

EXPIRATION  
DATE

TIM  
POWERS



# PRAISE FOR THE WRITING OF TIM POWERS

“Philip K. Dick felt that one day Tim Powers would be one of our greatest fantasy writers. Phil was right.” —Roger Zelazny

“Powers is a fine writer with an elegant and imaginative style, and the things that happen in his story are just weird enough to make us wonder if everyday life might not be as normal as it seems.” —*The Philadelphia Inquirer*

“A Tim Powers science fiction novel never fails to titillate and elucidate with the dark and the bizarre, and all with such original, eccentric color and style.” —*Los Angeles Times*

## *Earthquake Weather*

“Influenced by SF master Philip K. Dick, Powers taps into Dick’s surrealistic style to great success.” —*Library Journal*

## *Expiration Date*

“*Expiration Date* is fascinating. . . . It’ll have you turning pages as much for his sheer inventiveness as for the plot . . . for the remarkable frisson that sparks from the page, the playfulness of the language.” —*The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction*

“Only a writer of Powers’ skill and imagination could make this goulash of outlandish material work. He blends every outré ingredient into a satisfying and cohesive whole, so that the reader has no choice at the end but to think: ‘Of course. Everything fits. I can see that now.’ *Expiration Date* ranks with his best work.” —*San Francisco Chronicle*

# Expiration Date

**Tim Powers**



*For Brendan and Regina Powers,  
wonderful friends and family*

AND WITH THANKS TO Chris Arena, Skot Armstrong, Gloria Batsford, Brian Bilby, Jim Blaylock, Phil Dick, Aaron Dietrich, Mike Donohue, Anthony Foster, Kendall Garmon, Tom Gilchrist, Jaq Greenspon, Ken Lopez, Joe Machuga, Ed McKie, Denny Meyer, Chris Miller, Dean Moody, Dave Moran, David Perry, Serena Powers, Sam Riemer, Megan Robb, Randal Robb, Roger Rocha, Lew Shiner, Fred Speicher, Kate Sanborne, Roy Squires, Kirsten Tierney, Ed and Pat Thomas, and Dan Volante—

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# BOOK ONE

## OPEN UP THAT GOLDEN GATE

TRENTON, NJ—Thomas A. Edison, the inventor of the light bulb, whose honors have included having a New Jersey town and college named after him, received a college degree Sunday, 61 years after his death.

Thomas Edison State College conferred on its namesake a bachelor of science degree for lifetime achievement.

—*The Associated Press*,  
Monday, October 26, 1992

# CHAPTER 1

*“But I don’t want to go among mad people,” Alice remarked.*

*“Oh, you can’t help that,” said the Cat: “we’re all mad here. I’m mad. You’re mad.”*

*“How do you know I’m mad?” said Alice.*

*“You must be,” said the Cat, “or you wouldn’t have come here.”*

—Lewis Carroll,  
*Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*

WHEN HE WAS LITTLE, say four or five, the living room had been as dim as a church all the time, with curtains pulled across the broad windows, and everywhere there had been the kind of big dark wooden furniture that’s got stylized leaves and grapes and claws carved into it. Now the curtains had been taken down, and through the windows Kootie could see the lawn—more gold than green in the early-evening light, and streaked with the lengthening shadows of the sycamores—and the living room was painted white now and had hardly any furniture in it besides white wood chairs and a glass-topped coffee table.

The mantel over the fireplace was white now too, but the old black bust of Dante still stood on it, the only relic of his parents’ previous taste in furnishings. Dante Allah Hairy, he used to think its name was.

Kootie leaned out of his chair and switched on the pole lamp. Off to his left, his blue nylon knapsack was slumped against the front door, and ahead of him and above him Dante’s eyes were gleaming like black olives. Kootie hiked himself out of the chair and crossed to the fireplace.

He knew that he wasn’t allowed to touch the Dante. He had always known that, and the rule had never been a difficult one to obey. He was eleven now, and no longer imagined that the black-painted head and shoulders were just the visible top of a whole little body concealed inside the brick fireplace-front—and he realized these days that the rustlings that woke him at night were nothing more than the breeze in the boughs outside his bedroom window, and not the Dante whispering to itself all alone in the dark living room—but it was still a nasty-looking thing, with its scowling hollow-cheeked face and the way its black finish was shiny on the high spots, as if generations of people had spent a lot of time rubbing it.

Kootie reached up and touched its nose.

Nothing happened. The nose was cool and slick. Kootie put one hand under the thing's chin and the other hand behind its head and then carefully lifted it down and set it on the white stone slab of the hearth.

He sat down cross-legged beside it and thought of Sidney Greenstreet in *The Maltese Falcon*, sweating furiously, hacking with a penknife at the black-painted statue of the falcon; Kootie had no idea what might be inside the Dante, but he thought the best way to get at it would be to simply shatter the thing. He had glimpsed the unpainted white base of the bust just now, and had seen that it was only plaster.

But breaking it would be the irrevocable step.

He had packed shirts, socks, underwear, a sweatsuit, a jacket, and a baseball cap in his knapsack, and he had nearly three hundred dollars in twenties in his pocket, along with his Swiss army knife, but he wouldn't be *committed* to running away until he broke the bust of Dante.

Broke it and took away whatever might be inside it. He hoped he'd find gold—Krugerrands, say, or those little flat blocks like dominoes.

It occurred to him, now, that even if the bust was nothing but solid plaster all through, as useless as Greenstreet's black bird had turned out to be, he would still have to break it. The Dante was the ... what, flag, emblem, totem pole of what his parents had all along been trying to make Kootie into.

With a trembling finger, he pushed the bust over backward. It clunked on the stone, staring at the ceiling now, but it didn't break.

He exhaled, both relieved and disappointed.

Dirty mummy-stuff, he thought. Meditation, and the big tunnel with all the souls drifting toward the famous white light. His parents had lots of pictures of that. Pyramids and the Book of Thoth and reincarnation and messages from these "old soul" guys called Mahatmas.

The Mahatmas were dead, but they would supposedly still come around to tell you how to be a perfect dead guy like they were. But they were coy—Kootie had never seen one at all, even after hours of sitting and trying to make his mind a blank, and even his parents only claimed to have *glimpsed* the old boys, who always apparently snuck out through the kitchen door if you tried to get a good look at them. Mostly you could tell that they'd been around only by the things they'd rearrange—books on the shelves, cups in the kitchen. If you had left a handful of change on the dresser, you'd find they'd sorted the coins and stacked them. Sometimes with the dates

in order.

At about the age when his friends were figuring out that Santa Claus was a fake, Kootie had stopped believing in the Mahatmas and all the rest of it; later he'd had a shock when he learned in school that there really had been a guy named Mahatma Gandhi, but a friend of his who saw the movie *Gandhi* told him that Gandhi was just a regular person, a politician in India who was skinny and bald and wore diapers all the time.

*Kootie* wasn't allowed to *see* movies ... or watch TV, or even eat meat, though he often sneaked off to McDonald's for a Big Mac, and then had to chew gum afterward to get rid of the smell.

Kootie wanted to be an astronomer when he grew up, but his parents weren't going to let him go to college. He wasn't sure if he'd even be allowed to go to all four years of high school. His parents told him he was a *chela*, just as they were, and that his duty in life was to ... well, it was hard to say, really; to get squared away with these dead guys. Be their "new Krishna-murti"—carry their message to the world. Be prepared for when you died and found yourself in that big tunnel.

And in the meantime, no TV or movies or meat, and when he grew up he wasn't supposed to get married or ever have sex at all—not because of AIDS, but because the Mahatmas were down on it. Well, he thought, they *would* be, wouldn't they, being dead and probably wearing diapers and busy all the time rearranging people's coffee cups. Shoot.

But the worst thing his parents had ever done to him they did on the day he was born—they *named* him after one of these Mahatmas, a dead guy who had to go and have the name Koot Hoomie. Growing up named Koot Hoomie Parganas, with the inevitable nickname Kootie, had been ... well, he had seen a lot of fat kids or stuttering kids get teased mercilessly in school, but he always wished he could trade places with them if in exchange he could have a name like *Steve* or *Jim* or *Bill*.

He lifted the Dante in both hands to a height of about four inches, and let it fall. *Clunk!* But it still didn't break.

He believed his parents worshipped the thing. Sometimes after he had gone off to bed and was supposedly asleep, he had sneaked back and peeked into the living room and seen them bowing in front of it and mumbling, and at certain times of the year—Christmas, for example, and Halloween, which was only about a week away—his mother would knit little hats and collars for Dante. She always had to make them new, too, couldn't use last year's, though she saved all of them.

And his parents always insisted to Kootie—nervously, he thought—that the previous owner of the house had coincidentally been named Don Tay (or sometimes *Om Tay*) and that’s why the drunks or crazy people who called on the phone sometimes at night seemed to be asking to talk to the statue.

*Terminator 2*. “Peewee’s Playhouse.” Mario Brothers and Tetris on the Nintendo. Big Macs and the occasional furtive Marlboro. College, eventually, and maybe even just finishing high school. Astronomy. *Friends*. All that, on the one hand.

*Rajma, khatte chhole, masoor dal, moong dal, chana dal*, which were all just different kinds of cooked beans. On the other hand. Along with Mahatmas, and start some kind of new theosophical order (instead of go to college), and don’t have a girlfriend.

As if he ever could.

*You think it’s bad that Melvin touched you and gave you his cooties? We’ve got a Kootie in our class.*

His jaw was clenched so tight that his teeth ached, and tears were being squeezed out of his closed eyes, but he lifted the Dante over his head with both hands—paused—and then smashed it down onto the hearth.

With a muffled *crack* it broke into a hundred powdery white pieces, some tumbling away onto the tan carpet.

He opened his eyes, and for several seconds while his heart pounded and he didn’t breathe, he just stared down at the scattered floury rubble. At last he let himself exhale, and he slowly stretched out his hand.

At first glance the mess seemed to consist entirely of angular lumps of plaster; but when he tremblingly brushed through the litter, he found a brick-shaped piece, about the size of two decks of cards glued together front-to-back. He picked it up—it was heavy, and its surface *gave* a little when he squeezed it, cracking the clinging plaster and exhaling a puff of fine white dust.

He glanced over his shoulder at the front door, and tried to imagine what his parents would do if they were to walk in right now, and see this. They might very well, he thought, go completely insane.

Hastily he started tugging at the stiffly flexible stuff that encased the object; when he got a corner unfolded and was able to see the inner surface of the covering he realized that it was some sort of patterned silk handkerchief, stiffened by the plaster.

Once he’d got the corner loose, it was easy—in two seconds he had peeled the

white-cruled cloth away, and was holding up a little glass brick. The surfaces of it were rippled but gleamingly smooth, and its translucent depths were as cloudy as smoky quartz.

He held it up to the light from the window—

And the air seemed to vibrate, as if a huge gong had been struck in the sky and was ringing, and shaking the earth, with some subsonic note too profoundly low to be sensed by living ears.

All day the hot Santa Ana winds had been combing the dry grasses down the slopes of the San Bernardino Mountains, moving west like an airy tide across the miles-separated semi-desert towns of Fontana and Upland, over the San Jose Hills and into the Los Angeles basin, where they swept the smog blanket out to sea and let the inhabitants see the peaks of Mount Wilson and Mount Baldy, hallucinatorily clear against a startlingly blue sky.

Palm trees bowed and nodded over old residential streets and threw down dry fronds to bounce dustily off of parked cars; and red-brick roof tiles, loosened by the summer's rains and sun, skittered free of ancient cement moorings, cartwheeled over rain gutters, and shattered on driveways that were, as often as not, two weathered lines of concrete with a strip of grass growing between. The steady background bump-and-hiss of the wind was punctuated by the hoarse shouts of crows trying to fly upwind.

Downtown, in the streets around the East L.A. Interchange where the northbound 5 breaks apart into the Golden State and Santa Monica and Hollywood Freeways, the hot wind had all day long been shaking the big slow RTD buses on their shocks as they groaned along the sun-softened asphalt, and the usual reeks of diesel smoke and ozone and the faint strawberry-sweetness of garbage were today replaced with the incongruous spice of faraway sage and baked Mojave stone.

For just a moment now as the sun was setting, redly silhouetting trees and oil tanks on the western hills around Santa Monica, a higher-than-usual number of cars swerved in their freeway lanes, or jumped downtown curbs to collide with light poles or newspaper stands, or rolled forward at stoplights to clank against the bumpers of the cars ahead; and many of the homeless people in East L.A. And Florence and Inglewood cowered behind their shopping carts and shouted about Jesus or the FBI or the Devil or unfathomable personal deities; and for a few moments up on Mulholland Drive all the westbound cars drifted right and then left and then right again, as if the drivers were all rocking to the same song on the radio.

In an alley behind a ramshackle apartment building down in Long Beach, a fat, shirtless old man shivered suddenly and dropped the handle of the battered dolly he had been angling toward an open garage, and the refrigerator he'd been carting slammed to the pavement, pinning his foot; his gasping shouts and curses brought a heavysset young woman running, and after she'd helped him hike the refrigerator off of his foot, he demanded breathlessly that she run upstairs and draw a bath for him, a *cold* one.

And on Broadway the neon signs were coming on and darkening the sky—the names of the shops were often Japanese or Korean, though the rest of the lettering was generally in Spanish—and many of the people in the hurrying crowds below glanced uneasily at the starless heavens. On the sidewalk under the marquee of the old Million Dollar Theater a man in a ragged nylon jacket and baggy camouflage pants had clenched his teeth against a scream and was now leaning against one of the old ornate lampposts.

His left arm, which had been cold all day despite the hot air that was dewing his forehead with sweat, was warm now, and of its own volition was pointing west. With his grubby right hand he pushed back the bill of his baseball cap, and he squinted in that direction, at the close wall of the theater, as if he might be able to see through it and for miles beyond the bricks of it, out past Hollywood, toward Beverly Hills, looking for—

—An abruptly arrived thing, a new and godalmighty smoke, a switched-on beacon somewhere out toward where the sun had just set.

“Get a life,” he whispered to himself. “God, *get* a life!”

He pushed himself away from the pole. Walking through the crowd was awkward with his arm stuck straight out, though the people he passed didn't give him a glance, and when he got on an RTD bus at Third Street he had to shuffle down the crowded aisle sideways.

And for most of the night all the crickets were silent in the dark yards and in the hallways of empty office buildings and in the curbside grasses, as if the same quiet footstep had startled all of them.

## CHAPTER 2

“... when she next peeped out, the Fish-Footman was gone, and the other was sitting on the ground near the door, staring stupidly up into the sky.”

—Lewis Carroll,  
*Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*

KOOTIE TRUDGED BACK UP the quiet dimness of Loma Vista Drive toward home. He was walking more slowly than he had been a few minutes ago on Sunset Boulevard, and now that he had got his breath back he realized that he was limping, and that his side hurt worse than ever. Probably that punch in the stomach had cracked a rib.

Tomorrow must be trash day—all the wheeled green plastic trash cans were out along the curbs. His neighbors’ houses, which he had always scornfully thought looked like 1950s-style Japanese restaurants, were hidden behind the trees, but he knew that behind the ARMED RESPONSE signs on the lawns they were probably all dark at this hour. He was sure that dawn couldn’t be far off.

He leaned against one of the trash cans and tried to ignore the hard pounding of his heart, and the tight chill in his belly that was making his hands sweat and shake. He could claim that burglars had got in, and kidnapped him because he had seen them, because he was a *witness* who could identify them in a *lineup*; they had panicked, say, and grabbed him and fled after doing nothing more than break the Dante. Kootie had managed to escape ... after a fight, which would be how come his left eye was swelling shut and his rib was perhaps broken.

He tried to believe the burglar story, which he would probably have to tell to some policeman—he tried to imagine the fictitious burglars, what they had said, what their car had looked like; and after a few moments he was horrified to realize that the tone of the whole thing just rang with kid-ingenuity, like the “concerto” he had composed on the piano a year ago, which had sounded every bit as good and dramatic as Tchaikovsky to him at the time, but later was somehow just meandering and emphatic.

A kid just couldn’t see the difference. It was like being color-blind or something, or preferring Frazetta to all those blobby old paintings of haystacks and French people in rowboats.

A grown-up would probably have been able to tell that Lumpy and Daryl weren’t

nice guys. *Well, shit, Koot my man, you can stay in my garage—it's right down here, nothing fancy but it's got a bed and a refrigerator—and you can work for me detailing cars.*

It had sounded all right.

And then *pow* behind a Dumpster, and hard hands turning out his pockets while his knapsack was dragged off his back and all his carefully folded clothes were flung out onto the littered pavement, and a moment later Kootie was alone in the alley, snuffling and choking as quietly as he could and shoving his clothes back into the broken knapsack.

The glass brick had slid under the Dumpster, and he had had to practically get down on his face and crawl to retrieve it.

At least he could still return that. And his parents *had* to take him back. He didn't care what punishment they would give him, just so that he could soon be in his own room again, in his own bed. Last night he had dreamed of going to college, of getting a "B.S.," which in the dream had meant something besides *bullshit*. The dream had given him the (stupid!) determination to finally put his (stupid!) running-away scheme into actual (stupid!) action.

He hoped he never dreamed again.

He pushed away from the trash can and resumed limping up the street, from one silent pool of agitated street light to the next. Go to bed and put it off until morning, he thought miserably. They might think I've spent the night at Courtney's house, and ... No. There was the busted Dante to raise the alarm. Still, sneak into bed and deal with everything tomorrow morning.

The curb by his own driveway was bare—no trash cans. That wasn't reassuring. His mom and dad must be too upset to think of taking down the cans. But maybe they were off in the car right now, looking for him, and he'd be able to—

No. As he started limping up the white cement driveway he saw their Mercedes against the lights of the kitchen. And the leaves of the peach tree to the right of the house were yellowly lit, so his bedroom light was on too.

Shit, he thought with despairing defiance. Shit shit *shit*, and I don't care who knows it. At least there's no police cars. At the moment.

He tiptoed across the grass around to the garage on the north side of the house. The laundry-room door was open, spilling light across the lawn, and he crouched up to it and peered inside.

The gleaming white metal cubes of the washer and dryer, with the colorful Wisk

and Clorox 2 boxes on the shelf over them, were so achingly familiar a sight that he had to blink back tears. He stepped in and walked quietly, heel-and-toe, into the kitchen.

He could see into the living room—and there were two elegantly dressed people standing by the fireplace, a man and a woman, and only after a moment did he recognize them as his mom and dad.

His dad was wearing ... a black *tuxedo*, with a ruffled white shirt, and his mother had on a puffy white dress with clouds of lace at the wrists and the low neckline. The two of them were just standing there, staring at different corners of the room.

In the first moment of frozen bewilderment Kootie forgot about wanting to cry. Could they have put on these crazily formal clothes just to greet him when he returned? His father's hair was *styled*, obviously blow-dryered up, and ... and the hair was all black now, not gray at all.

Kootie took a deep breath and stepped out onto the deep tan carpet. "Mom?" he said quietly.

His mother looked much slimmer in the dress, and he noticed with disbelief that she was actually wearing eye makeup. Her calm gaze shifted to the ceiling.

"Mom," Kootie repeated, a little louder. He was oddly reluctant to speak in a normal tone.

His father turned toward the kitchen—and then kept turning, finally fixing his gaze on a chair by the hallway arch.

"I'm sorry," Kootie whimpered, horrified by this grotesque punishment. "*Talk* to me, it fell and broke so I ran away, I've got the glass thing that was inside it—"

His mother raised her white-sleeved arms, and Kootie stumbled forward, sobbing now—but she was turning around, and her arms were out to the sides now as if she was doing a dance in slow motion. Kootie jerked to a stop on the carpet, abruptly very frightened.

"*Stop it!*" he screamed shrilly. "*Don't!*"

"*Fuck is that?*" came a hoarse shout from down the hall.

Kootie heard something heavy fall over, and then clumping footsteps in the hall—then a homeless-looking man in a ragged nylon wind breaker was standing there scowling crazily at him. The big man's whiskery face was round under a grimy baseball cap, and his eyes seemed tiny. He blinked in evident surprise at the slow-moving figures of Kootie's parents, but quickly focused again on the boy.

"Kid, come here," the man said, taking a quick step into the living room. He was

reaching for Kootie with his right hand—because his left hand, his whole left arm, was gone, with just an empty sleeve folded and pinned-up there.

Kootie bolted to the left into the green-lit atrium, skidding and almost falling on the sudden smooth marble floor, and though he clearly saw the two figures who were sitting in chairs against the lattice wall he didn't stop running; he had seen the figures vividly but he hit the backyard door with all his weight—it slammed open and he was running across the dark grass so fast that he seemed to be falling straight down from a height.

His hands and feet found the crossboards in the back fence and he was over it and tearing through ivy in darkness, getting up before he even knew he had fallen—he scrambled over a redwood fence and then was just running away full tilt down some quiet street.

His eyes must have been guiding his feet on automatic pilot, for he didn't fall; but in his head all he could see was the two figures sitting in the chairs in the atrium, *duct-taped* into the chairs at neck and wrist and ankle—his overweight mother and his gray-haired father, mouths gaping and toothless, eyes just empty blood-streaked sockets, hands clawed and clutching the chair arms in obvious death.

## CHAPTER 3

*“... Just look along the road, and tell me if you can see either of them.”*

*“I see nobody on the road,” said Alice.*

*“I only wish I had such eyes,” the King remarked in a fretful tone. “To be able to see Nobody! And at that distance too! Why, it’s as much as I can do to see real people, by this light!”*

—Lewis Carroll,  
*Through the Looking-Glass*

PETE SULLIVAN OPENED HIS eyes after the flash, but seconds went by as he watched a patch of sky through the screened window of the van, and he didn’t hear any thunder. He sat up in the narrow bed and wondered whether silent flashes behind one’s eyes were a symptom of impending stroke; he had been unaccountably jumpy tonight, and he had played a terrible game of pool in the bar here after work, flinching and clumsy with the cue stick.

The thought of incipient stroke wasn’t alarming him, and he realized that he didn’t really believe it. He swung his bare feet to the carpeted floorboards and stood up—years ago he had replaced the van’s stock roof with a camper top that raised the ceiling two and a half feet, so he was able to stand without bumping the top of his head—and he leaned on the little sink counter and stared out through the open window at the Arizona night.

Tonto Basin was down inside a ring of towering cumulus clouds tonight, and as he watched, one of the clouds was lit for an instant from inside; and a moment later a vivid fork of lightning flashed to the east, over the southern peaks of the Mogollon Rim.

Sullivan waited, but no thunder followed.

The breeze through the screen smelled like the autumn evenings of his boyhood in California, a cool smell of rain-wet rocks, and suddenly the stale old-clothes and propane-refrigerator air inside the van was confining by contrast—he pulled on a pair of jeans and some socks, stepped into his steel-toed black shoes, and slid the door open.

When he was outside and standing on the gravel of O’Hara’s back parking lot, he could hear the noise from the bar’s open back door—Garth Brooks on the jukebox and

the click of pool shots and the shaking racket of drink and talk.

He had taken a couple of steps out across the lot, looking up vainly for stars in the cloudy night sky, when a Honda station wagon spoke to him.

*“Warning,”* it said. The bar’s bright back-door light gleamed on the car’s hood. *“You are too close to the vehicle—step back.”* Sullivan stepped back. *“Thank you,”* said the car.

The thing’s voice had been just barely civil.

Sullivan plodded back to the van for cigarettes and a lighter. When he was back out on the gravel, the Honda was quiet until he clicked his lighter; then the car again warned him that he was too close to the vehicle.

He inhaled on the cigarette and blew out a plume of smoke that trailed away on the breeze. *“Too close for what?”* he asked.

*“Step back,”* said the car.

*“What vehicle?”* Sullivan asked. *“You? Or is there somebody else around? Maybe we both ought to step back.”*

*“Warning,”* the thing was saying, speaking over him. *“You are too close to the vehicle. Step back.”*

*“What’ll you do if I don’t?”*

*“It’ll go off like a fire siren, Pete,”* came a voice from behind Sullivan. *“What are you teasing a car for?”*

It was Morrie the bartender, and out here in the fresh air Sullivan thought he could smell the beer stains on the man’s apron. *“He started it, Morrie.”*

*“It started it. It’s a car. You’ve got a call.”*

Sullivan imagined picking up the bar phone and hearing the flat mechanical voice telling him that he was standing too close to a vehicle. *“The power station?”*

*“Didn’t say. Maybe it’s some local dad pissed about his daughter being messed with.”*

Morrie had turned and was crunching back toward the lit doorway, and Sullivan tucked in his T-shirt and followed him. It wouldn’t be some citizen of this little desert town—Sullivan was one of the apparently few tramp electricians who didn’t get drunk every night and use his eight-hundred-a-week paycheck to sway the local girls.

Besides, he’d only been in town this season for a week. Last Friday he’d been bending conduit pipe and pulling wires at the Palo Verde Nuclear Generating Station a hundred miles west of here—and during this last week at the Roosevelt Station, outside of town, there had been too much overtime for him to do anything more than

work, come back here to gulp a couple of Cokes and shoot a couple of games of pool, and sleep.

The noise of conversation increased when he walked in through the back door after Morrie, and Sullivan squinted in the sudden glare of overhead lights and neon beer signs. He walked to the bar, and Morrie was already behind it and tilting a plastic cup under the Coke tap. The telephone was on the bar with the receiver lying beside it.

Sullivan picked it up. "Hello."

"Pete? God, you're a creature of habit—every year working the same places at the same seasons." She sounded angry.

It was his twin sister, and his hand tightened on the receiver. "Sukie, what—"

"Shut up and listen. I'm at a hotel in Delaware, and the front desk just called me. They say somebody hit my car in the lot, and they want me to go down and give 'em insurance information. I—"

"Sukie, I don't—"

"Shut *up!* I woke up on bar-time, Pete! I was bolt upright a second before the phone rang, and then I felt the plastic of the receiver before my hand hit it! I could feel my pupils tighten up a second before I turned on the lamp! Nobody hit my car, I'll bet my life on it! She's *found* me, and she'll find you—she'll have people at the desk here waiting for me, and she's got people out there where you are, you *know* she does. And you know what she wants us *for*, too, unless you've managed to forget *everything*. I'm looking Commander Hold-'Em in the *eye* right now, if you care; this is for *you*. Go straight out of there, right now, and drive and—this call is through the goddamn front desk, I know they're listening—go to the place where we hid—a thing, some things, okay? In a garage? It's what you're gonna need if she's—wanting us again. For any purpose."

"I can't—"

"Do you know the thing I'm talking about?"

"I think so, the ... where you can't hardly walk for all the palm fronds on the pavement, right? And you've got to crawl under low branches? Is the ... thing still there?"

"I've never moved it."

"But I can't just walk away here, Sukie, I'd have to ... God, go to Radiation Control and get a Whole Body Count, that takes twenty minutes right there, and for my paycheck—"

"*Walk away, Pete!* It's just a job."