where's the husband?'

'Don't know, sir; haven't had time. She's there behind the armchair.'

The young woman lay raggedly, blood coming out of her mouth. Pretty young woman but one couldn't tell; dead faces told one so little.

There was a strong smell of burning.

'What caught fire?'

'The potatoes boiled dry,' said the sergeant, almost apologetically.

Van der Valk touched the huddled face.

'Happened about half an hour ago — why all the delay? Did nobody hear? Seven shots!'

'Television going — and it's a noisy building at lunchtime. People coming home, doors opening and shutting. There's a child — neighbours are looking after it. The neighbour that gave the alarm.'

'Have those shells sent to Ballistics in Amsterdam. Seven shots — must be some kind of automatic weapon. Looks like sheer hysteria — and the fellow just walked out calmly, huh? Nobody saw anything either?'

'Not as far as we know now, sir,' said the policeman stolidly. He'd had enough to do keeping the mob quiet!

The medical examiner came in, looked briefly, and said, 'Good God!' He straightened the body out.

‘Heaven help us. Literally shot to pieces. Died within seconds. You’d think she’d been machine-gunned.’

‘Perhaps she was.’

‘Professionally killed is all I can say.’

‘Some professional,’ muttered the sergeant.

‘A professional...’ said Van der Valk lumpishly. He pulled himself together.

‘Camera finished?’

‘Blanket job, chief. Top to toe — but it won’t take long in a place like this.’

‘I want the keys, and all identity stuff — look in her bag. I’m going to see this neighbour.’ He looked across the room at his own sergeant. ‘Half an hour. Who has seen a stranger in the building?’

‘Have you seen a man carrying a machine-gun?’ muttered the technical sergeant.

‘Have you seen the fingerprints on the lavatory flush?’ returned the other, stung.

‘Who gave the alarm?’ asked Van der Valk.

‘Concierge.’

Michael Crichton, "Travels"

One night I was getting dressed for dinner when the front doorman knocked on my door.

"Dr. Crichton?"

"Yes?"

"It's Miss Jenkins."

"Miss Jenkins?" An unfamiliar name.

"In the building. You know Miss Jenkins?"

"I don't think I do."

"Well, she lives in the building; I thought you might have seen her."

"What about her?"

"She fell off the commode."

I couldn't see why that was any business of mine, and I said so.

"I think you should see her."

"Why?"

"She fell off the commode."

"Well, did she hurt herself?"

"It is only one floor up, on the eighth floor."

"But why should I see her?"

"Because she fell off the commode."

This conversation could go on forever. In the end, he led me upstairs and with a grave dignity unlocked the door to Miss Jenkins's room.

Her apartment also contained green crushed-velvet furniture in a Mexican style. I recognized Miss Jenkins as a bespectacled woman of about forty with short blond hair, the younger of a pair of lesbians who had lived together in the building at least as long as I had.

Miss Jenkins was now fully dressed, lying on her back on the living-room couch, one arm dangling limply on the floor. Her skin was pale blue. She did not seem to be breathing. Her lover, the other woman, was not there.

"Where is the other woman?" I said.

"Walking the dog."

"Walking the dog? Does she know about Miss Jenkins?"

"Yes. She was the one who told me."

"What did she tell you?"

"That Miss Jenkins fell off the commode."

By now I had quickly checked Miss Jenkins, noting a thready, pulse, shallow, intermittent respiration, dilated eyes, an open can of beer, and a half-empty bottle of sleeping pills.

The doorman said, "Is she dead?"

"No," I said.

"No?" He seemed surprised.

"No," I said. "She's taken an overdose."

"I was told," he said, "that she fell off the commode."

"Well, the problem is a drug overdose."

"You can help her?"

"No," I said.

"Aren't you a doctor?"

"Yes, but I can't do anything." And indeed I could not. I was not licensed to practice medicine and I faced serious lawsuits if I did anything at all in this situation.

"Call the police," I said.

"I did," he said. "Although at the time I was not sure if she was dead."

"She's not dead," I said. "What did the police say?"

"They said to call the fire department."

"Then call the fire department," I said.

"Why should I call the fire department?" he said. In the end, I called the fire department and they said they would send an emergency vehicle.

Meanwhile, her roommate returned with a yapping Lhasa apso on a rhinestone leash. "What are you doing in my apartment?" she said suspiciously.

"This man is a doctor," the doorman said.

"Why don't you help her?"

"She's taken a drug overdose," I said.

"No, she fell off the commode," the roommate said. She was a tall, slender woman of fifty, graying hair, a stern manner. She looked like a schoolteacher.

"Do you know what drugs she took?" I said.

"Are you really a doctor?" the woman said. "You look too young to be a doctor."

By now the Lhasa was jumping on the comatose woman, licking her face and barking at me. The dog was leaving muddy footprints on Miss Jenkins's blouse. The scene was becoming

chaotic.

The roommate turned to me, holding the beer can. "Did you drink this beer?"

"No," I said.

"Are you sure?" She was very suspicious.

"I just got here."

She turned to the doorman. "Did you drink this beer?"

"No," the doorman said. "I came with him."

"This beer can wasn't here before," she said.

"Maybe Miss Jenkins drank it."

I checked Miss Jenkins's pupils again and the Lhasa apso bit my hand, drawing blood. The roommate saw the blood and began to scream. "What have you done to Buffy?"

She grabbed the barking dog into her arms, and then she began to kick me, shrieking, "You bastard! You bastard! Hurting a poor, innocent dog!"

I was trying to avoid her kicks, and I looked at the doorman. "Can't you do something about this?"

"Shit, man," he said.

There was a loud knock on the door, but, nobody could get to the door, because the roommate was kicking and fighting. Now she was shouting, "You robbed me, you robbed me!"

Then we heard a loudspeaker voice say, "All right! You people inside, stand clear of the door, we're coming through!"

"Shit," the doorman said. "Cops!"

"So?"

"I'm carrying!"

"Aha!" the roommate shouted. "I knew it!" She flung open the door, and there stood a fireman in a yellow slicker and pointed hat, standing with his ax upraised. He was ready to hack down the door, and he looked disappointed to have it opened instead.

"What the hell's going on in here?" he said.

"She fell off the commode," the roommate said.

"Did you put it out already?" the fireman said.

"I was walking the dog, I don't know what happened."

"There isn't any smoke," the fireman said suspiciously. "What are you people up to?"

"This woman's had a drug overdose," I said, pointing to Miss Jenkins on the couch.

"Hell, then we need the paramedics," the fireman said, looking at the woman. He called on

a walkie-talkie. "There's no damn fire here," he said. "Who reported a fire?"

"Nobody reported a fire," I said.

"Somebody sure as hell did," the fireman said.

"This man is not a doctor," the roommate said.

"Who are you?" the fireman said.

"I'm a doctor," I said.

"Then I'd like to know what he is doing in my apartment," the roommate said.

"You got some identification?"

"I called him," the doorman said. "Because he's a doctor."

"He is not a doctor."

"All I want to know is, who reported a fire? Because that's against the law."

"Coming through," the paramedics said, arriving at the door with a stretcher.

"Never mind," the fireman said. "We already got a doctor here."

"No, come in," I said to the paramedics.

"You don't want to treat her?" the paramedics asked.

"I'm not licensed," I said.

"He's no doctor. He cut Buffy."

"You're not what?"

"I'm not licensed."

"But you're a doctor, is that right?"

"Yes."

"I've never seen him before in my life."

"I live in the building."

"And he drank my beer."

"You drank her beer?"

"No, I never drank any beer."

"I think he took something, too."

"You mean this beer here?"

Meanwhile, the paramedics were working on Miss Jenkins, getting ready to take her to the hospital. They asked what drugs she had taken, but the roommate would only say she had fallen off the commode. The fireman was giving me a hard time about being a doctor until Buffy

leaned over and bit him viciously on the hand. "Son of a bitch!" the fireman said, reaching for his ax.

"Don't you dare!" screamed the roommate, clutching her dog.

But all the fireman did was take his ax and head for the door. "Jesus, I hate Hollywood," he said, and he slammed the door behind him.

I was out the door right after him. "Where are you going?" the fireman asked me.

"I have a date," I said. "I'm late."

"Yeah, right," he said. "Only think of yourself. You guys. Shit."

It turned out the manager had listed my name on the lobby board with an "M.D." after it, because he thought it gave the building class. Whenever there was a suicide attempt, the doormen would look at the building directory and call the doctor. I was the only doctor. I got all the calls. It was a large building. There was a suicide attempt nearly every week.

The second time it happened, I told the doorman right away, "I don't have a license, I don't practice, there's nothing I can do."

"Would you just check him? I'm pretty sure he's dead."

"How do you know?"

"He jumped from the twelfth floor. Would you just check him, make sure he's dead?"

"Okay. Where is he?"

"Out front."

I went with him to the lobby. There was a woman crying. I recognized her as a girl from Atlanta who had come to Los Angeles to sell cosmetics but who hoped to get discovered for the movies while she was here. She was always heavily made up. Now she was sobbing, "Oh, Billy, Billy ..."

I hadn't been aware this girl had a boyfriend. I looked at the doorman.

He nodded sadly. "Billy jumped from her balcony."

"Oh."

We went out to the street.

"Did you call the police?" I said.

"Do I have to?"

"Of course," I said. "If he's dead."

Out on the street, I didn't see a body immediately. I was tense now, steeling myself against what I might see, wondering how bad it would be, how gruesome. We walked around the side of the apartment building. Then the doorman pointed to some low bushes that were planted near the building. "Billy's in there."

"In there?"

For an awful moment I thought Billy might be a child. I walked forward to the bushes and saw the body of a yellow cat.

"Billy's a cat?" I said.

"Yeah."

"You called me out here for a cat?"

"Sure. What'd you think?"

"I thought it was a person."

"No, hell. Person jumps, we always call the police."