

Standing Alone at the Edge of a Crowd

ROACHES. IF YOU see one of them, there's fifty thousand more where that came from.

Watch them all scatter as I flick on the light.

Some of them are so big, you can hear their disease-carrying little legs scuttling across the linoleum.

Ugly crunchy shiny brown unconquerable unkillable pests, heartless machinelike faces and flailing antennae.

Running and hiding down the sinkhole.

Behind the oven.

In back of the sofa.

Hanging on the walls.

Clinging to the ceiling.

Every little cardboard Roach Motel I've set throughout this place is filled to overflowing with half-inch Orientals and huge lumbering Palmettos, some dead but most still alive, their brown twiggy limbs stuck in yellowish gloppy glue, antennae slashing like bullwhips.

For fun I'll chase one down as it races across the floor, trapping it under a plastic cup then tossing it into a saucepan on the stove, covering it with a steel lid and jacking the flame up HIGH. I'll fry that motherfucker until it explodes, coating the saucepan's inner rim with a sick film of burnt, brownish roach blood.

But you can't catch them all.

They multiply too fast.

Killing one of them is a nice gesture, but it's hopeless. You have to kill them all, and that seems impossible.

I got this apartment so I could be alone, but one is never truly alone, is he? Not with all these roaches.

What can I tell you about myself?

I'm 21.

I got straight "A"s last semester at college.

And I might kill myself or somebody else really soon.

I was born...different. I was stamped "irregular" somewhere along

the assembly line.

When I was very young, I thought I was the only real human being on earth and that everyone else was a robot.

But somewhere along the line, a switch was made.

Now everyone else seems real, and I'm the cold, mechanical one.

As far back as I can remember, I felt that I was destined to disrupt things, destined to leave a big black eye on the world.

One-on-one, I can get along with almost anyone. But facing the crowd en masse, I'm always out of the circle.

This aloneness, though, enables me to see things the crowd never can, what with its kicking up dust and obscuring the dustbowl's perimeters. It is too late for me to join the crowd, so I wander on its fringes, checking under rocks and counting the stars.

It's not that loneliness doesn't hurt, because it does. It sucks the life from my bones. But what hurts worse is that I can't see it any other way. Part of me hates being alone, and part of me can't think of another person on earth with whom I'd like to be right now. As depressing as it is to be alone, it's worse to stand in a crowd and realize you don't belong there.

Mr. and Mrs. Goad hatched a strange child, no doubt about that.

My older brother John used to take me along for rides in his Mr. Frostee ice-cream truck, and one afternoon when I was about three, I had fallen asleep beneath the cold-steel ice-cream machines, and when John pulled up to one of his usual stops, a crowd ran up and began banging on the window for their ice cream. I awoke startled and immediately began bawling, scared at all the faces staring at me through the window. When they saw me crying, they started laughing and banging harder. And so I cried harder. And so they laughed harder and banged harder.

When I was around six, some neighborhood kid my age was diddling with my bicycle combination lock when he discovered the secret number—470—and the moment the lock popped open, he started chanting "470" to other kids.

My bicycle lock—my security, the line between me and the predatory prepubescent horde—was now useless. My chain of protection was broken.

The other kids took up the chant—"four-sev-en-tee! Four-sev-en-tee!"—gleeful that my privacy had been demolished.

At least two dozen of them, cruelly, rhythmically shouting

"Four-sev-en-tee! Four-sev-en-tee!"

How happy they were.

I desperately ran up the alley through the taunting mob, slaloming around all the smiling, chanting, torturing kiddie faces, up into my house and my bedroom's quiet safety.

Alone in my room.

Alone with my thoughts.

Alone with books instead of toys.

I've never had a normal social life. Instead of being connected to a network of friends, I'll take one friendship...or obsession...and plow through it, knock it down and pick it up, caress it and slap it, probe and poke it from every angle, slowly dissect it, and declare it an off-limits disaster area in the end.

And the friends always go back to the crowd and join in the chant against me.

Tommy Fox was my first boyhood friend, a happily dumb, flamingly normal kid who lived next door. From toddlerdom to age seven we played with frogs together, ate Italian water ices together, and pledged to live next door to each other and be friends forever.

We even pricked each other's thumbs with a sewing pin and rubbed the little blood droplets together, swearing we'd be blood brothers forever.

But across the alleyway from our houses lived the Santoro brothers. One summer morning when Tommy and I were between second and third grade, the Santoros turned their garage into a clubhouse and asked Tommy to join their club, with one stipulation—he'd have to ditch me. I was the only neighborhood kid the Santoros didn't want in their club.

Without ever saying goodbye, Tommy walked away from me and joined the club.

For the rest of the summer, I was at war with every other kid in the neighborhood. We even called it a war.

Me vs. the rest.

Every morning while I watched, the Santoros would make a grand display of welcoming their friends, then pull down the garage door and lock me out.

So I'd grab a stick and run up and down the alley, swatting at air conditioners, squashing bugs, and drawing chalk figures on the concrete. I played alone, Robinson Crusoe on a sandless cement beach. I was left to create a world of my own.

I've been locked outside their garage ever since.

And sometimes I'll lock myself up in my own garage.

Like a clam opening and closing its shell, I'll go through alternating

phases of being open and closed to the world. I'm either having too much fun or not nearly enough. And whether I'm playing Satan or Jesus, I'm still a freak, more a mascot than a team player, more an actor than a member of the audience.

Never a part of the world, only reacting to it.

For a long spell through grade school I was a fiendish little hellion, seducing both boys and girls to take off their Catholic uniforms and get naked with me, ambushing kids as they walked home from school and knocking blood out of their heads, and disrupting class in whatever way ensured that I was the center of attention.

That all changed the day that Pete Callahan pinned me down and beat my face in.

Pete was tall, goofy, red-haired, and freckle-faced. He had absolutely no style. As such, he was the crowd's perfect ambassador.

Pete had seen me harassing someone else and challenged me to a fight. For two or three weeks, everyone at school knew the fight was going to happen.

Most of the kids wanted Pete to win.

It was over in less than a minute.

Looking down at me as he swung fists, he had a smiling, manic, bug-eyed expression of victory.

The crowd cheered Pete along with every punch and walked home with him.

I walked home alone.

I had been shorn of my plumage in the grade-school pecking order and went from rowdy bully to withdrawn loner.

Alone in my room again.

Obsessing.

Once I focus on something, everything around it gets blurry.

First it was the Marx Brothers—you know...Groucho, Harpo, Chico, and Zeppo. These schwarzweiss Jewish funnymen from a dead era became my friends.

I can still recite every one of their movies, first to last, within six seconds (I've timed it on a stopwatch):

TheCocoanutsAnimalCrackersMonkeyBusinessHorseFeathersDuckSoupANightattheOperaADayattheRacesRoomServiceAttheCircusTheBigSto
reANightinCasablancaLoveHappy.

Two dozen Marx Brothers T-shirts. Three dozen books. Hundreds of clippings. Groucho's autograph. A letter from Harpo's widow.

But I burn out on my obsessions like I burn out on my friendships.

One morning, I threw all my Marx Brothers paraphernalia on a pile

and burned it—literally—in a smoky bedroom bonfire because I'd devoted my life to Jesus Christ.

If you read the Gospels, you'll see that Jesus was an extremist.

He said that his believers would be able to drink poison and not die. So I drank a half-bottle of Campho-Phenique antiseptic lotion and crawled into bed, hoping that my faith was strong enough to save me.

It was.

Even the priests and nuns said I was too fanatical.

While other boys were drinking beer and chasing girls, I was all alone in the chapel, saying the rosary.

And then one day after Jesus and I had fucked each other in every possible orifice, I dumped him, too.

But the bottomless melancholy remained. Never been able to dump that.

Depression came in my early teens like a dark winter storm front. It buried me under a ten-foot snowdrift.

And I drifted from the crowd like an old Eskimo on an ice floe, floating out to sea.

I went from being the loudest kid in school to the quietest.

Springtime came, but the flower didn't bloom.

I pulled the cord, but the parachute didn't open.

This rooster crawled back into the egg.

This fly reverted to a maggot.

Depression came and it raped me. It took something I can never get back, and I'm not even sure what. But something's missing now. Something very important is missing. Something came and snatched most of the air out of my lungs. A big block of nothingness came and swallowed me alive.

Adolescence killed something inside me, I know that much.

Cold-steel ice-cream scoopers dug into my chest and carved out huge melon balls of my flesh.

A bomb of emptiness exploded inside me.

A bubble popped inside my head, spreading madness throughout it.

I felt a dread. Oh, what a dread. A foreboding. A premonition of something awful. An urgent, all-consuming, heart-piercing fear that something's coming to destroy me, something that can hide in the sunlight or the darkness. A big vacuum cleaner's coming to suck this pathetic speck of dust off the planet.

Total loss of natural fluid motion. Can't even breathe without a crippling self-consciousness. It's an effort to put one foot in front of the other.

Walking around inside a giant teardrop. I'll step off the curb into the street, afraid that I might fall all the way down to hell.

It's when late spring's light, airy beauty sinks in that I feel my head's going to fly off from depression. I always hit bottom in full-blown summertime, when the heat hatches bloodsucking worms in my brain while all the children play under a screwed-open fire hydrant, running and splashing and squealing, happy children, happy like I never was, strolling lovers, holding hands and kissing and whispering like I've never done. The hot ugly sticky sweaty Philly summer and the sun's melting my brains while air conditioners hum and death's hot breath chases me down the sidewalk.

What to do with this sadness, this sadness, this sadness, this sadness that knows no end, this sadness like the end of time?

Late teens and mom moved out of the house without leaving a forwarding address and dad's needling me to where I want to kill myself just to spite him, the old cocksucker's all pickled from late-stage alcoholism and trying to starve me out of the house by refusing to buy groceries until a nun at school finally gives me five bucks so I can get something to eat and each acid trip is more and more like being stuck in a coffin and one night I'm under moonlight wrestling a thorny bush in a cemetery and losing.

Cancer spread from dad's meat-and-potatoes-sodden colon to the rest of his body, and when the surgeons sliced him open they stitched him back up immediately as if the tumors were contagious, because cancer spots were everywhere like freckles on Pete Callahan's face when he was punching me.

Dad would be so doped-up from the cancer medication that he'd fall asleep in his bedroom leaning on the volume button of his remote control until the TV got ear-splittingly loud and would wake him back up again.

White-suited paramedics came and whisked him in a wheelchair to the hospital for the last time and he's all skinny and gray and coughing and spasming and that's what he gets for all his hard work and hopes of making it to Alaska one day and never getting there.

Dad's dead and mom moves back home and kicks me out, prying me loose like an aborted baby from the bedroom I'd occupied since infancy, and I move to a basement apartment in Norristown, Pennsylvania, where there's a mental hospital, a methadone clinic, and not much else, and I have to take a forty-minute high-speed screaming train over rickety tracks to connect with the subway into Philly, and at night I can see my reflection in the train window and notice that the hair in my temples

is receding slightly and I'm fucking only nineteen and already getting old.

That winter in Norristown felt right because it felt dead: dark cold damp basement with only a tiny window peeping up to ground level, privy to only a thin sliver of blackish twilight.

Wheezing Pennsylvania skyline, red smokestacks barfing industrial phlegm, crumbling blood-colored bricks, cracked rubber fan belts on dying leaden machines which leaked oil, my breath a fog, cold alcoholic blackouts, jumping at the slightest noise, lifting weights in preparation for attackers which never came, even my cum was gray and runny like dirty dishwasher, nineteen's supposed to be your sexual peak and my hard-on's soft like uncooked dough.

Some skinny black kid with glasses paid me five bucks for the privilege of letting him suck my cock on the concrete stairwell to a fluorescent-lit Norristown subterranean parking lot, and he had his eyes closed all worshipfully slobbering over it and said I could fuck him if I wanted to but I said no, and the way he fawned over my bone was the same way Ardea the fat clothing-industry fag hag knelt down and prayed to it and said it tastes great when she swallowed and she'd be cute if she lost a hundred pounds, and I've never had a steady girlfriend or anyone tell me they love me and thinking about all this makes me want to put a bullet in my head.

Or someone else's.

That winter was when Mark David Chapman, obsessive bookish loner, shot and killed John Lennon and I remember thinking that I could easily do something like that.

Without blinking.

Mom let me back home in the spring because mom likes when I'm depressed and deflated and docile and I kept thinking there's something wrong with my brain, there has to be something wrong with my brain, because lithium didn't work and therapy didn't work and maybe I should try electroshock and deeper I slid down the fatal esophagus scanning my memory banks for traumatic childhood events which would make me feel this way until I finally insisted on a CAT scan to search for organic brain damage, so they shoved my head inside the radioactive white donut, but there was nothing organically wrong with my brain, so the demon remained elusive.

That spring was when John Hinckley shot at President Reagan and when I heard that Hinckley used to sit in the darkness watching TV and glumly eating half-gallons of ice cream I thought, yep, that'll be me one day, and reporters will knock on the neighbors' door and ask if they

saw this coming.

A little over a year ago mom kicked me out for good and so I moved into this place here, this shitty, crumbling, Spanish-villa-styled hovel with flaking stucco paint, rusted fixtures, and gas-leaking, ready-to-explode kitchen equipment.

Shortly after I moved here, I accepted a mild acquaintance's offer to attend a keg party at a local Knights of Columbus hall his friends had rented.

He was likeable enough, this stupid, grinning, cut-from-the-mold, party-hearty, pillar-of-dudeosity Philly metalhead.

The moment I stepped into the hall, it was like a nigger walking into a Klan rally. All eyes were on me, and all eyes wanted to hurt me.

A glowering Cro-Magnon looked up from the pool table where he was poised to make a shot and said, "We don't like fucking punk rockers here."

I shrugged it off, and without even bothering to explain the difference between rockabilly and punk rock, I poured myself some beer and sat down.

It was an awful crowd grooving to a retarded cover band sluggishly pumping out covers to AC/DC and Blondie songs, girls with curly perms and yellow teeth, guys with dull eyes and protruding foreheads.

I didn't say a mean word to anyone. The only thing I did to provoke them was being different.

As I crossed the dance floor to the bathroom, the crowd pounced on me from all directions, at least a dozen of them with quick wolfpack instinct, guys swinging fists, chicks scratching my face and pulling on my freaky, gelled-up pompadour, tearing at my shirt, kicking and yelling at me, and I elbowed enough guts and kicked enough shins that I was able to break loose and run outside the dance hall.

As I'm slipping and sliding on the ice outside, using torn shreds of my white shirt to dab blood from my face, a giant thick-necked bruiser walks out of the hall toward me, and every muscle in my body tenses, waiting for him to deliver the death blow.

Instead, he says,

"That was fucked-up what they did. That was wrong."

Individuals have consciences. Crowds don't.

This past spring was when I quit drinking, after I single-handedly guzzled a quart of Colt 45 and an entire bottle of tequila that was so cheap, the screw-off cap was a red plastic sombrero.

The last thing I remember before waking up in jail and being charged with assaulting two police officers was stumbling around in

some woods near where I worked and being taunted by a group of schoolchildren who were probably amused at the sight of this silly drunken man.

Blurry, buried memories of being under siege, of a happy kiddie gang mocking me.

The next thing I knew, I was waking up in a jail cell at midnight with my face all puffy and covered in dried blood. I still don't remember how it happened.

So tell me—where do I run?

Where is the island that holds all the people like me?

Why was I sent to the wrong planet?

Once you see through them, you can't pretend you're a part of them. I will join no movements. No gangs. No political parties. No club-houses.

Little crowds are just as bad as big ones. Even worse, because they should know better.

The fags and niggers and nerds form their own little lynch mobs and condemn those who are different.

A crowd of nonconformists is just a smaller crowd, bound by the same rules and instincts which guide bigger crowds.

All crowds are bad. Wherever two or more are gathered, there's trouble.

The crowd cannot be fixed. You can't reform it like you can't reform the plague.

They say I'm crazy, but which is the truer form of madness—the clear perception of their cruelty, or the blind illusion that they're good?

Antisocial acts are only wrong if you accept the premise that society is good, and under the slightest inspection, that premise sinks like a bowling ball through quicksand.

Without flinching, the crowd will do things far more heinous than the most depraved individual on earth could ever come close to doing. Individual crimes can never compete with what an angry school of human piranhas does as a matter of course.

Every serial killer on earth—combined, throughout world history!—can't stack up as many bodies as the crowd does in one eager day on the battlefield.

The crusty old pervert who fondled a kid's genitals likely did so with far less cruelty than the mob which kicks his teeth in and chops his hands off.

The weirdo who gets picked on is never as bad as the gang who taunts and mocks and tortures him.

And yet the crowd must always justify its actions. It can never bring itself to face the inhumanity inherent in its actions.

The crowd is a big fat ugly fly which blames the fly that it swallows.

The crowd's moralistic outrage is merely a cover for its sadistic bloodlust. The crowd can never admit that it simply enjoys tearing a helpless individual to bloody pieces—it must invent excuses so that this dreaded thing called "guilt" doesn't bounce back to it.

The angry cocks who impale their victim in a gang bang always have to pretend that the filthy whore deserved it, don't they? They can't just get their nut and leave it at that.

The crowd instinctually, effortlessly channels its own guilt onto the individual whom they're disfiguring, the individual who screams out for mercy and gets none.

The crowd needs to see evil as outside of itself. It needs to control and condemn and punish and hurt. It needs to find a scapegoat, that's what it needs to do.

The crowd isn't content just huddling together and being warm. It needs to snatch someone else's blanket and make them cold.

To be different is to invite attack.

Don't join the witch hunt, you become the witch.

Don't join the lynch mob, you'll be hanging from a tree.

It isn't what they do that's so bad; it's how they justify it. They aren't good; they just need to see themselves as good, and they can't tell the difference. They're only "good" because they're bad.

There is absolutely no consistency to their definitions of good and evil except for this: They define right and wrong only by what strengthens or weakens the crowd. If their beloved leader gets killed, they'll flock to the enemy leader who killed him and act as if it was always this way. They'll cluster around whoever has the power, regardless of whether what they're now calling "good" was "evil" five minutes ago.

They hate the loner because he reminds them of their cowardice. They hate the thinking individual because he reminds them that they're zombies. They call him a "sociopath," glossing over the fact that they bear a cruel, pathologically destructive hatred for the lone individual who thinks for himself.

They like to pretend that the loner is the dangerous one, but he's never as much of a threat to the crowd as they are to him. He just wants to be left alone, but they won't allow that.

Join us or die.

The crowd has a mind of its own, a mind which overrides individual thoughts and personalities.

Stare into the shallow pond and watch all the minnows swim in unison, darting back and forth together as if choreographed by an invisible puppeteer.

What they call "society" is only an endless wallpaper pattern of strangers living in apartments next to one another and watching the same TV shows, a vast web of tiny wet brains effortlessly manipulated and rendered compliant.

Creatures of habit and instinct and reflex and thoughtlessness. Not one mannerism or idea to call their own. Never thought or done one thing...one meager, measly fucking thing...which wasn't spoon-fed to them by the crowd.

They aren't individuals, they are imitators. They are programmed. Everything about them was passively received through osmosis. They knelt down, threw their heads back, and accepted everything society told them as if it was a gob of sperm shot down their throats like hot mayonnaise.

What a happy, ginger-spiced twist of circumstance that their tastes and beliefs mirror those of everyone around them. Howzabout that? What are the odds of that happening?

And yet each one of these plastic soldiers thinks they're unique, don't they? They're blindly unaware that they're just a little bar of soap that has been whittled into shape by the crowd. They naively believe that they'd be even remotely the same person they are now if they'd been born halfway around the world or a hundred years ago. They're good little Americans here, and they'd be good little Hitler Youth in Germany and good little members of Chairman Mao's Red Brigades in China.

Retarded farting livestock, penned up, shoved down, pushed forward one after the next onto the slaughterhouse conveyor belt.

They're all whipped into line by fear of the crowd's disapproval, by the threat of shame and ostracism.

And loneliness.

Anyone who hides within the crowd is a coward. Anyone. It's the only place where the weak can feel strong. Strength in numbers for those weak as individuals. Safe within the crowd, a safe place for the faceless. Can't see the forest for the trees. Just a cell in the body. Just a dim little star in the galaxy. A locust amid the swarm. A goose in the gaggle.

Replaceable.

Little minds hide in big crowds. Little specks of toner on a giant Xeroxed sheet. Drowning in their own irrelevance. Striving to be unexceptional. Celebrating their blandness. Lusting after the ordinary. The

common. The run-of-the-mill. The middle-of-the-road. The mundane.

Breeding for quantity, the lowest common denominator factored exponentially, mere sequels of their parents, they really think they're so special that they need to reproduce themselves, thinking one of them isn't plenty—or too much already—existing for no other apparent purpose than to squirt out more like them, spraying their intellectually stunted, emotionally arrested genes like pollen, one smelly asshole leading to another, breeding another and another, a big knot of swelling flesh clogging nature's toilet.

I'll bet each little individual fungal spore which clings to my bathtub thinks it's special, too.

I've taken shits which are more intelligent than these people. Ask them why they exist, and they just stare at you confused.

And yet they're happy. They have money and friends and family and love. They're utterly worthless, yet they have an endless network of support. No brains, yet they've been loved all their lives.

Give someone a brain but no love, and this is what happens...

Me.

I'm the Tin Man.

I'm the one everyone says is quiet because they can't hear the explosions inside my head. I seem calm, but that's the only way to contain it all. I'm not quiet—I'm just balled-up with so much tension, I'm paralyzed. One minute I'm polite and silent; the next, I'm smashing everything in the room to jagged pieces. You always have to beware of the quiet ones. Be very afraid of the quiet ones.

I've always felt simultaneously superior and inferior to the rest of humanity. I'm book-smart and socially retarded. I'm a human being amid gorillas—a notch up on the evolutionary staircase, yet weaker and less equipped to deal with nature.

Weirdo gorillas left the herd and mutated into humans.

And I'm a weirdo human.

There's something beyond Homo Sapiens, and I have to strain and stretch to get there. The weirdos experience all the growing pains as they point the normals toward something hidden in our dim evolutionary future.

The freak points to the future. The normals are the present sinking into the past.

If you don't take risks, you become a fossil.

The mainstream isn't a stream at all—it's a backlogged cesspool. Like a dried bloodstain, the crowd congeals at the point where evolution has stopped, at the big fat hump in the bell curve.

Whether it's above or below them, the crowd will destroy whatever is different. In fact, it is far more dangerous to be better than they are than it is to be worse. The crowd will slaughter an inferior individual out of contempt, but it kills the superior person out of envy.

The superior individual reminds them of their obsolescence, and they kill him in a desperate attempt to stave off their own extinction.

I'm harmful to the crowd because I poke holes through the flimsy cellophane they've wrapped around their minds to protect them. But I will ultimately suffer far more from their stupidity than they will from my intelligence.

People my age are getting married and having babies and starting businesses, and I don't want any part of it, this cold new wave of conservative Reagan youth who would have all been hippies ten years ago, rushing lemminglike wherever the crowd leads them.

The others grew into adulthood, and I just went somewhere else.

Here comes the adulthood I never wanted.

Alone I'll sleep tonight, just like every other night.

And still, the world is just something I watch.

I booted my roommate Vince out a month ago, only a couple of weeks before Christmas, because that's the kind of bastard I can be. I tired of the cat-piss smell of crank oozing from his sweat glands, tired of the crankhead buddies he'd drag in here all hours of the night who couldn't hold a conversation with tile grout—huge, open acne sores, chipped teeth, misshapen heads hung with drippy black-spaghetti hair, and that open-mouthed vacuum in their expressions—tired of finding used syringes tucked under the silverware tray, so I kicked him out into the wet, slushy snow and wished him a Merry Christmas.

But as much of a lowlife as Vince was, he had friends.

Here I am, a crowd of one.

No family, no lover, no group to call my own. Just me and the roaches. The roaches, bless them, don't seem afflicted with the idea that they're anything more than roaches.

What a mess I've made.

A pile of dirty clothes on the floor big enough to sleep on, big enough to hid a couple of dead bodies under.

Strewn pieces of an old wooden chair I smashed to splinters a couple of weeks ago and never picked up.

I had used a refrigerator box as a trash can until it overflowed and then I gave up and started tossing it all on the floor. Periodically you'll glimpse a small patch of virgin carpet, but mostly it's grease-stained pizza boxes and crumpled garbage with roaches crawling up, down, and around everything. I've started to throw excess trash out of my bedroom window into the alley, and so far no one's complained.

Over Christmas break I went and got the nose job I'd wanted for

years. I'd always hated dad's big schnozz, and in my high-school graduation photo I thought my nose looked like a banana, all curved like an apostrophe. And all these fistfights I've had made it look more bulbous than ever.

I figured my nose was the reason I didn't have a girlfriend.

So I was wheeled in on a steel hospital gurney, spiked in the ass with morphine, and I listened stuporously as the female plastic surgeon hacked and sawed at my nasal bones. Feeling her steel hammer's percussive slam vibrating through my skull, I realized that the operation was the first time a woman had touched me in years.

She shoved plastic splints up my nose so the bones would set, stitched me up, and sent me home.

I spent Christmas and New Year's alone here at the trash dump. The only contact with another human being was when I'd swing open the door for the pizza-delivery person, and what a sight it must have been to see me with my face bandaged up, wading amid smelly garbage.

Shortly after I returned to work, this placed got burglarized. Someone smashed through my door and purloined my typewriter, TV, and stereo. When a cop surveyed the scene, he gasped, "Jesus Christ! They tore the shit out of this place! Someone must have had a vendetta against you!" The local paper reported, "The apartment had been so thoroughly ransacked, police suspected personal revenge as a motive." Truth was, the burglars had delicately removed my valuables while leaving everything else untouched.

The mess was purely my own.

But revenge had to have been a motive, because the thieves smeared a big "X" in blood on the outside of my front door.

The ancient Hebrews marked their doorways so the Angel of Death would pass over them and leave them unharmed. But I suspect that this bloody "X" was an omen that they'd be back.

I can feel the walls squeezing in on me.

The icy, unforgiving winter sun peers like a telescope into my apartment.

As hard as it is to get up and go outside with my feet nailed to the floor like this, I have to make a move. I can't stay here. They're coming to get me.

I'm a marked man.

The world locked its doors on me a long time ago.

And now even my own locks won't keep me safe.

