

Ben Fountain III

The Fact of the Matter

Every case had its own language, its own peculiar sound and style of talk, which was why Tom Boyle, as he listened, transcribed the speaker's words exactly as they came. You deciphered clues, uncovered lies, coaxed out confessions with words: It would all unfold if you found the right words. Right now he was listening, writing what he heard in a fresh legal pad while across the marble table — *his*, Tom Boyle's, this cream-colored slice of rock which embodied all the status of his hard-won corner office — Hersey Schuble pitched the story of his life. "Tommy," he kept saying, "Tommy" this and "Tommy" that, a familiar that normally irritated Boyle, but today he didn't notice. Today he was so deep into this voice that the Tommies seemed as natural as his wife's "honey."

"No Tommy," Hersey was saying, "I don't exactly sound native, do I? I came out here the week I turned eighteen, me and my brother Seth, we bought this old Pontiac for a hundred bucks and aimed it west. We were crazy, you know? but Guttenberg, Hudson County . . ." and he broke off sighing, years of sadness in that sigh. "What can I say, an absolute shithole, which was how we defined our destination — any place but the Gut. We had this vague idea of Vegas but didn't make it. We kept drifting to the south, always south, maybe the gravity of the map pulling us down, and when we got to our last ten bucks we aimed for the nearest big city on the map. That was '57, what, thirty years ago? Thirty-three? I been here ever since."

"Is Seth involved in this?"

"Ah, Sethie died in '71." His voice was sad but firm, just the right tone for manly grief. Boyle tested the sound, let it buzz around his ear; this client, he was starting to think, would star on the stand. At first he'd been worried about the face — Hersey was bald, gap-toothed, bug-eyed, creamy whorls of acne scars rippling his cheeks — but twenty minutes into the meeting Boyle found his looks winning. The face had virtue, a kind of homely integrity that worked a charm: Instead of putting you off the ugly drew you in, made you want to study its engine.

"Brain cancer, horrible, I went around for years sure I had it too. But Seth — listen, we started out with *nothing*, now I look at my beautiful life and I say a prayer for Seth. Of course it's the patriotic duty of every American to get rich," and he winked as he pulled two butter-scotches from his jacket, setting one in front of Boyle, "but that wage thing, forget it, even young as we were we knew that was shit — we'd decided already we weren't gonna work for wages. So we traded the Pontiac for an old GMC pickup and went into business for ourselves, buying and selling, anything, you name it. We'd sit around and ask each other, 'What would you buy if we had it?' And when one of us said, 'Well, I'd buy X,' well then we'd go out and find X. We hustled everything, building supplies, pinball machines, furniture, antiques" — and now he laughed, a hard smoker's bray as he slapped his hand down on the marble — "some of the little towns we went to scrounging antiques, we may as well of been Martians to those hicks, two guys from Jersey — they didn't know what hit 'em." Boyle nodded, smiling, mentally down-dressing Hersey if it ever went to trial; Armani suits made sympathy a long stretch. "Cinderblocks too, that was our first experience in the concrete business. We'd buy from this ham-and-egger up in Allen and take 'em down to Oak Cliff, sell 'em to the blacks and Mexicans for their little houses and churches.

"Then in '60, I think, right after the elections, we heard about this company that was in bankruptcy. It was up off Marsh Lane, I mean it wasn't much, an old barracks with the plant, a pile of gravel, a couple of piece-a-shit mixers. We bought it outta bankruptcy for \$2000. We didn't know shit about the business, but we figured we could learn. We weren't dumb. We were crazy."

Boyle's notes kept pace, a personal shorthand he'd developed over years of conversations. Writing, he'd found, was the best way to listen; you had to pay attention taking notes, but even the strictest mind could wander with pure listening. His pad gradually filled with his scribble, all the facts and noise and patter of the business Hersey built — costs per ton, the fuel factor, scale economies, grades of gravel. Every once in a while his client's scalding Jersey accent woofed out, slipped on thirty years down South and smeared a few vowels. It was genuine, real, a good sound; Boyle liked it. The trial was years away, if it ever came to that, but already he was plotting how to pull his client's strings, how to make twelve strangers love him enough to give him a million dollars.

"I turned down a lotta offers for this company, Tommy." Hersey came up for air, sipped his coke, clapped his teeth.

"Why'd you take this one?"

"Christ, who knows?" He held out his arms, implored the ceiling. "But I do know, really. I was tired. You know the one thing about the contracting business? It scares the shit out of you, every single day. I don't care how many jobs you got in the loop, you're always hustling, there's always this fear in the back of your head that there ain't gonna be another job after this one. And the business was changing, you know, they can import it now about as cheap as I can make it. I was tired, Tommy. I wanted to relax. Plus these guys, they were gonna make me rich *and* keep me on, they still wanted me to run the show. I just wouldn't have the risk anymore."

"How long before they fired you?"

"Six months, not even that. It was your classic sack, Good morning, you're fired, and don't let the door hit you in the ass on your way out. I mean I understand, you buy the railroad you get to play with the trains, but what they did!" He gulped his drink, his eyes round as eggs. "The contract said for cause. If I was fired for cause I wouldn't get the severance, that's normal. I mean I knew it was broad but I trusted these guys, and not this nyah nyah idiot trust either, I survived thirty years in a very tough business. But I talked with these guys, I worked with these guys, I made my judgment. And now they're trying to fuck me outta my severance."

"How much is that?"

Hersey rolled a piece of ice around his tongue. "Stock options, cash, everything, say two hundred thousand. At least two hundred thousand."

"What did they say was the reason?"

"I didn't take advantage of certain contracts. You'll see, it's all in the letter, but what happened was they came to me and said, How about using these suppliers? So I said okay, I'll take a look. I see a few glitches, I ask a few questions, boom, I'm gone. You wanna know what I think," and now he dropped his voice, dramatically leaned at Boyle across the table, "these suppliers, they were all affiliates. They were all owned by the crowd that bought me out. Which I got no kick with, but just *tell* me, that's all. But the second I start asking questions I'm gone."

Boyle drew two lines across the page. "Okay," he said, "I want you to tell me everything you know about these people," but before Hersey could start Boyle's secretary came to the door. "I'm sorry," she said, "but George Dees is on the line. He says it's an emergency."

"Better take it," Boyle said, rising and turning to his client, excusing himself. He took the call at his desk, standing as he talked and watching Hersey move about his office. Hersey was shameless in his looking, frankly appraising: He eyed Boyle's diplomas, the plaques and gavels on

his shelves, his art and his view, the cut and finish of his life. Talking, spinning out a strategy which was second nature now, Boyle guessed in the midst of his call that this was Hersey's way: He opened his heart and also went after yours, assumed intimacy with such good-natured force that you'd feel like a crank to hold it back. All along Boyle had been gauging his own reaction, judging his gut response as a test of Hersey's person, but now he allowed himself an uncritical fondness — pure liking, affection, forget how the guy would play to a jury. That he had the sensation of being slightly taken in didn't worry him; he believed he could pull back anytime, understanding as he did how Hersey worked his charm. And if he sensed that underneath the laughs and broad affection there was viciousness in Hersey, a hard working tool of malice, that was all for the better. The best cases always came with clients who liked a fight.

When Boyle hung up Hersey was standing in the middle of the room, arms on his hips, grinning. "Thomas Benedictus Boyle," he said. He'd read it off the diplomas. "You Catholic by any chance?"

"Yes."

"A good Irish boy."

"I'm not so sure about good."

Hersey laughed. "Where you from?"

"Here."

"Whad your old man do?"

Boyle hesitated long enough to clear his throat; when he spoke the words came slowly, distinctly. "He was a painter. He had a house-painting business."

Hersey was still grinning, but his eyes were cool. Boyle sensed the intelligence behind those eyes would be hard for him to control. "A house painter. You put yourself through school, didn't you?"

This time Boyle let the irritation show. His "Yep" was short, intended to close the subject, but Hersey only broke out laughing. "And now this! A corner office in the biggest damn law firm in the city! Listen," he said, assuming the host role, directing Boyle to a chair and then sitting himself, pulling his chair close to Boyle's, "you're just what I'm looking for, I don't want any candy-ass Harvard fuck, I want somebody who's come up tough. I want a street fighter like you." He dropped his voice, scootched his chair even closer. "Because listen, I'm telling you, I think we're gonna take some heat on this."

"What do you mean?"

"Well these guys, Tommy, they're pretty hard."

"I gathered that."

"No, listen to me. They're *hard*. I think you might get some pressure."

"What kind of pressure?"

"Well, you know," Hersey wheedled, pulling back. He shrugged and squirmed, tugged his collar, looked askance at Boyle like some vaudeville fright routine. "Threats," he said finally.

Boyle smiled. The pad was in his lap; he put it back on the table and looked straight at Hersey, trying not to show he was enjoying this. "All right, what kind of threats?"

More squirming; the words escaped Hersey like a burp. "Bodily threats."

"Well there's a remedy for that too. It'll just be one more thing to throw at them."

Hersey laughed, a shrill piping from the top of his throat. "That could be Tommy, sure, absolutely. But these guys, they're pretty tough." When Boyle said nothing, just stared and waited, Hersey coughed and tried again. "It's just a feeling I had, ever since I got to know these guys — just a feeling, understand. But I think there's mob money behind this somewhere."

"Mob money."

"Yeah. Like I said, it's just a feeling."

"Anything solid?"

"No. Yes. I don't know — these guys were so damn touchy about their privacy. I could go a certain ways up the ladder, you know, who owned what, who's calling the shots, and then the answers would stop. I admit, I was greedy, I didn't let this bad feeling stop me — stack up enough money you can look past anything. But I'm telling you, Tommy, you start digging into this can of worms, you might piss some people off."

Boyle shrugged, suddenly bored with the subject. He picked up his pad and pencil once again. "I get pressure all the time, Hersey. I can handle it. Right now I just want you to tell me what you know."

Clients, Boyle had realized early in his practice, were usually slightly nuts by the time they got to him. They came in burning, obsessed, giddy with the rage of the wronged; the first job was getting them straight enough to tell the facts. His method was to hear their story once, in his office; then over the following months, sometimes years, through meetings and phone calls, under the guise of informal lunches and drinks, he had them tell the story over and over, until he was satisfied he'd found all the holes. Then he'd drag it out of them, all of the really ugly facts they hadn't told him. His cross-exam of Hersey would come later, Boyle

knew, but reading deeper into the file he found he couldn't put the mystery down to client paranoia. He was looking for control, the power that called the shots, but the power in the case was never quite within his grasp. He studied the contracts and resolutions; he sent off for the Articles from New York and Delaware; he had his secretary draw up a flow chart. He outlined the theory and waited for more facts, but with every new piece of information he received the power kept moving back, always moving to a point just beyond the edge of his chart.

After a week of fits and starts, of stealing looks at the file in between his hot cases, he felt comfortable enough with his ignorance to sketch out the pleadings. Late on a weekday evening he was still in his office, tired but pushing, drafting a motion he would file the next morning for another case. His secretary had left; he was answering the phone himself, and picked up on the first ring to hear his name stated flatly, a known fact, no rising inflection to warm the approach.

"Mr. Boyle."

"Speaking."

"I'm calling about Hersey Schuble." The line was clear, immediate, a local call. Without thinking Boyle catalogued the voice, traced the sound to an unctuous younger man, bland, nasal — this voice might have hatched in Ohio. Boyle noticed he didn't like it much.

"I'm listening."

"Good. I was calling to say that it might be necessary for you to drop his case."

"Who's calling please?"

The voice laughed, a little social noise, grease for words. The damn insulting thing about it, Boyle was thinking, was that they'd sic a younger man on him — much younger, he decided as he listened, and flip, and cocky, and vaguely effeminate. "I'm calling on behalf of certain people who are familiar with this case, Mr. Boyle, they don't have an interest *per se* — I know that would be unethical, for an actual party to call you up like this — but they're, how should I put it, interested in the matter. They don't want to see anyone hurt, on either side. They know all the parties, Mr. Boyle, all the facts, certain facts which I'm sure you don't even have access to, and they asked me to give you a call. It's really for your own good, Mr. Boyle, yours and your client's. You'd save yourself and Mr. Schuble a lot of trouble if you could persuade him just to drop it."

Boyle swung his feet up on his desk, sat back and hoped for an opening, a chance to dick the guy. "Well, as soon as you tell me your name and who you're working for, I'll be glad to hear your facts."

"Hmmm." The voice was stagy, extravagant, its veneer of civility barely hiding the sharp edges. "That would mean telling you certain things that are really none of your business."

"Then I'm afraid we aren't going to have much of a talk."

"That's too bad. Because my clients truly are sincere, really truly have your interests at heart. Let me just say this." He smacked his lips, a prim schoolteacher sound. "Your client is not clean, Mr. Boyle, not clean at all. He's the one who broke the law here. If you bring this lawsuit you will lose, and it will be very ugly and nasty, and that's all I can say."

Boyle was tired; he could see them talking in circles like this for hours. He waited a moment, then loosed a quick breath into the line as if he'd just been hit with a revelation. "Oh, I get it," he said brightly. "You want me to drop the case."

"That's right," came the answer, polite, cheerful.

"Tell Schuble he'd better find another lawyer."

"Um hmm."

"Send him back his file."

"You got it."

"So after you and I get off the phone I'm supposed to call him up and say 'Hey, some schmuck just called, didn't give his name, said you had the dirty hands in this case and I ought to drop it. So I'm dropping it.' You actually think," and he swallowed, channelling his anger, "you actually think I'm going to do that?"

There was a pause, a gathering moment, and when the voice came back it was bitter, withering, all shades of chumminess gone. "Just *get off*, okay? If you knew what you were dealing with you'd get off. So just *get off*."

Boyle hung up chafing, hardly soothed that he'd gotten a rise out of the guy. He sat for a moment staring out his window, looking past his reflection to the darkness outside. Should I be worried? he asked himself, trying to shake off the foulness. The call was a joke, more insulting than fearsome, barely registering on the scale of what he knew. At least once a year someone threatened to beat him, confrontations in hallways or meetings that boiled over, people juiced with more rage than they could handle. He was big enough, hard and dark enough in the face to discourage that kind of aggression, but he'd learned that the subtler forms of pressure could hurt: Financial, a hook in a case that tugged someone's wallet, or political, some power from above trying to finger the law. The most intimidated he'd ever been was in Louisiana, in a trial where a defendant with connections had the police follow Boyle wherever he

went. They never spoke, never touched him, never threatened, but after a week he found himself craving a fight, a push or an upraised club that would give him something solid to hit.

The call broke his momentum, his pleasure in the job; now he looked around his office and left for home. That Louisiana town stayed with him as he drove, and remembering the pressure he'd resisted then was a comfort. Compared to that tonight's phone call was nothing, a nuisance, so much wasted breath; and yet he knew the guy had gotten under his skin. At home he found himself locking the door, casually flipping the deadbolt as his hand left the knob, then the switches for the spotlights and alarm — his ten-thirty routine, usually the last thing he did before bed.

"I'm home!" he called, moving through the kitchen, past the table still cluttered with his family's dirty dishes. He called again as he walked through the den, and he stopped to lock the door there too, hitting the lights and alarm as he'd done in the kitchen. He moved down the hall slightly spooked, edgy at the silence and then laughing, half-starting as the sounds roiled from the bathroom — the fan, a burst of splashing, a yelp and a screech. He opened the door on Diane wrapping their son with a towel.

"There he is!" she cried, and Ricky broke from the towel, locked his arms around Boyle's knees. It was all noise and chaos — the fan, Ricky laughing, his infant daughter splashing and shrieking in the tub. The room was warm as a sauna.

"How you doing?"

"All right. God he's big."

"I can't lift him anymore, I literally cannot lift him. I hope you don't mind, we went ahead and ate."

"Fine."

"Everything's in the oven."

"Okay."

She laughed at Ricky swinging from Boyle's neck. "I think he wants to go with you."

"I think you're right."

Later, he knew, they would talk, once the children were in bed and they could hear each other's voice. As he carried Ricky to the bedroom he wondered if he would tell her, then stalled over his reasons — For a purpose, for her to be careful? Or just noise, their lazy TV talk, the most interesting thing that happened to him today? That he even considered telling her, Boyle knew, was further proof that the guy had nicked him. He threw his son laughing on the bed and changed clothes,

flipping the master switch on the alarm as he reached into the closet. When Ricky followed him out to the kitchen Boyle turned him around, sent him back for pajamas. Ricky returned a minute later with his globe, still naked.

"Aren't you cold?" Boyle asked. Ricky was hoisting himself into a chair, grunting and huffing. "Unh unh," he said, and when Boyle touched his son he knew it was true. The flesh was pink, warm, firm as packed snow, throwing off a faint sheen like he'd been dipped in phosphorous.

"You were at work," Ricky said.

"That's right."

"Can you do this for me?" He pushed the globe toward Boyle's plate.

"Do what?"

"Show me."

"What?"

"All the *places*."

"Oh. Okay." As Boyle ate Ricky spun the globe, slapping it into motion with the flat of his hand and then tracing it with a finger, skimming the continents spinning by; wherever the finger pointed when the globe came to rest was what Boyle had to name. It was a test, a running quiz, and when Boyle couldn't answer his son took it as a triumph. "That's the water," Ricky said, palming the blue, and then he puffed out his cheeks, tried to wheel the globe around by force of breath. When that failed he went back to pushing with his hand, pushing slowly now, quietly, seeming to ponder the world as it floated by.

Boyle watched him as he ate, measuring the joy he got from his children against the risk. It was a habit of mind he despised but couldn't break; his childhood had been uncertain, his father a casual worker but dedicated drinker, and if Boyle had managed to refuse that history he was reminded every day of how quickly life could turn. His trade was risk, risk fulfilled, the worst contingencies come to pass; people brought him the busted parts of their lives to fix. He'd built his success off the trouble of others, but perhaps too conscious of the risks, too distrustful of happiness, he'd insisted on the tightest security when they built this house: A gate at the driveway, spotlights and double locks, a state-of-the-art alarm system. He'd wondered then if his insistence was unhealthy, a sly neurosis taking hold, but tonight he took comfort in the walls he'd built around — comfort not so much for today's threat as for them all, the whole world of trouble lapping up against his door.

"Dad," Ricky said, breaking into Boyle's thought. Boyle turned to him, smiling, but Ricky didn't notice. He was rapt, absorbed, poring over the globe like a mad explorer, fierce with purpose. "Dad," he said again,

and now he turned demanding eyes on Boyle, "show me heaven on this map."

"Heaven?" Boyle was quick. He laid a finger on their city, their one tiny speck on the globe. "Right here," he said, "right here in this house. Right *here*," and he thumped Ricky's chest, firmly, savoring the tautness of the muscle. "In there, inside, heaven. You have to carry it around with you. So don't forget it."

Boyle was a light sleeper by nature. He usually rose several times a night, to pee, to get a drink, to make sure his children were covered. For the next week he stretched his tour as far as the den, ranging to the point where he could see all the doors, the formal rooms and kitchen, the band of yard lit by the spotlights. During the days he worked hard; at night he slept in spurts, and while the threat seemed to fade over time he would have been surprised not to get another call. He was in his office, a weekday morning with the sunlight plunging through his windows, charging the room like some time-haloed memory. He was reading at his desk, happy, working through a stack of cases for a point he knew he'd find when his secretary rang the intercom. "There's a man holding on line one. He says he's calling about Mr. Schuble."

"Who is it?"

"He wouldn't give his name. But he said you'd want to talk to him."

"All right." Boyle reached for the phone, his good mood spoiled. "Put him through." He waited a beat; the moment the line clicked open he spoke. "You're wasting my time."

"No, you're wasting mine." Those few words were enough for Boyle to hear the change. The voice had the same strut, the same splash and swagger, but it was different today — somehow calmer, a shade genuine. "I asked you nicely and you didn't do it."

"That's right, friend. And I'm still here."

"So you are." There was a pause. "I was really hoping I wouldn't have to do this."

"Sorry to be such an inconvenience."

A sigh came over the line, a swish of air like the sound of an ax coming down. "I know where your son sleeps."

Boyle was silent. He had no answer for that; he had no choice but to listen.

"Ricky, right? He's a pretty little thing, a pretty boy. He sleeps in the first room down the hall, in the bottom bunk. There's a night light in his room, and bookshelves, and planes, toy soldiers — boy stuff. And a globe on the floor; I almost forgot, a globe on the floor by his bed."

Boyle said nothing.

"Your little girl sleeps in the next room down, the white crib with the lace all around. There's a print on the wall, a Peter Rabbit thing right over her head, and a mobile at the end with little birds, little cardinals and bluebirds and jays. And she wears red pajamas that zip up the front — sweet old-fashioned flannel, soft."

"You touched her."

"That's right, Tom. But just a touch. Just so you'd know I could do it. Wanna hear more?"

"No," Boyle said, but the words kept coming, smooth and obscene and almost sad, the tender line that might accompany a certain kind of rape. "You hang your watch on the bedpost. You sleep on the left, in your boxers, no pajamas. You keep some books by the bed — the Lonesome Dove, Berlin Diary, the Litigation Explosion. Your wife . . ."

"Enough."

" . . . Diane, pretty lady — how'd you rate a crack like that? She dresses up for bed, camisoles and little panties — she likes to show her pretty body. And you're a snuggler, Tom, I watched you snuggle that stuff. A big, tough guy like you, it made my day seeing that."

Boyle said nothing.

"You get the picture, Tom? I can get into your house anytime I want. I can get to your kids, your wife, I can do anything I want, and there's nothing you can do about it." He sighed, gently, like a teacher coaching an especially dense child. "So now, Tom, will you do what I asked?"

Boyle couldn't believe how easy it was. What should have been a struggle was a slide, as easy as breathing, so clearly predetermined that he barely had to think. Morals, courage, commitment, all the muscular lifelong standards that he'd taught himself to honor disappeared; he was in so deep, so far over his head that only instinct applied. And in the instant of speaking, saying the word he believed would save his family, he was struck with the knowledge of how small his function was. All the signs seemed to demonstrate that what he did was vital — big clients, big cases, big fees, he made half a million dollars in a middling year — but there was nothing, he realized now, that really mattered, nothing that could make him even think to risk his children. "Yes," he said, half-whispering, fervent, and it took just a moment, a split-second of doubt as to whether he'd been heard, for him to repeat it. "Yes," he said again, urgent, hissing, "*yes, I'll drop it.*"

"Good. Smart," said the voice, grandly blasé, breaking off the line as it spoke.

Boyle had enough presence to hang up the phone, even enough to pretend to work when his secretary came in. She brought in the mail,

his messages, a fistful of sharpened pencils, padding in and out as Boyle stared at the same page for an hour, trying to understand what he'd been made to do. The whole business left him dizzy, had the feel of a wicked dream, but what shook him the worst was the ease with which they beat him. They knew exactly where to aim, what to menace, and had the skill to break him without actually striking. That skill, the clean surgical touch, gave him the sense that he'd run up against something huge, a whole culture of intimidation. The realization scared him: He'd been toying with something serious, and having at last gotten a sense of its size and power he simply wanted anonymity, to be forgotten and left alone.

But there was a price even for that; he had to live the degradation one more time. Once Schuble got the drift he was furious, his voice wrangling Boyle's ear like a chain. "I told you you were gonna get some pressure, I told you that Tommy, remember? And you told me you could handle it."

Boyle simply took it, almost grateful for the punishment. "Hersey," he began, "Hersey, listen. They threatened my family . . ."

"Shit, that's never happened to you? Some of the goons I had to deal with, the fucking unions, the fucking *teamsters* for Chrissake, you wouldn't believe the shit I had to deal with. That's the first frigging thing they do," he said, his voice turning bitter, "that's the *easiest*. *Threaten*, Jesus, any fuck can *threaten*."

"Hersey, listen a minute. They got into my house." He was conscious of his shame, double shame for having to say it, even as the quality of Hersey's silence softened. "I'm only telling you this so you'll know what you're up against."

"Ah, okay." A complex snuffling came over the line. "Jesus, wow. You okay?"

"We're fine, everybody's fine. Actually I'm the only one who knows."

"You didn't call the cops?"

"No."

"That's good, that's good," he snapped, relief jumping through the words. "They'd only get you in deeper if they knew. Christ, I was afraid some shit like this would happen."

"What makes you say that?"

"I don't know, Christ, who knows? Didn't I tell you they were hard? I warned you, that's all, it was a feeling I had. I'm just glad nobody got hurt."

There was a pause; Boyle's urge to press him was more habit than desire. Mainly he just wanted to be done with it. "So what are you going to do?"

"I'll be damned if I know." Something was clicking around his mouth — ice? candy? Hersey was always consuming something. "But thanks to you I do know one thing, Tommy — I know these guys are not to be fucked with."

They hung up friends, Hersey resigned and understanding, but Boyle never remembered that phone call without a fit of shame. He never mentioned any part of the case to his wife, to any friend or partner, and even with time could barely stand the dialogue with himself. After seventeen years of practice, of priding himself on listening and reading the signs, he'd let himself get burned by a client, lost the thread of the words in a masterful soft-sell. And he failed also with the voice, failed to hear the strain it showed in their first conversation, its stress at having to talk in a code Boyle clearly didn't know. Now he wondered where to start; his faith in himself was damaged, and in his vaguer, more extravagant moments, playing the crisis of submission over and over, he saw himself refusing, cussing the voice and hanging up, digging in for the blow that was bound to follow. But even dreaming he knew it was fantasy, impossible; and at night, locking up, flipping the switches for the lights and alarm, he measured his shame against the fact of the thing he'd encountered, and never once regretted what he'd done.