



Prodigal Son

By Lewis Shiner

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He wore the kind of cheap Nike knock-offs that you see at Target, faded jeans, and a Lone Star Beer T-shirt that was last year's size. I made him to be about twelve years old, might even have guessed younger if his eyes hadn't been so hard. He was tan and fit, and his hair was the shade of blond that women in Dallas and Houston begged their hairdressers for.

"I want you to find my parents," he said.

I pointed to a chair and watched him sit in it, carefully, like it might move under him. "Now that's a new one," I said. "Don't tell me they ran away from home?"

"It's not a joke, Mr. Sloane. I got money."

"I'm sorry," I said. I got rid of my smile and straightened up in my chair. "Why don't you go back to the beginning and tell me about it?"

"Not much to tell, I don't guess. Just that I don't know who my parents are, and I want you to find them for me."

"You're adopted, is that it?"

"No sir," he said. "Kidnapped."

Either the kid had the world's best deadpan delivery or else he was serious. "Kidnapped?"

"That's right." He was looking at me like I'd left my mouth open, and I probably had.

"Go on," I said, waving a hand at him. "Talk to me."

"It was about ten years ago, here in Austin. Took me right out of a ... mister, are you sure you're okay?"

"Fine," I said. "Jesus Christ. This kind of thing happens to me every day. Shouldn't we be calling the cops?"

The kid shook his head. "I don't want to make trouble for nobody. Andy-that's the guy that took me-he's been real good to me. I know what he done was wrong, but I don't want nothing to happen to him. Okay? Me taking off like I did is going to hurt him bad enough."

"Ten years ago, you said?" Suddenly I could hear a buzzing in my head, and it wasn't just the AquaFest speedboats a few blocks away on Town Lake.

"Yeah. He always called me Buddy. I don't know if that was my real name or something he just came up with. He took me right out of a shopping cart outside some grocery store. It was raining, and..."

"Jesus Christ!" I said, and jumped out of my chair so hard that it slammed into the wall behind me. Buddy came out of his chair at the noise and put out one hand to make sure he knew where the door was.

I banged open the file cabinet and walked my fingers across the folders. "Burlenbach," I said, and yanked one out.

The kid stared at the folder, started to reach out a hand toward it and then snapped it back. "Just like that?" he said.

"Man," I told him, "if you knew how famous you were, you wouldn't have to ask that. Now, maybe I'm getting ahead of myself, and maybe it was some other shopping cart, but about ten years ago a guy named Burlenbach lost his son just that way. He was Councilman Burlenbach then, but he's a State Senator now."

"State Senator?" It was the kid's turn to look stunned, and I couldn't blame him. I had a feeling it was going to be a hell of a step up for him.

"He must have had half the PI's in this town scrounging for something the cops had missed. Me included. I even got my name in the paper over it."

"No shit," he said, and then glanced up quickly. "Pardon me."

"That's okay," I said. "Listen, have you got anything that might identify you? A baby ring, or a locket or something?"

"There's this," he said, pulling a bag out of his back pocket. It was the kind of little paper sack that they put single beers in at a 7-Eleven. "I was supposed to be wearing this when he found me."

Inside the bag was an infant's T-shirt. It had blue and yellow stripes, and Mrs. Burlenbach's description of it was on page 2 of the file.

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The secretary didn't want to put me through so I said, "Tell him it's about his son."

"Senator Burlenbach doesn't have a--"

"Just tell him that, will you?"

A moment later a deep voice said, "This is Frank Burlenbach. Now what the hell is this bull crap about my son?" The voice had a lot more authority than it used to, but I recognized it just the same.

"This is Daniel Sloane," I said. "I was one of the investigators looking into your son's kidnapping ten years ago. Um, to be blunt, sir, he just turned up."

"Now?" he said.

It wasn't what I was expecting to hear. "Pardon?"

"After ten years?" he asked. "He shows up now?"

"He's just fine, sir," I said to the phone, conscious of Buddy watching me from across the room. "Healthy, in good shape, a good-looking kid."

"If this is some kind of stunt..."

"I'd like to bring him out to you, sir, if that would be possible."

I seemed to have outlasted the bluster. "What did you say your name was?" he asked in a quieter voice.

"Sloane," I said. "Daniel Sloane."

"I remember you," he said, as if such a thing were a minor miracle. "Are you sure about this? I mean really sure? Because I am not going to put Georgia through this all over again and have it be for nothing. Do you understand me?"

I remembered Georgia, his tall, stylish wife, alternately hysterical and hideously uncomfortable during the few hours I'd spent with her. "It's no joke," I said. "Believe me."

He gave me his new address. It was in West Lake Hills, a big jump in equity from the one listed in the file. I told him we were on our way and hung up.

"Well?" the kid asked.

"We're going over," I said, not wanting to meet his eyes.

"He didn't even care, did he?"

I felt ashamed for Burlenbach, ashamed even of my own tawdry little profit-oriented part in the exchange. "Look," I said. "He went through a lot of pain over this ten years ago. He just wants to be sure, that's all."

"Yeah," the kid said. "Sure he does." He shifted his feet and made a face. "Before we go, I need to use the, uh, donniker."

I hadn't heard the expression before, but the meaning was obvious enough. I pointed him down the hall, and

while he was gone I folded the tiny blue-and-yellow T-shirt into thirds and put it back in the paper bag.

*

The August heat didn't seem to bother the kid much as we drove through downtown and crossed the river just below the Tom Miller Dam. He'd pulled back into himself after the phone call and I guessed he was working out the contingencies for himself.

The radio in my ancient Mustang told us that tonight was Czech night at AquaFest and there would be plenty of kolaches and bratwurst and cold Lone Star Beer on the Auditorium Shores. Not to mention the Golden State Carnival and a concert by Rusty Weir. I turned off on West Lake Drive and told Buddy to keep an eye out for the address.

The houses were almost invisible from the narrow, twisting road, most of them set well back and screened by mesquite and cedars. The odd glimpses, though, were enough to make the kid look back at me in disbelief. I found the driveway and eased down the graveled slope, steering around the BMW and the little sport Mercedes parked casually in the open.

It looked like the Burlenbachs had done pretty well for themselves in the last ten years, which was more than I could say for myself. When I came to think of it, the five weeks I'd put in for them back then had been about the last steady work I'd had.

Frank Burlenbach answered the door himself, wearing pleated khaki pants and a white shirt that had obviously been hand-pressed with a lot of starch. His hair had gone completely white since the last time I'd seen him, giving him the worldly air of a talk-show host. His handshake left heavy cologne on my palm and I resisted the impulse to wipe it off on my pants.

"This is Buddy," I said, having to reach back and pull him forward by his shoulder.

The two of them looked each other over like prizefighters, and then Burlenbach stepped aside to let us in. He didn't offer to shake with the boy.

He led us into a living room done in red tile, wicker and bentwood. Lots of plants stood around in terracotta pots that matched the floor, and ceiling fans kept the air moving briskly. I couldn't help but wonder if they laid down carpet and rolled in overstuffed chairs every winter.

Georgia Burlenbach huddled at one end of a long, low couch with white cushions. Her hair was short and not quite blonde, her clothes wrinkled the way only expensive linen wrinkles. She looked broken, somehow, as if carrying the weight of that abandoned shopping cart around with her had finally been too much. She wanted to stand up, but her eyes flashed first to her husband and she read something there that made her stay put.

"You might remember Mr. Sloane," Burlenbach said, and she nodded. Her smile flickered on and off like it wasn't hooked up properly.

I took Buddy's shirt out of the paper bag and laid it on the coffee table in front of her. "He had this with him when he showed up at my office."

The woman gasped and Burlenbach took half a step toward her. "Oh God," she said. "Oh God, it's Tommy." She picked up the shirt and hugged it against her, as if she hadn't yet connected it with the grown boy just across the room.

Buddy walked slowly over to her and held out his hands. "Mother?" he said.

That was all she needed to go over the edge. She jumped up and hugged him, sobbing loudly, the tears spilling onto the back of the boy's T-shirt.

"I'd better be going," I said to Burlenbach.

"What do we owe you?" He seemed abstracted, barely aware of me.

"Half a day's pay," I said, knowing I could have pushed for a lot more. "I'll send you a bill."

He barely heard me. "The boy--Tommy, or Buddy, or whatever--did he say anything to you?"

"Say anything?"

He licked his lips. "About us."

"I'm afraid I don't know what you're talking about." I looked over at his wife, but she was oblivious.

"Nothing," Burlenbach said. "Forget it. This is all just such a shock...We'd gotten used to the idea that we'd never see Tommy again, and now...well, I hardly know what to say." His brain was spinning like a roulette wheel, and I saw where the ball needed to drop.

"If nothing else," I said, "I imagine this will make for one hell of a newspaper story. Father and son reunited after all these years?"

"Hmmm? Yes, yes, I suppose it does at that." He shook my hand again and for the first time he actually managed a smile.

*

By four o'clock the reporters tracked me to my house and I posed for a round of pictures and told them what I knew. After that I unplugged the phone and let my service take over. I needed the publicity badly enough, but I was starting to feel a little cheap. I'd really liked the kid and it bothered me to make a profit off of something I should have wanted to do for free.

All night long my mind kept coming back to him. I wondered what it would be like for him, coming out of a world of dime stores and bad grammar and moving into that carefully manicured house, no longer even sure he'd done the right thing. What would Georgia Burlenbach think when the kid didn't know which fork to use or when she found him whizzing into the hedges?

I plugged the phone in before I went to bed and it woke me at six the next morning.

"Sloane?" Burlenbach sounded like the phone was cracking in his fist. "You've got thirty seconds to convince me not to call the police."

"Go ahead and call them," I said. "If you want to tell me why you're calling them, that's okay too."

"Don't get cute with me, Sloane. What's the price tag? Let's get that over with first and then we'll take it from there."

I yawned. "It's six in the morning, Senator, and I just woke up, and I don't have the foggiest notion what you're talking about."

"I'm talking about the boy, as you goddamned well know. Buddy, as you call him. He's gone."

I lay back down on the bed. "Oh Jesus."

"I called your goddamn reporters and now you know perfectly goddamn well how stupid this is going to make me look if I don't get him back. So what's it going to cost me?"

I spent five minutes convincing him that I didn't have anything to do with it. Finally I said, "Give it a while. Maybe he just went out for a walk or something. If you don't hear anything by noon, call the cops. They can be discreet when they have to be."

By the time I got him off the phone my sleep was shot to hell so I made a pot of coffee and read the morning *Statesman*. The kid's picture was all over the front page, and I even had a sidebar to myself on page 8. The longer I thought about it the more likely it seemed that Buddy had simply changed his mind, decided that his new home wasn't cutting it, and gone back to Andy.

I drove to the office, under the huge net banner for the AquaFest, and spent ten minutes finding a place to park. They were rebuilding Congress Avenue with trees and walks instead of a third lane each way, the first case I'd ever heard of a major city narrowing its streets. It had seemed like a good idea once, but we'd all gotten a little tired of the dust and the noise and the parking squeeze.

My service told me that the publicity had already brought in five missing pets, three divorces, and a short list of what might turn out to be real jobs. I was still sorting through them when Burlenbach called again.

"It's a kidnapping," he said.

"What happened?"

"Somebody called. Said his name was Andy, said he had the boy. He wants fifty thousand."

It sounded about right. Cheap enough that Burlenbach could put it together on his own, but enough of a payoff to justify the risk. "How long have you got?"

"Until eight tonight. Listen, Sloane, I'm sorry about this morning." He went quiet for a second and I thought he was finished, then he started again in a voice thick with emotion. "I loved that boy. When we lost him, it almost killed me. We never tried to have another child. We just never got over it. And when you found him again, I couldn't trust it." Another pause. "And it looks like I was right not to." He took a breath and plowed on. "Anyway. I hope you'll accept my apology. And help us find him."

"Okay," I said. "But I haven't got much to go on."

"You've got as much as anybody. You spent time with him. Maybe you can come up with something."

"I'll do what I can," I said, and made him go over everything with me, what the kid had said and done, the kidnapper's voice, everything I could think of. By then the cops were at his house and he turned me over to a Lieutenant Rogers, who I vaguely knew. I got Rogers' okay to work on the case and then I hung up the phone.

I put my head down on my folded arms. By now I had a long list of things I didn't like about this case, and at the top was the fact that Andy had set me up. It was obvious now that he'd sent the kid to me because of my publicized work on the kidnapping ten years ago, which meant I wouldn't miss the connection with the Burlenbachs. So much, I thought, for getting my name in the paper.

Then there were the nagging questions. Why wouldn't a two-and-a-half year old kid know his own name? Why did Andy wait so long to make his move? What was he doing with the kid in the meantime? Child porn? Some other kind of hustle?

Finally I sat up and went through it again, from the moment the kid had walked in the office. I took it slow and careful, and after about fifteen minutes I said, "Donniker."

I took my dictionary of American slang off the shelf and looked it up. The book said donniker was circus or carnival usage for "a restroom, esp. a public facility." I threw the book on the desk and looked up the date of the original kidnapping in Burlenbach's file. It was the first week in August, AquaFest week. Carnival week.

I was on a roll. I called my poker buddy Dutch at the cops and told him I needed a favor.

"So what else is new?"

"A couple years ago you said something about the carnivals that play here. You said something about what a pain in the ass it was to get a list of all the booths in the show, but you had to because of some kind of goddamned red tape."

"The language sounds familiar."

"Do you think you could maybe find the list from ten years ago and maybe a copy of this year's list?"

"Jesus, Danny, I'm supposed to be working for the City of Austin."

"I knew you could. I'll be over in half an hour."

When I saw the size of the lists, with over two hundred names on the old one and over three hundred on the new, a little of my enthusiasm wilted. What if he's not with the carnival anymore, I thought. What if he never was, and it's all a coincidence?

But detectives don't believe in coincidence, and the list, thank God, was alphabetical. In under an hour I had an index card with twenty names that had been on both lists.

It was twelve noon. The carnival was open.

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I felt dirty the minute I walked onto the midway. It wasn't just the heat, not just the pressure of all those booths crammed into the asphalt lot behind the Coliseum. It was the smell of greasy pots full of melted cheese to pour over nacho chips, the sticky puddles of dried coke under my feet, the recorded calliope and disco blaring out of metal horns, the lurking carnies in baseball shirts and gimme hats that sized me up as I walked by.

"Hey, gotta girlfriend? She'd love this Snoopy doll! Hey, where ya going? No girlfriend? Got a boyfriend, then?"

The big rides, the Merry-Go-Round and the Tilt-A-Whirl and the Ferris Wheel and something called a Dragon's Lair, were in the center of the lot. Around the edges were the shooting galleries and fortune wheels, concessions and fortune tellers, cooch dancers and freak shows, all the booths trying to look like anything but what they really were, the back ends of custom tractor-trailers.

One by one I crossed the booths off my list, the ones run by old couples or twenty-year-old kids. I marked off the grab joints because my instincts told me Andy was a hustler, not a food salesman. Finally there were three names left and A. Gresham looked like the best bet.

At the moment A. Gresham's balloon-breaking concession was being run by a thirty-year old woman with dark hair and prominent breasts, wearing a stained tan tank top. She could have been Andy's girlfriend, or she could have been A. Gresham herself. In any case it was time to move. I'd been there over an hour and I was starting to draw a kind of attention I didn't like.

I settled down at the booth next to Gresham's and watched a scrawny man in his seventies hustle a pair of soldiers. He was running a big board laid out like a roulette wheel, with silver dollar sized holes by each of the numbers. When the bets were down the old man dropped a white mouse into the middle of the board. It walked around with its nose in the air while the soldiers shouted at it, and then it suddenly darted into one of the holes.

"Well," the old man said, "better luck next time, fellas. I could see he was close to feeling your number--did you see how he was sniffing for it? So I'll tell you what I'm gonna do..." But it was too late. The soldiers had wandered off. "How about you, young man? Fifty cents to win any prize on the second shelf."

I moved in, catching a quick whiff of ammonia. I'd read somewhere that a mouse would follow that smell, thinking it was the urine of other mice. An easy way to rig whatever hole you wanted.

"No thanks," I said. "I was kind of hoping to see Andy, next door, but he doesn't seem to be in."

The old man looked me over and I had about decided I'd blown it when he said, "Yeah, he's had Melissa in there all day. So you know Andy, do you?"

I nodded, trying to keep it casual. "Met him a few years back. Him and his boy..."

"Tommy?"

"Yeah, that's the one." My heart was thudding so hard I was afraid the old man would see the front of my shirt shaking. Tommy, was it? Then Andy did know the kid's real name. "Blond, good-looking kid."

"Yeah," the old man said. "A goddamned shame."

"How do you mean?"

"I guess you wouldn't know. Poor kid died about two years ago, while we was wintering in Florida. Pneumonia. Like to broke ol' Andy's heart."

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By the time I got away from the old man I had it complete in my mind. I used a pay phone to call Burlenbach and told him to bring some cops and meet me at the main gate. "He's here," I said. "I'm sure of it. The kidnapper's named Andy Gresham and he runs a pop-the-balloon joint on the midway."

I stopped then and wondered if I should tell him the rest of it. No, I thought. Not over the phone. "The kid is one of them," I said. "It's not going to be easy to get to him."

"Maybe he'd be better off staying there," Burlenbach said, and then stopped himself. "Forget I said that, okay? I've been under a lot of strain."

It was hard to hear him over the noise. "Sure," I said. "But get those cops here. This could get ugly."

"We're on the way," he said.

I hung up the phone and started for the front gate, detouring for a last glance at Andy's booth. It was a mistake. The curtains were parted and somebody was watching me from the darkness.

I looked away and started walking faster. When I turned my head again Buddy was standing next to the woman, staring at me. As he watched he shook his head slowly, twice. And then he screamed, "Andy!"

I started to run. I could see them in my peripheral vision, vaulting their counters and coming after me. I made it almost halfway to the gates before the carny running the Tilt-A-Whirl saw me and saw who I was running from. He was young and tough-looking, with ragged hair and a Fu Manchu moustache, and as the ride slowed to a stop he stepped out to block my way.

I tried to shift around him, but he was ready for me and a fist came out of nowhere and caught me in the stomach. My momentum took me past him and down, ripping the knees out of my pants. Before I could get back on my feet they had me.

There were about ten of them, and they made a ring so that the townies couldn't see what they were about to do. There should have been cops on the midway but I couldn't see them and now they couldn't see me either.

The line broke for a second and one man stepped through. He was short, with the hard stringy muscles of an athlete, sandy hair and long sideburns.

"Sloane," he said.

"Hello, Andy."

He fired a kick at my head and I dropped out of the way, swinging both feet at him as I went over. One of them caught him in the thigh and he yelled "Shit!" and wobbled for a second.

I was struggling onto my stomach when a foot came from behind and caught me in the ribs. The air flashed white in front of me and I couldn't find anything to breathe. Another boot landed and another and I could tell, just barely, that I was moving with the blows and that the circle of men was following.

I rolled up against something metal and found myself in the clear. It took me a second or two to see that I'd hit the blue-painted barricade around the Tilt-A-Whirl. I twisted under it and got up into an unsteady crouch.

Somewhere in my mind I knew I only had to hold out a few minutes longer, that Burlenbach was on his way with the cops. So I got all the way up, swaying a little, wondering why they weren't coming at me anymore.

Then an engine fired noisily and I knew the answer.

I turned and saw Andy at the controls of the Tilt-A-Whirl, and as my eyes took it in, the first metal car sailed up toward my face.

I ducked, lost my balance, went down on my knees again. Somebody behind me let out a gasp and I almost turned to look. If I had the next car would have killed me, but instead I threw myself over the top of it as it went by.

The machine was picking up speed now and I didn't have time to get clear, even if the crowd and the

barricades hadn't been in the way. The next car shot past high above me while I was still lying on my face, fighting for breath.

The next one would be low. I pushed myself flat onto the asphalt of the lot and felt the bottom of the car slap my back as it passed, hard enough to stun me and let me know I couldn't take much more.

I got to my knees. If I just lay there I was going to be dead anyway. The next one went high and gave me time to get my legs under me and say about half a prayer. Then the red blur of another car rushed at my knees and I jumped across it, my fingers scrabbling at the metal for a hold. One hand caught the safety bar and I felt myself being lifted up and away.

I rolled into the seat of the car, arms and legs all twisted wrong, but with breathing space for a few seconds. The wind roared past my face as the machine kept picking up speed. My lunch tried to crawl out my throat but I held it down, crouching next to the seat, trying to see what was happening.

Andy still worked the controls from the hub of the ride. I was moving too fast to see him clearly, but the expression on his face was not pretty. It had just occurred to me that I wasn't as safe as I'd thought, that he could still probably push the speed up high enough to throw me loose, when I heard a voice.

It carried even over the noise of the wind, and it said, *"Stop it! Leave him alone!"*

It was the kid, and suddenly he was fighting Andy for the controls. The metal seat under me lurched and the spinning began to slow.

I could still hear the kid's voice as I crawled back onto solid ground, my eyes closed, telling myself I wasn't going to throw up. "Give it over, Andy," the kid said. "It's finished."

Burlenbach helped me to my feet and kept hold of one arm while I looked around. The cops had cleared everyone away from the ride except Andy, and two of them were holding him by the shoulders. Georgia Burlenbach handed me a clean handkerchief I didn't really know what to do with it so I just clenched it hard in my fist.

"Thank God Tommy is safe," she said. "Thank God he's all right."

"He's ..." I wasn't getting the air I needed and I had to start again. "He's not Tommy," I said.

"What!" Frank Burlenbach shouted. "What do you mean?"

"Your boy is dead," I told him. "I'm sorry. But I don't think Andy would ever have given your real son back to you. This one, Buddy, is a substitute. Something he came up with later on."

"Dead?" Burlenbach said. He looked stunned. His wife reached over and took his hand, but he didn't seem to notice.

"What happened?" she asked. "How--"

"Pneumonia," I said. "He'd been living with Andy, grew up here in the carnival. It happened a couple of years ago. I'm sorry."

"Sorry," she said, and nodded. She didn't seem able to make sense out of what I was saying.

Frank Burlenbach turned to the boy. "Is all that true?"

Buddy nodded.

"Who are you? What are you doing here?"

Buddy looked at me and I said, "Go ahead. Tell him."

"I...I don't really come from anywhere, I guess." He looked to me for help again but there was nothing I could say. "An orphanage in Tampa," he said. "I been in and out of it all my life. Until I ran away to Gibtown, you know, Gibsonton, where all the carnies live. I heard they help kids our sometimes. That's where I met up with Andy, and when he saw me he got his idea."

Burlenbach walked over to where they were putting the cuffs on Andy and reading him his rights. Georgia Burlenbach's hand stayed in mid-air, where she'd left it, for just a second. Then it slowly dropped to her side.

"Clever," Burlenbach said. "We hadn't seem him since he was two. We had no idea what he would look like now. And with the shirt, and a few details he couldn't possibly have faked, why should we doubt him?"

The set of his shoulders changed and I could see him digging his feet in for balance, Clarence Darrow going after the jury. "And what difference does it make to you if you opened up wounds that had taken years to heal? What if you brought back all the doubts and nightmares and guilt that almost tore my wife and I apart ten years ago? What do you care? We're just marks, right? Yokels. What difference does it make to you?"

He had worked himself up to where he was almost shouting, and Lieutenant Rogers took him by one arm. "Easy there, Frank."

But Andy had come back to life. He was staring at Burlenbach, and I could see the little muscles working at the tops of his cheeks. "You didn't deserve that boy, mister. You had no right to him, no matter what your laws say."

Suddenly something was wrong with Burlenbach. He obviously hadn't expected Andy to talk back to him, and now he had gone pale and was backing away.

"You know what I'm talking about," Andy sneered, and Burlenbach did. I looked over at his wife and she was standing with one fist at her mouth, biting down hard on the knuckle.

"You want me to tell your cop friends?" Andy said, leaning forward against the two patrolmen that held him. "You want me to tell them about--"

"Shut up!" Burlenbach yelled. "*Shut up!*"

"--about the bruises that were allover that little boy's face when I found him? About that cut over his eye that took two months to heal up?"

Burlenbach had covered his face with his hands and fallen onto his knees.

"Shit," Andy said. "When I saw that poor kid in that shopping basket, all beat up, the rain coming down like that, I just couldn't let him go back to somebody who was going to treat him that way. So I took him. I took him, and I cared for him, and I brought him up. And I buried him. That was never your boy. You lost the right to call him that before I ever came along."

The cops were pulling at Andy's arms now, and after one last look at Burlenbach he let them take him away.

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I gave Georgia Burlenbach a lift downtown. She didn't look as though she could drive, and I didn't think she wanted to be with her husband just then.

On the way I asked her if she was all right.

"I don't know," she said. "I don't know what I feel like. Things keep turning around. First Tommy was back, then he was gone again, and now he's dead...I don't know."

"When he first disappeared, ten years ago, I was so afraid it would all come out. Then I was sort of relieved. I couldn't stand what was happening to Frank, the violence...he'd always been so gentle, but after Tommy was born he'd just go crazy. I just couldn't believe that it was really Frank doing it, somehow. It just wasn't real. You know?" She finally turned and looked at me. "You know?"

Around midnight they told me I could go, and I went out through one of the side offices. Buddy and Andy were sitting there, with a couple of cops standing guard. I waited in the shadows for a minute or two, where they couldn't see me.

"...put me away for a while," Andy was saying, "but I don't see how they could do anything to you. Stick you back in that orphanage, maybe."

"They can't keep me there," Buddy said. "I'll be out in a week, under that fence again."

Andy smiled. "You just get yourself back to Gibtown, then. The folks'll take care of you."

"I will," he said. Then he saw me standing in the corner and his face changed. The smile stayed on, but the life went out of it. "Hello, Mr. Sloane."

Andy looked at me; and his face smoothed into a mask just like the boy's. He nodded pleasantly, and it nearly made me shiver. I hadn't touched him, nothing that had happened had touched him. I was still a mark and he was still a carny.

"Goodbye," I said to both of them. "Good luck."

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For reasons I didn't entirely understand I drove over to Lamar and swung off onto First Street, parking across the river from the carnival. The lights from the Ferris wheel reflected back to me from the surface of the lake, looking like a toy carnival in a paperweight.

From that distance it was easy to forget that the carnival was a message, a message to people like Frank Burlenbach, reminding him that there were people who didn't subscribe, who didn't care about his church and his Senate and his table manners, people who would take his kid away from him just because they thought they could do a better job of bringing it up. They were out there, and that was the message in Andy's frozen smile. Look out, it said. Look out.

I waited until all the lights went out, until the Ferris wheel stopped turning and went dark, and then I got back in my car and drove away.

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