



**STEPHEN
KING**

WRITING AS
RICHARD BACHMAN

BLAZE

H
HODDER

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First published in Great Britain in 2007 by Hodder and Stoughton
A division of Hodder Headline

This paperback edition published in 2008

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A Hodder paperback

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A CIP catalogue record for this title is
available from the British Library

ISBN 978 0 340 95224 5

Typeset in Bembo by Palimpsest Book Production Limited,
Grangemouth, Stirlingshire

Printed and bound in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

Hodder Headline's policy is to use papers that are natural,
renewable and recyclable products and made from wood grown
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Hodder & Stoughton
A division of Hodder Headline
338 Euston Road
London NW1 3BH

*For Tommy and Lori Spruce
And thinking of James T. Farrell*

‘These are the slums of the heart.’

John D. MacDonald

FULL DISCLOSURE

Dear Constant Reader,

This is a trunk novel, okay? I want you to know that while you've still got your sales slip and before you drip something like gravy or ice cream on it, and thus make it difficult or impossible to return.¹ It's a revised and updated trunk novel, but that doesn't change the basic fact. The Bachman name is on it because it's the last novel from 1966–1973, which was that gentleman's period of greatest productivity.

During those years I was actually two men. It was Stephen King who wrote (and sold) horror stories to raunchy skin-mags like *Cavalier* and *Adam*,² but it was Bachman who wrote a series of novels that didn't sell to anybody. These included *Rage*,³ *The Long Walk*, *Roadwork*,

1. In saying this, I assume you're like me and rarely sit down to a meal – or even a lowly snack – without your current book near at hand.

2. With this exception: Bachman, writing under the pseudonym of John Swithen, sold a single hard-crime story, 'The Fifth Quarter'.

3. Now out of print, and a good thing.

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and *The Running Man*.⁴ All four were published as paperback originals.

Blaze was the last of those early novels . . . the fifth quarter, if you like. Or just another well-known writer's trunk novel, if you insist. It was written in late 1972 and early 1973. I thought it was great while I was writing it, and crap when I read it over. My recollection is that I never showed it to a single publisher – not even Doubleday, where I had made a friend named William G. Thompson. Bill was the guy who would later discover John Grisham, and it was Bill who contracted for the book following *Blaze*, a twisted but fairly entertaining tale of prom-night in central Maine.⁵

I forgot about *Blaze* for a few years. Then, after the other early Bachmans had been published, I took it out and looked it over. After reading the first twenty pages or so, I decided my first judgment had been correct, and returned it to purdah. I thought the writing was okay, but the story reminded me of something Oscar Wilde once said. He claimed it was impossible to read 'The Old Curiosity Shop' without weeping copious tears of laughter.⁶

4. The Bachman novel following these was *Thinner*, and it was no wonder I got outed, since that one was actually written by Stephen King – the bogus author photo on the back flap fooled no one.

5. I believe I am the only writer in the history of English storytelling whose career was based on sanitary napkins; that part of my literary legacy seems secure.

6. I have had the same reaction to *Everyman*, by Philip Roth, Thomas Hardy's *Jude the Obscure*, and *The Memory Keeper's Daughter*, by Kim Edwards – at some point while reading these books, I just start to

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So *Blaze* was forgotten, but never really lost. It was only stuffed in some corner of the Fogler Library at the University of Maine with the rest of their Stephen King/Richard Bachman stuff.

Blaze ended up spending the next thirty years in the dark.⁷ And then I published a slim paperback original called *The Colorado Kid* with an imprint called Hard Case Crime. This line of books, the brainchild of a very smart and very cool fellow named Charles Ardai, was dedicated to reviving old ‘noir’ and hardboiled paperback crime novels, and publishing new ones. *The Kid* was decidedly softboiled, but Charles decided to publish it anyway, with one of those great old paperback covers.⁸ The whole project was a blast . . . except for the slow royalty payments.⁹

About a year later, I thought maybe I’d like to go the Hard Case route again, possibly with something that had a harder edge. My thoughts turned to *Blaze* for the first time in years, but trailing along behind came that damned Oscar Wilde quote about ‘The Old Curiosity Shop’. The *Blaze* I remembered wasn’t hardboiled noir, but a three-handkerchief weepie. Still, I decided it wouldn’t hurt to look. If, that was, the book could even

laugh, wave my hands, and shout: ‘Bring on the cancer! Bring on the blindness! We haven’t had those yet!’

7. Not in an actual trunk, though; in a cardboard carton.

8. A dame with trouble in her eyes. And ecstasy, presumably, in her pants.

9. Also a throwback to the bad old paperback days, now that I think of it.

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be found. I remembered the carton, and I remembered the squarish type-face (my wife Tabitha's old college typewriter, an impossible-to-kill Olivetti portable), but I had no idea what had become of the manuscript that was supposedly inside the carton. For all I knew, it was gone, baby, gone.¹⁰

It wasn't. Marsha, one of my two valuable assistants, found it in the Fogler Library. She would not trust me with the original manuscript (I, uh, lose things), but she made a Xerox. I must have been using a next-door-to-dead typewriter ribbon when I composed *Blaze*, because the copy was barely legible, and the notes in the margins were little more than blurs. Still, I sat down with it and began to read, ready to suffer the pangs of embarrassment only one's younger, smart-assier self can provide.

But I thought it was pretty good – certainly better than *Roadwork*, which I had, at the time, considered mainstream American fiction. It just wasn't a noir novel. It was, rather, a stab at the sort of naturalism-with-crime that James M. Cain and Horace McCoy practiced in the thirties.¹¹ I thought the flashbacks were actually better than the front-story. They reminded me of James T. Farrell's *Young Lonigan* trilogy and the forgotten (but

10. In my career I have managed to lose not one but two pretty good novels-in-progress. *Under the Dome* was only fifty pages long at the time it disappeared, but *The Cannibals* was over 200 pages when it went MIA. No copies of either. That was before computers, and I never used carbons for first drafts – it felt *haughty*, somehow.

11. And, of course, it's an homage to *Of Mice and Men* – kinda hard to miss that.

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tasty) *Gas-House McGinty*. Sure, it was the three Ps in places,¹² but it had been written by a young man (I was twenty-five) who was convinced he was WRITING FOR THE AGES.

I thought *Blaze* could be re-written and published without too much embarrassment, but it was probably wrong for Hard Case Crime. It was, in a sense, not a crime novel at all. I thought it could be a minor tragedy of the underclass, if the re-writing was ruthless. To that end, I adopted the flat, dry tones which the best noir fiction seems to have, even using a type-font called American Typewriter to remind myself of what I was up to. I worked fast, never looking ahead or back, wanting also to capture the headlong drive of those books (I'm thinking more of Jim Thompson and Richard Stark here than I am of Cain, McCoy, or Farrell). I thought I would do my revisions at the end, with a pencil, rather than editing in the computer, as is now fashionable. If the book was going to be a throwback, I wanted to play into that rather than shying away from it. I also determined to strip all the sentiment I could from the writing itself, wanted the finished book to be as stark as an empty house without even a rug on the floor. My mother would have said, 'I wanted its bare face hanging out.' Only the reader will be able to judge if I succeeded.

If it matters to you (it shouldn't – hopefully you came for a good story, and hopefully you will get one), any royalties or subsidiary income generated by *Blaze*

12. Purple, pulsing, and panting.

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will go to The Haven Foundation, which was created to help freelance artists who are down on their luck.¹³

One other thing, I guess, while I've got you by the lapel. I tried to keep the *Blaze* time-frame as vague as possible, so it wouldn't seem too dated.¹⁴ It was impossible to take out all the dated material, however; keeping some of it was important to the plot.¹⁵ If you think of this story's time-frame as 'America, Not All That Long Ago', I think you'll be okay.

May I close by circling back to where I started? This is an old novel, but I believe I was wrong in my initial assessment that it was a bad novel. You may disagree . . . but 'The Old Curiosity Shop' it ain't. As always, Constant Reader, I wish you well, I thank you for reading this story, and I hope you enjoy it. I won't say I hope you mist up a little, but—

Yeah. Yeah, I *will* say that. Just as long as they're not tears of laughter.

Stephen King (for Richard Bachman)

Sarasota, Florida

January 30th, 2007

13. To learn more about The Haven Foundation, you can go to my website. That be www.stephenking.com.

14. I didn't like the idea of Clay Blaisdell growing up in post-World War II America; all that has come to seem impossibly antique, although it seemed (and probably was) okay in 1973, when I was pecking it out in the trailer where my wife and I lived with our two children.

15. If I had written it today, certainly cell phones and caller ID would have needed to be taken into consideration.

CHAPTER ONE

George was somewhere in the dark. Blaze couldn't see him, but the voice came in loud and clear, rough and a little hoarse. George always sounded as if he had a cold. He'd had an accident when he was a kid. He never said what, but there was a dilly of a scar on his Adam's apple.

'Not that one, you dummy, it's got bumper stickers all over it. Get a Chevy or a Ford. Dark blue or green. Two years old. No more, no less. Nobody remembers them. And no stickers.'

Blaze passed the little car with the bumper stickers and kept walking. The faint thump of the bass reached him even here, at the far end of the beer joint's parking lot. It was Saturday night and the place was crowded. The air was bitterly cold. He had hitched him a ride into town, but now he had been in the open air for forty minutes and his ears were numb. He had forgotten his hat. He always forgot something. He had started to take his hands out of his jacket pockets and put them over his ears, but George put the kibosh on that. George said his ears could freeze but not his hands. You didn't need your ears to hotwire a car. It was three above zero.

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‘There,’ George said. ‘On your right.’

Blaze looked and saw a Saab. With a sticker. It didn’t look like the right kind of car at all.

‘That’s your left,’ George said. ‘Your *right*, dummy. The hand you pick your nose with.’

‘I’m sorry, George.’

Yes, he was being a dummy again. He could pick his nose with either hand, but he knew his right, the hand you write with. He thought of that hand and looked to that side. There was a dark green Ford there.

Blaze walked over to the Ford, elaborately casual. He looked over his shoulder. The beer joint was a college bar called The Bag. That was a stupid name, a bag was what you called your balls. It was a walk-down. There was a band on Friday and Saturday nights. It would be crowded and warm inside, lots of little girls in short skirts dancing up a storm. It would be nice to go inside, just look around—

‘What are *you* supposed to be doing?’ George asked. ‘Walking on Commonwealth Avenue? You couldn’t fool my old blind granny. Just do it, huh?’

‘Okay, I was just—’

‘Yeah, I know what you was just. Keep your mind on your business.’

‘Okay.’

‘What are you, Blaze?’

He hung his head, snorkled back snot. ‘I’m a dummy.’

George always said there was no shame in this, but it was a fact and you had to recognize it. You couldn’t fool anybody into thinking you were smart. They looked

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at you and saw the truth: the lights were on but nobody was home. If you were a dummy, you had to just do your business and get out. And if you were caught, you owned up to everything except the guys who were with you, because they'd get everything else out of you in the end, anyway. George said dummies couldn't lie worth shit.

Blaze took his hands out of his pockets and flexed them twice. The knuckles popped in the cold still air.

'You ready, big man?' George asked.

'Yes.'

'Then I'm going to get a beer. Take care of it.'

Blaze felt panic start. It came up his throat. 'Hey, no, I ain't never done this before. I just watched you.'

'Well this time you're going to do more than watch.'

'But—'

He stopped. There was no sense going on, unless he wanted to shout. He could hear the hard crunch of packed snow as George headed toward the beer joint. Soon his foot-steps were lost in the heartbeat of the bass.

'Jesus,' Blaze said. 'Oh Jesus Christ.'

And his fingers were getting cold. At this temperature they'd only be good for five minutes. Maybe less. He went around to the driver's side door, thinking the door would be locked. If the door was locked, this car was no good because he didn't have the Slim Jim, George had the Slim Jim. Only the door was unlocked. He opened the door, reached in, found the hood release, and pulled it. Then he went around front, fiddled for the second catch, found that one, and lifted the hood.

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There was a small Penlight in his pocket. He took it out. He turned it on and trained the beam on the engine.

Find the ignition wire.

But there was so much spaghetti. Battery cables, hoses, spark-plug wires, the gas-line—

He stood there with sweat running down the sides of his face and freezing on his cheeks. This was no good. This wouldn't never be no good. And all at once he had an idea. It wasn't a very good idea, but he didn't have many and when he had one he had to chase it. He went back to the driver's side and opened the door again. The light came on, but he couldn't help that. If someone saw him fiddling around, they would just think he was having trouble getting started. Sure, cold night like this, that made sense, didn't it? Even George couldn't give him grief on that one. Not much, anyway.

He flipped down the visor over the steering wheel, hoping against hope that a spare key might flop down, sometimes folks kept one up there, but there was nothing except an old ice scraper. *That* flopped down. He tried the glove compartment next. It was full of papers. He raked them out onto the floor, kneeling on the seat to do it, his breath puffing. There were papers, and a box of Junior Mints, but no keys.

There, you goddam dummy, he heard George saying, *are you satisfied now? Ready to at least try hot-wiring it now?*

He supposed he was. He supposed he could at least tear some of the wires loose and touch them together like George did and see what happened. He closed the

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door and started toward the front of the Ford again with his head down. Then he stopped. A new idea had struck him. He went back, opened the door, bent down, flipped up the floormat, and there it was. The key didn't say FORD on it, it didn't say anything on it because it was a dupe, but it had the right square head and everything.

Blaze picked it up and kissed the cold metal.

Unlocked car, he thought. Then he thought: *Unlocked car and key under the floormat*. Then he thought: *I ain't the dumbest guy out tonight after all, George*.

He got in behind the wheel, slammed the door, slid the key in the ignition slot – it went in nice – then realized he couldn't see the parking lot because the hood was still up. He looked around quick, first one way and then the other, making sure that George hadn't decided to come back and help him out. George would never let him hear the end of it if he saw the hood still up like that. But George wasn't there. No one was there. The parking lot was tundra with cars.

Blaze got out and slammed the hood. Then he got back in and paused in the act of reaching for the door handle. What about George? Should he go in yonder beer-farm and get him? Blaze sat frowning, head down. The dome light cast yellow light on his big hands.

Guess what? he thought, raising his head again at last. *Screw him*.

'Screw you, George,' he said. George had left him to hitchhike in, just meeting him here, then left him again. Left him to do the dirtywork, and it was only by the dumbest of dumb luck that Blaze had found a key,

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so screw George. Let *him* thumb a ride back in the three-degree cold.

Blaze closed the door, dropped the gear-shift into Drive, and pulled out of the parking space. Once in an actual lane of travel, he stomped down heavily and the Ford leaped, rear end fishtailing on the hard-packed snow. He slammed on the brakes, stiff with panic. What was he doing? What was he thinking of? Go without George? He'd get picked up before he went five miles. Probably get picked up at the first stop-n-go light. He couldn't go without George.

But George is dead.

That was bullshit. George was just there. He went inside for a beer.

He's dead.

'Oh, George,' Blaze moaned. He was hunched over the wheel. 'Oh, George, don't be dead.'

He sat there awhile. The Ford's engine sounded okay. It wasn't knocking or anything, even though it was cold. The gas gauge said three-quarters. The exhaust rose in the rearview, white and frozen.

George didn't come out of the beer joint. He couldn't come out cause he never went in. George was dead. Had been three months. Blaze started to shake.

After a little bit, he caught hold of himself. He began to drive. No one stopped him at the first traffic light, or the second. No one stopped him all the way out of town. By the time he got to the Apex town line, he was doing fifty. Sometimes the car slid a little on patches of ice, but this didn't bother him. He just turned with the

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skid. He had been driving on icy roads since he was a teenager.

Outside of town he pushed the Ford to sixty and let it ride. The high beams poked the road with bright fingers and rebounded brilliantly from the snowbanks on either side. Boy, there was going to be one surprised college kid when he took his college girl back to that empty slot. She'd look at him and say, *You are a dummy, I ain't going with you again, not here or nowhere.*

'Aren't,' Blaze said. 'If she's a college girl, she'll say aren't.'

That made him smile. The smile changed his whole face. He turned on the radio. It was tuned to rock. Blaze turned the knob until he found country. By the time he reached the shack, he was singing along with the radio at the top of his voice and he had forgotten all about George.

CHAPTER TWO

But he remembered the next morning.

That was the curse of being a dummy. You were always being surprised by grief, because you could never remember the important things. The only stuff that stuck was dumb stuff. Like that poem Mrs Selig made them learn way back in the fifth grade: Under the spreading chestnut tree, the village smithy stands. What good was that? What good when you caught yourself peeling potatoes for two and got smacked all over again with knowing you didn't need to peel no two potatoes, because the other guy was never going to eat another spud?

Well, maybe it wasn't grief. Maybe that word wasn't the right word. Not if that meant crying and knocking your head against the wall. You didn't do that for the likes of George. But there was loneliness. And there was fear.

George would say: 'Jesus, would you change your fuckin skivvies? Those things are ready to stand up on their own. They're disgusting.'

George would say: 'You only tied one, dimbulb.'

George would say: 'Aw, fuck, turn around and *I'll* tuck it in. Like havin a kid.'

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When he got up the morning after he stole the Ford, George was sitting in the other room. Blaze couldn't see him but knew he was sitting in the broke-down easy-chair like always, with his head down so his chin was almost on his chest. The first thing he said was, 'You screwed up again, Kong. Congratcha-fuckin-lations.'

Blaze hissed when his feet hit the cold floor. Then he fumbled his shoes on. Naked except for them, he ran and looked out the window. No car. He sighed with relief. It came out in a little puff he could see.

'No, I didn't. I put it in the shed, just like you told me.'

'You didn't wipe the goddam tracks, though, did you? Why don't you put out a sign, Blaze? THIS WAY TO THE HOT CAR. You could charge admission. Why don't you just do that?'

'Aw, George—'

'"Aw, George, aw, George." Go out and sweep em up.'

'Okay.' He started for the door.

'Blaze?'

'What?'

'Put on your fucking pants first, why don't you?'

Blaze felt his face burn.

'Like a kid,' George said, sounding resigned. 'One who can shave.'

George knew how to stick it in, all right. Only finally he'd gone and stuck it in the wrong guy, too often and too far. That was how you ended up dead, with nothing smart to say. Now George was just dead,

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and Blaze was making his voice up in his mind, giving him the good lines. George had been dead since that crap game in the warehouse.

I'm crazy for even trying to go through with this, Blaze thought. *A dum-dum like me.*

But he pulled on his underwear shorts (checking them carefully for stains first), then a thermal undershirt, then a flannel top shirt and a pair of heavy corduroy pants. His Sears workboots were under the bed. His Army surplus parka was hanging on the doorknob. He hunted for his mittens and finally found them on the shelf over the dilapidated woodstove in the combination kitchen-living room. He got his checkered cap with the earflaps and put it on, careful to give the visor a little good-luck twist to the left. Then he went out and got the broom leaning against the door.

The morning was bright and bitter. The moisture in his nose crackled immediately. A gust of wind drove snow as fine as powdered sugar into his face, making him wince. It was all right for George to give orders. George was inside drinking coffee by the stove. Like last night, taking off for a beer, leaving Blaze to figure out the car. And there he would still be if he hadn't had the dumb luck to find the keys somewhere, either under the floormat or in the glove compartment, he forgot which. Sometimes he didn't think George was a very good friend.

He swept the tracks away with the broom, pausing several minutes to admire them before he started. How the treads stood up and cast shadows, mostly, little perfect

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things. It was funny how little things could be so perfect and no one ever saw them. He looked at this until he was tired of looking (no George to tell him to hurry up) and then worked his way down the short driveway to the road, brushing the tracks away. The plow had gone by in the night, pushing back the snow-dunes the wind made across these country roads where there were open fields to one side and t'other, and any other tracks were gone.

Blaze tromped back to the shack. He went inside. Now it felt warm inside. Getting out of bed it had felt cold, but now it felt warm. That was funny, too – how your sense of things could change. He took off his coat and boots and flannel shirt and sat down to the table in his undershirt and cords. He turned on the radio and was surprised when it didn't play the rock George listened to but warmed right up to country. Loretta Lynn was singing that your good girl is gonna go bad. George would laugh and say something like, 'That's right, honey – you can go bad all over my face.' And Blaze would laugh too, but down deep that song always made him sad. Lots of country songs did.

When the coffee was hot he jumped up and poured two cups. He loaded one with cream and hollered, 'George? Here's your coffee, hoss! Don't let it go cold!'

No answer.

He looked down at the white coffee. He didn't drink coffee-with, so what about it? Just what about it? Something came up in his throat then and he almost hucked George's goddam white coffee across the room, but then he didn't. He took it oversink and poured it

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down instead. That was controlling your temper. When you were a big guy, you had to do that or get in trouble.

Blaze hung around the shack until after lunch. Then he drove the stolen car out of the shed, stopping by the kitchen steps long enough to get out and throw snowballs at the license plates. That was pretty smart. It would make them hard to read.

‘What in the name of God are you doing?’ George asked from inside the shed.

‘Never mind,’ Blaze said. ‘You’re only in my head, anyway.’ He got in the Ford and drove out to the road.

‘This isn’t very bright,’ George said. Now he was in the back seat. ‘You’re driving around in a stolen car. No fresh paintjob, no fresh plates, no nothing. Where you going?’

Blaze didn’t say anything.

‘You ain’t going to Ocoma, are you?’

Blaze didn’t say anything.

‘Oh, fuck, you are,’ George said. ‘Fuck *me*. Isn’t the once you *have* to go enough?’

Blaze didn’t say anything. He was dummied up.

‘Listen to me, Blaze. Turn around. You get picked up, it’s out the window. Everything. The whole deal.’

Blaze knew that was right, but wouldn’t turn back. Why should George always get to order him around? Even dead, he wouldn’t stop giving orders. Sure, it was George’s plan, that one big score every small-timer dreams of. ‘Only we could really make it happen,’ he’d say, but

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usually when he was drunk or high and never like he really believed it.

They had spent most of their time running two-man short cons, and mostly George seemed satisfied with that no matter what he said when he was drunk or getting his smoke on. Maybe the Ocoma Heights score was just a game for George, or what he sometimes called mental masturbation when he saw guys in suits talking about politics on TV. Blaze knew George was smart. It was his guts he had never been sure of.

But now that he was dead, what choice? Blaze was no good by himself. The one time he'd tried running the menswear con after George's death, he'd had to book like a bastard to keep from being picked up. He got the lady's name out of the obituary column just the way George did, had started in on George's spiel, had shown the credit slips (there was a whole bag of them at the shack, and from the best stores). He told her about how sad he was to have to come by at such a sad time, but business was business and he was sure she would understand that. She said she did. She invited him to stand in the foyer while she got her pockabook. He never suspected that she had called the police. If she hadn't come back and pointed a gun at him, he probably would have still been standing there waiting when the police ho'd up. His time sense had never been good.

But she came back with a gun and pointed it at him. It was a silver lady's gun with little swoops on the sides and pearl handles. 'The police are on their way,' she said, 'but before they get here, I want you to explain

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yourself. I want you to tell me what kind of a lowlife preys on a woman whose husband isn't even cold in his grave yet.'

Blaze didn't care what she wanted him to tell her. He turned and ran out the door and across the porch and down the steps to the walk. He could run pretty good once he got going, but he was slow getting going, and panic made him slower that day. If she had pulled the trigger, she might have put a bullet in the back of his big head or shot off an ear or missed him entirely. With a little short-barrel shooter like that, you couldn't tell. But she never fired.

When he got back to the shack, he was half-moaning with fear and his stomach was tied in knots. He wasn't afraid of jail or the penitentiary, not even of the police – although he knew they would confuse him with their questions, they always did – but he was afraid of how easy she saw through him. Like it wasn't nothing to her. They had hardly ever seen through George, and when they did, he always knew it was happening and got them out.

And now this. He wasn't going to get away with it, knew it, kept on anyway. Maybe he wanted to go back inside. Maybe that wouldn't be so bad, now that George was wasted. Let someone else do the thinking and provide the meals.

Maybe he was trying to get caught right now, driving this hot car through the middle of Ocoma Heights. Right past the Gerard house.

In the icebox of New England winter, it looked like a frozen palace. Ocoma Heights was old money

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(that's what George said), and the houses were really estates. They were surrounded by big lawns in the summertime, but now the lawns were glazed snowfields. It had been a hard winter.

The Gerard house was the best one of all. George called it Early American Hot Shit, but Blaze thought it was beautiful. George said the Gerards had made their money in shipping, that World War I made them rich and World War II made them holy. Snow and sun struck cold fire from the many windows. George said there were over thirty rooms. He had done the preliminary work as a meter-reader from Central Valley Power. That had been in September. Blaze had driven the truck, which was borrowed rather than stolen, although he supposed the police would have called it stolen if they'd been caught. People were playing croquet on the side lawn. Some were girls, high school girls or maybe college girls, good-looking. Blaze watched them and started feeling horny. When George got back in and told him to wheel it, Blaze told him about the good-looking girls, who had gone around to the back by then.

'I saw em,' George said. 'Think they're better than anybody. Think their shit don't stink.'

'Pretty, though.'

'Who gives a rat's ass?' George asked moodily, and crossed his arms over his chest.

'Don't you ever get horny, George?'

'Over babies like that? You jest. Now shut up and drive.'

Now, remembering that, Blaze smiled. George was

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like the fox who couldn't reach the grapes and told everyone they were sour. Miss Jolison read them that story in the second grade.

It was a big family. There was the old Mr and Mrs Gerard – he was eighty and still able to put away a pint of Jack a day, that's what George said. There was the middle Mr and Mrs Gerard. And then there was the young Mr and Mrs Gerard. The young Mr Gerard was Joseph Gerard III, and he really was young, just twenty-five. His wife was a Narmenian. George said that made her a spic. Blaze had thought only Italians could be spics.

He turned around up the street and cruised past the house once more, wondering what it felt like to be married at twenty-two. He kept on going, heading home. Enough was enough.

The middle Gerards had other kids besides Joseph Gerard III, but they didn't matter. What mattered was the baby. Joseph Gerard IV. Big name for such a little baby. He was only two months old when Blaze and George did their meter-reading bit in September. That made him – um, there were one-two-three-four months between September and January – six months old. He was the original Joe's only great-grandson.

'If you're gonna pull a snatch, you got to snatch a baby,' George said. 'A baby can't ID you, so you can return it alive. It can't fuck you up by trying to escape or sending out notes or some shit. All a baby can do is lie there. It don't even know it's been snatched.'

They had been in the shack, sitting in front of the TV and drinking beer.

BLAZE

‘How much do you think they’d be good for?’ Blaze asked.

‘Enough so you’d never have to spend another winter day freezing your ass off selling fake magazine subscriptions or collecting for the Red Cross,’ George said. ‘How’s that sound?’

‘But how much would you ask?’

‘Two million,’ George said. ‘One for you and one for me. Why be greedy?’

‘Greedies get caught,’ Blaze said.

‘Greedies get caught,’ George agreed. ‘That’s what I taught you. But what’s the workman worthy of, Blaze-a-rino? What’d I teach you about that?’

‘His hire,’ Blaze said.

‘That’s right,’ George said, and hit his beer. ‘The workman’s worthy of his fucking hire.’

So here he was, driving back to the miserable shack where he and George had been living since drifting north from Boston, actually planning to go through with it. He thought he would be caught, but . . . two million dollars! You could go someplace and never be cold again. And if they caught you? The worst they could do would be put you in jail for life.

And if that happened, you’d still never be cold again.

When the stolen Ford was back in the shed, he remembered to brush the tracks away. That would make George happy.

He made himself a couple of hamburgers for his lunch.

RICHARD BACHMAN

‘You really going through with it?’ George asked from the other room.

‘You lyin down, George?’

‘No, standin on my head and jerkin off. I asked you a question.’

‘I’m gonna try. Will you help me?’

George sighed. ‘I guess I’ll have to. I’m stuck with you now. But Blaze?’

‘What, George?’

‘Only ask for a million. Greedies get caught.’

‘Okay, only a million. You want a hamburger?’

No answer. George was dead again.