

# *Big Sleep Boogie*

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*Bill Kerwin*

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*Big Sleep Boogie*  
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# Chapter 1

“Archer,” I said, “You are a lucky man!”

I gazed out the window and watched the faded sun creep over the border into night. Then I looked down at the maze of stone and green below.

“Here you are, in your brand-new office. With a great location, and a pleasant view! And it’s yours . . . that is, if you can keep paying the rent. Yes, it’s a place where you can hear yourself think, where no wandering dead will disturb your thoughts, where—in fact—no self-respecting dead would ever wish to wander. No need to pinch yourself, you’re *here*, Archer Blackwood, gazing from the window of your very own office, secure in The Blackbird Arms, smack dab in the middle of Big Sleep Cemetery.”

This is just one of many things the living don’t understand about the dead. They think we are eternally linked to our monuments by some invisible chain. They think we continually lurk in graveyards, watching for unwary tourists, eager to gibber and howl.

Nothing could be further from the truth. Granted, it may have been true in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, before the science of embalming solved the problem of premature burial. But these days, when they lug our poor earthly shells—drained of blood and pumped full of formaldehyde—into a place like this, days after our spirits have crossed over, and then proceed to drop them into a six-foot hole lacking both history and atmosphere, what possible reason could we have to stick around?

Now it's true, if you're a recently dead Italian—or a Mexican or North African, for that matter, someone from a powerful traditional culture with amiable ties to the dead—you might choose to check up on the cemetery, at least for the first few weeks or so. Hang out on a Sunday, waiting for a visit from Nonna, hoping to hear the music of her Ave Marias, the click of her beads, or just to smell the scent of the anise and garlic that always clings to her clothes. But most grannies these days—whatever their culture—live far beyond the old city graveyards, past the outer belt, stuck in the living death of their nursing homes.

You see, there's little energy in a cemetery, and energy is what we dead people desperately need. It is places where the living congregate—sources of conflict, pleasure, and power—that attract us dead when our batteries begin to run low. A bloody fight, a hook-up joint, a popular restaurant, a church crowded with a congregation swaying and swooning to a syncopated Jesus: these are the places of the living that command the interest of the dead. Even if we can't see what is happening—and, 99% of the time at least, the living cannot be seen by the the dead—we can still feel their energy, still sense when something exciting is going on.

Sometimes, though, if we just want to kick back and hang out, we will go somewhere with a history, and this works even better if we feel we are part of that history too. The best places of all have both energy and history. My favorite hang-out, for example, a legend since the '40's, is still popular in the land of the dead. It closed ten years ago, but the building now hosts—so the new arrivals tell me—a mediocre Mexican restaurant, so it has a bit of live energy to recommend it too.

But, as I was saying to myself, just then, a cemetery is the last place you will find the wandering dead.

But you know how it is: just stick your neck out and say something you know for sure, and life will step up and make a liar out of you. And, as folks like me know best, death—just as likely as life—may come along and make a liar of you too.



Darkness was falling quickly. The sun was a ghost, a beige smudge. Particles of light flickered on the waters of the Whetstone like a colony of fireflies scattered close to the banks. East of the river, a few plasmobiles pattered south along the river road, seeking excitement in what must seem to them like a very big town.

But my eyes were drawn directly below. Something didn't look right.

In the near dark, at the southwest verge of the cemetery, stood the large maternal statue of a mourning angel, elbows on her monument, face cast down, wings arched over her head. Something behind her had caught my attention, something bright, and its brightness came closer—rushing back and forth, bobbing up and down, deepening the shadows in the foreground—as if it wished to help the sad mother angel gather the growing darkness in her wings.

Then I saw the source of the brightness. A woman—almost a girl—was moving, with the glimmer of the Whetstone behind her, as if she just risen from the water. She was searching for something or someone, moving from stone to stone.

At first I didn't notice the randomness of her movements, for she advanced with a concentrated panic, a panic with the illusion of purpose. Then I noticed how abruptly she moved her head, and I saw, in the light of her own brightness, the desperation in her eyes.

Her light was the most noticeable thing about her. It flowed outward from her chest, white with a diamond intensity. Her trunk and limbs glowed a rich amber, her extremities glimmered ruby red.

None of us glow like that in Big Sleep City except the ones who have just arrived. I wasn't surprised, for only a newcomer would be caught dead—so to speak—in a cemetery. And because she was new, it was particularly dangerous for her to be wandering alone.

I turned away from the window, opened the top right drawer of my desk, grabbed my I.D. and my icer, and rushed down the stairs. I followed the ground floor hallway to the cemetery, opened the back gate and slipped through.

Nothing was stirring in the place where I last saw her. But the real dead don't just disappear, like the dead in some live kid's spook story. It is real dead people we are talking about here, after all.

When I looked straight ahead I saw her: first a red glow, then her head and hands. She was leaning on a monument twenty yards away, staring at the statue of a young woman who looked down from a pedestal, her stone hair a flutter of ringlets about the shoulders. The girl looked hard at the smiling stone face, as if she wished to ask it a question.

I could see her better now. Her blouse was white and her hair was black, a bob with bangs. Dark intelligent eyes, a generous mouth. She looked to be in her early twenties—a couple of years younger than the statue.

I approached her silently—child's play for any card-carrying member of the dead—so that I could begin a conversation with her without setting off mental alarms. I drifted quietly toward her, making sure to come to a full stop, and then I put my hands at my sides before I spoke.

"Excuse me, young lady," I said, in my most inoffensive voice. But she startled, tense with fright, like a fawn surprised.

"I'm sorry. I don't wish to alarm you. It's just that you look sort of lost, and a little confused. Is there something I can do to help?"

I reached out a hand—slowly, tentatively—a gesture of support in her direction. Again she startled, and began to back away. The monument was no longer in front of her, and again I saw the diamond light burning beneath her breast.

"Stay away! What do you want from us? Haven't you done enough?" She moved again, farther away from me. She stood in front of the statue now, her arms slightly raised from her sides, her palms pointing backward, as if protecting the stone girl from harm.

I had a hunch, took my chance. "Your sister. Did something happen to your sister?"

She stiffened, began to sob, covering her face with her hands. Her white crystalline light pulsated as she wept.

Poor girl. As I stood silent before her, other images—other faces—flickered through my mind: scared teenagers summoned here by drug

overdose or car crash; old folks still clutching at their death bed sheets, recoiling from the pallid new “life” ahead of them; suicides raging at the unfairness of consciousness, begging for a second shot at oblivion. I had seen a lot of misery these last three years with City Immigration Services. And now, here I was, in my own private agency, and it was starting all over again.

But then again, who was I to complain? This was the excitement I wanted. And here she was, my first prospective client. Even if she didn’t know it yet.

I stood silent for a few minutes until she had finished weeping. I wanted to place a hand on her shoulder, but I knew if I came one step closer, she would run away into the night. Then the sobbing stopped. She lifted her hands from her face and stared at me with that hollow look that sometimes comes after sorrow.

How do you introduce yourself to a grieving woman in a graveyard? Silly as it sounds, I thought the formal approach might work.

“Hello, miss. My name is Archer. Archer Blackwood. I’m used to working with people who are new here, and I may be able to help you. I know how confusing it can be.”

“Here? Where is ‘here’?”

I paused. I hated this part. You’d think, after two years with CIS, I would be used to it by now. One thing I’ve learned, though: the best way to deliver bad news is not always the shortest. And for some, finding out they’re dead can be very hard to take.

I decided to answer her question with another question. “Where do you think you are?”

“I don’t know. So much has happened. A cemetery, of course. Is it the one close to the university?”

“Yes,” I said, “but it’s not that simple.”

“How can ‘Where am I?’ *not* be simple?”

“It isn’t. Let’s try this another way.”

I paused briefly, and then began again.

“Before you found yourself here, looking for your sister in this graveyard, where were you exactly?”

She frowned. Her eyes widened. She opened her mouth to scream, but I heard no scream. She stood frozen in place, her mouth still open.

Just when I began to believe she had turned herself into stone, she closed her mouth, opened it again, and spoke.

“I remember. You don’t have to tell me. I’m dead. I must be dead. They must have killed us both.”

“So your sister ...”

“Must be dead too. I got here, heard her calling, and assumed we were both alive. But now I remember they killed me. But I hear my sister calling, and she *must* be dead, since I know I’m dead too.”

I wasn’t sure I agreed, but I wasn’t going to argue. Not here, not now. First, she needed the reality to sink in.

“You’re dead alright. Just like me. And everybody else here. Welcome to Big Sleep City.”

She grimaced. “Thanks for setting me straight. Mr. ... Mr. ...”

“Archer. Archer Blackwood. You may call me ‘Archie,’ if you wish.”

“Thanks for setting me straight, Mr. Blackwood, but, if you will excuse me, I have things to do. I have to find my sister.” The words seemed right, but the voice was wrong. Flat, without emotion, the utterance of a machine.

“Wait a minute! You can’t wander off like that!”

“But I have things—urgent things—I must do. It might seem strange, but I can tell my sister needs me. I can hear her calling, even now. We were like twins that way.”

“But where will you go? What will you do? It’s dangerous to wander without a guide, without a feel for the terrain or a knowledge of the environment.”

“But this is Columbus, Ohio. This is where I grew up.”

“Not exactly. And it’s not called Columbus, Ohio. It’s—”

“I know, you told me. It’s Big Sleep City.”

“Not really. That’s just the nickname I give it. Death. The Big Sleep. You know: Raymond Chandler. The official name is still Franklinton—what they called Columbus two hundred years ago. The old-timey dead liked the name Franklinton, and, since we dead all swim neck deep in the



past, the old name stuck. You see, the average dead person is more bound to the past than your average live person is. Which helps explain why—”

I broke off because of a better idea. Just like the man says: *Don't tell 'em, show 'em!*

“Let’s try something,” I said.

I smiled and looked at her. Her automatic pilot was off now. I sensed she was ready for a challenge.

“Turn around. Now look past the cemetery, over there, to the west. What do you see?”

“The Olentangy River, I guess.”

“We call it the Whetstone. But look again. Anything else you see, anything different from what you remember?”

She frowned, then smiled. “Why, the river should be in back of the cemetery, not in front!”

“Very good. Weird, isn’t it? None of us know why these displacements happen. We’re pretty sure it has to do with water and green space and gardens, but nobody knows exactly how or why. Anything else you notice? Between us and the river, along the cemetery fence?”

“A road. Why, that must be the Olentangy—I mean, the Whetstone–River Road.”

“You’re getting the hang of it now. But what is different about it?”

She frowned again. Then her eyes brightened.

“It’s so small. Not six lanes, or four. It’s two! And it’s darker than I remember. That’s why I didn’t notice it at first. There are hardly any streetlights, hardly any lights at all.” This must be what Columbus looked like fifty years ago.

I smiled. “Good guess, kid. But as usual—in death as in life—things are more complicated than they seem. What year it is here in any given neighborhood of Big Sleep City depends on a lot of things: the total number of ethnic dead anchored in a particular neighborhood, their average year of death, and the number of old-timey dead who haven’t yet faded or raged away. Italian Village is the World War II era, North Campus is filled with late ’60s types who never made it to *their own* 60s. Clintonville is a mixed bag—mostly ’50s, with a smattering of faders from before the ’20s hanging

around because they like the old amusement park so much. But the late '50s, early '60s is the average for most neighborhoods."

She looked uncertain. She had probably been born in the late '90s. '50s Columbus and a city full of dead people were both foreign countries to her.

I took advantage of her confusion to scare her. "You'll never find your way around here, especially at night. And there are people here who could hurt you—people who could hurt you bad."

She laughed a brittle laugh. "What're they gonna do? Kill me again?"

"At the risk of sounding Victorian, Miss, there *are* fates worse than death. And remember: you will find no death available to stop your suffering here."

Her face filled with fear—and compassion. "I must find my sister!"

"I'll help you. But please don't go off alone. Look, why don't you come up to my office? I have some questions to ask you, questions that may give me a better idea how to go about my search. Besides, I've got a brand new bottle of water-of-life in the bottom drawer of my desk."

"Life-water?"

"Life-Water. *Usquebaugh. Aqua vitae.* The closest thing to good whiskey we have here in Deadville."

She smiled, but wasn't convinced. "How do I know you aren't one of those people you just now warned me against?"

"You don't. Not really. But here. Let me show you something."

She began to back away again.

"Don't worry. I don't need to come any closer. Watch me: I'll back away too."

She stopped then, and stood silent, waiting for me to tell her more.

"There. Is that far enough? Now listen." I spoke to her softly, slowly. "Can you feel the heat inside you—in the center of your chest?"

"Yes. It's a powerful feeling. Strange, but I never noticed it before."

"Good. So you feel it. Keep feeling it. Now close your eyes, and bring yourself into that center, inside the light. Experience everything you see and feel through that light."

"Yes... I'm there. Got it."

“Excellent. Now—still in the center, still in the warm—send the heat to ... are you right-handed or left-handed?”

“Left-handed.”

“Send the full force of the heat you feel into your left hand.”

I looked, as the red-wine glow of her left-hand was transformed into bright amber.

“Good! Now point your left index finger at me. I am your target. Zap me in the chest.”

“What?”

“You heard me. Zap me in the chest.”

“But—”

“Dammit, woman! You say you don’t trust me? Goddammit! I’ll give you a reason not to trust me!” I advanced toward her, menacingly, raising my hand as if to strike.

It worked. She pointed her finger like I told her and zapped me right in the chest.

Overwhelmed with force and light, I was thrown backward a dozen yards. The next thing I knew, I was flat, looking up at the half-hidden face of the mourning angel.

“So,” I said, scrambling to my feet, “Do I still fill you with fear?”

“Not so much as before,” she smiled. “But, if I can do that to you, can’t you do it to me too?”

“No I can’t. Look down at your chest. See that big white lump shining there?”

She nodded.

“Now look at me. Do you see anything inside me that looks remotely like that?”

“No. Nothing white. Dark orange mostly, trailing off to reds, then purples.”

“Only you new folks have what we call the white crystal. It fades away after three years or so. You can do things with it we veteran dead can’t do.”

“Good to know. So tell me then, Archer: what exactly do I need you for anyway?”

A smart-ass, this woman. I was beginning to like her.

“Because newbies—that’s what we call you new arrivals—are just a bunch of little baby supermen.”

“Superwomen?”

“Okay, superwomen. A bunch of little baby superwomen, filled with powers they don’t understand, more innocent than the day they were born—or died. And there are people here—bad people—who know how to turn your crystal into cash, are willing to stop at nothing to control you and people like you. Me? I’m just a guy who knows the ropes and can show you how to survive.”

She paused, taking it all in it in.

“And how to find my sister?”

“I’ll do my best.”

She stretched to full height, like someone who had made a decision.

“Thanks for setting me straight, Mr. Blackwood. Or may I call you Archie?”

“Archie it is.”

“I’m Maria. Maria Mortabella. Won’t you show me the way to your office, Archie?”

When we reached the back door of the Blackbird Arms, she saw my face in the overhead light. She didn’t like what she saw, but this time she didn’t back away.

“Don’t worry. I won’t bite you,” I said. “That yellowish color my skin has? All the dead have it. You have it too. We call it low yellow.”

Maria looked down at her own arms. She shuddered once, and then grimaced in recognition.

“I was thinking, Archie, now that I can see that I’m really dead, I could use a little of that—what did you call it?—that”water of life.”

## Chapter 2

At the top of the stairs, my office door greeted us. The frosted glass panel proclaimed: *Archer Blackwood, P.I.*

“P.I. Private Investigator?”

“Private Immigration,” I said. “We help newbies like you with the stuff City Immigration won’t touch.”

“Like what?”

“Bodyguard stuff. Security advice stuff. Looking for missing sisters.”

“Are you sure you can help me find my sister?”

“I can try. But first I need to know a couple of things. Have a seat.”

I gestured toward the front of my desk, in the directions of the red leather chair. “I’ll rustle up some of that Water of Life I’ve been telling you about.”

I walked past her and sat down in the yellow leather chair, the one behind my desk, and fetched a bottle and two small glasses from the bottom drawer. I poured two fingers worth in each of the glasses, and handed one of them to her.

“Here. This should help a bit.”

She drank half, and put the glass down. “Thanks. I think it does.”

“Good. Now, pardon my bluntness, but time may matter here. Do you know for sure who died first? Was it you or was it your sister?” She frowned. “I thought she must have died first, since she was calling to me as soon as I came to in the cemetery. But they had separated the two of us half an hour before. And I didn’t see her die.”

“You didn’t see her body?”

“No.”

“Didn’t hear anything—a gunshot, a scream—from the next room? Anything you remember?”

“No. After they separated us, they took me away. In a van.”

“So as far as you know, she may still be alive? She may not be dead at all?”

“But I still feel her calling—”

“Even if you’re right, if it’s not just your grief talking, can’t the living still call out to the dead? Good hard cash has changed hands through the centuries on that assumption, and we wouldn’t have bogus mediums or the Sistine Chapel if the living didn’t believe they could influence and be influenced by the dead.”

“But she seems so close, right next to me!”

“Closeness can be a funny thing, especially in Big Sleep City. It can be proximity, sure, but it can be affinity too. You and your sister may always be close, even when separated by death.”

“And what do you think, Archer?”

“Me? I’m a skeptic. Sure, I know the world of the living exists. Heck, I came from there. Everybody here came from there. But are there mystical phone lines connecting us? And if so, how’s the service? Can we travel back and forth, like a commuter train? The jury’s out, as far as I’m concerned. But if communication like that does happen, I bet it happens less than half as often as most of the people on both sides of the border think it does.”

I saw a new look on her face. A look of horror. “That means my sister could still be alive. She could be hurt by those men—*being* hurt by those men—and calling out for help from some place where I can’t find her.”

What could I say? I freshened her drink. Then I poured myself a second, and drank it down.

“Now tell me: where was your sister—”

“Cecilia. Cee-Cee.”

“Cee-Cee. Where was Cee-Cee the last time you saw her?”

“In the living room of her apartment, on East 13th Avenue, being pushed around by a guy with a gun.”

“Okay. So maybe she’s alive, maybe she’s not. But if she’s dead, our best chance of finding her tonight is to check out that apartment on 13th.”

“Is that the point where everyone arrives here? The place they were when they died?”

“Not always. Sometimes it’s your home. Sometimes your favorite park bench. Or maybe you show up next to someone here who has died, someone you love—or hate. But mostly—especially if the death is violent—you show up in the place where you died.”

I stood up, and walked across the room to the closet next to the office door.

“I think we should travel down south and check out the apartment now, before Cee-Cee wanders far. Of course we could walk or take a plasmocab, but that would take fifteen minutes at least. Or . . . I could show you another little trick—something only a newbie can do.”

“Sure. Anything that’ll get us there faster.”

I opened the closet and took a normal looking jacket off the hanger. I had two of them, a large and a small. The small was still a size too big, but for now it would have to do.

“Here. Put this on. Its a special kind of jacket, thought-weaved from psychically slowed-up molecules—or something. I don’t understand how it works, really, but it keeps people from seeing that big bright crystal of yours. We don’t want to attract attention and we certainly don’t want trouble.”

“Okay,” she said, and put it on. “Now what do you want me to do?”

“Do you know 13th Avenue and Cee-Cee’s apartment well enough to make a mental picture of the exterior?”

“Yes. I’m sure I can. I’ve been there dozens of times.”

“Good. If you concentrate, you should be able to travel there in a second. And, if you and I are in contact, mentally and physically, you should be able to take me along.”

I grabbed hold of her shoulders and turned her slightly. “Face this way, toward the southeast.”

Then I stood directly in front of her and held out my arms. “Grab on to my wrists. Grip them firmly. Now close your eyes and concentrate until

you can see 13th. Cee-Cee's building, the lawn in front, the apartment next to it—whatever makes it vivid.”

“Yes. I can see it.”

“Keep that image clear, feel the warmth at your center, and send that warmth out in the direction of the place you want to be. Then, when you are ready, go.”

She held on tight, like someone afraid of falling. Then she took a big breath. And we were there.



It was a typical south campus street, filled with old rooming houses and converted doubles. Interspersed here and there were a few anonymous rectangles—shoebox apartments erected in the '60s or '70s. Cee-Cee's apartment building was one of these.

Everything about 13th seemed faded and hazy, as if the street itself had been imperfectly imagined. There was nobody—nothing—moving here, except for one plastic bag, uncertainly buoyed by the wind.

You could tell this was not the sort of street a dead person could ever come to like.

“It reminds me of photographs I've seen,” Maria said. “Photographs of Detroit.” She frowned. “I know the buildings aren't falling down. But they look like they're falling down *inside* somehow, where it counts.”

On the side of the shoebox in front of us was an external metal stairway that looked like a fire escape. Maria mounted the stairs toward the second floor apartments, and I followed.

“Go ahead,” I said, when she stopped at the door of Number 5. “Doors are no barrier here. Not without thought-locks, and they're too expensive for the college crowd. Knock if you wish to be polite. Then just walk right on in.”

She knocked. No response. We entered with caution.

To the right, there was a small kitchen with a dining area. To the left was what you might call a living room. There was a fraying gray couch shoved up against the wall, a print of Picasso's *Old Man with Guitar* hanging above. Down the hall was a bathroom and three bedrooms. None of the



bedrooms had furniture, or any signs of life, except for one Farah Fawcett poster hanging on a wall. I wondered what long-departed fantasy had anchored her desperate smile to this place.

“There’s nothing of Cee-Cee here,” she said. “And I can barely hear her now.”

As we walked outside, onto the cold metal platform, we could see, above the roof of the rooming house next door, the first hint of dawn.

“There is nothing of anybody present here,” I said. “because nobody ever cared about this place. It has always been just a stepping stone, a place people live on the way to someplace else. Nothing here can feed the dead. There’s no life, no history here.”



We decided to walk the ten blocks back to the office. I told Maria that maybe Cee-Cee had been drawn to High Street, that we might find her there, but—between you and me—I didn’t really believe it. The reason I suggested a High Street walk was that Maria’s energy had dropped to amber levels. She exerted herself twice tonight, and I didn’t want to tire her out with any more newbie ju-ju—certainly not an unnecessary piggyback trip back to my office. It would be better if she was in full energy mode tomorrow for her interview with City Immigration. As it was, she would need at least a few hours’ sleep before her levels would be normal again.

Besides, that would give both of us a chance to unwind, to experience a little of High Street before it lost its charm to the crowded claims of the day, one last chance to watch Big Sleep City glimmer a little, when the street people were still in their element, before the rising of our unimpressive sun.

We passed Dirty C’s, the all night diner. In the back I could see Iris the waitress ministering to the fatal-overdose crowd, who—as usual—had survived into almost morning. Some, high on the local think-weed, were scarfing down cheesecake and burgers at the counter. Others, strung out on vitasim, babbled excitedly. In front of us, framed by the window, was a thin man wearing a trilby hat who looked a little like William Burroughs. That is Morrice Dance, the philosopher. He can always be seen, through

the night and beyond, in the very last booth of Dirty C's, typing his eternal philosophy dissertation on a portable Underwood.

Almost everything else on the street was closed for the night. A few hippies still discussed the cosmos on the steps of the long-shuttered Christian Science Reading Room. Elsie's Burger-Rama was closed too, although one couple remained, at an outside table, whispering to each other furiously. At their feet the shadows of pigeons picked at the ghosts of fries.

The Club Laurence had closed four hours ago, but a couple of old hippies I sort of knew were sitting on the advertising bench in front of the parking lot, looking very much like they wanted to go somewhere but didn't quite know where to go. I acknowledged them with a brief nod as we walked by.

Besides Dirty C's, the only place always open this late was Buccaneer Donuts. Bucks was still open in the world of the living too, and the living energy acted on the dead like a magnet. At 3 AM it was always the happening place on campus.

I bought five annies worth of donuts for breakfast—Maria and I choose an assortment—and then we walked through campus back to my office at the Arms.



"How about we save the donuts for later?" I said. "Newbies need their sleep. What's say we share one more Lebenswasser, and get some rest?"

She nodded. I poured the drinks. She sipped hers, leaned back in her red leather chair, and closed her eyes. Then she smiled—briefly, wistfully—as if in anticipation of sleep.

"Nice leather chair. You have good taste in furniture."

"Thanks, but I can't take the credit. They belonged to the private detective—a fat man—who had the office before me. Had had his own personal chair too—nice, but too big for me. As Mrs. Gaffney—the landlady—says, 'Himself and his fat just faded away, as he pined for a good old fashioned murder.' Fading away is literally possible in here."

A cloud came over her face. "Shall I tell you my story—what happened tonight?"

"Yes. It might help me if I could know the rest."

She leaned forward in her chair, took another sip of her drink, and began.

"I came up from Cincinnati to visit my sister. I'm a senior at Xavier there. Cee-Cee had gone to Xavier too—we spent two years together—but after graduation she decided to come back home, get a master's from OSU and teach high school in Columbus. Our father's aunt Sofia—we called her Aunt Sofia too—hadn't been doing well lately, and Cee-Cee wanted to be closer, not far from the old family place in Italian Village, to keep an eye on her. After all, she was the one who raised us. It turned out, though, that she had been sicker than we thought. She dropped dead, of a stroke, at the age of seventy-one, six months ago.

Cee-Cee was executor, and she decided we should go through the family papers together. But we kept putting it off. There were boxes and boxes in Aunt Sofia's basement—even stuff belonging to my mother and father. It was going to be a chore. And painful too.

"Cee-Cee received a good offer on the Italian Village place, on the condition of a quick possession. So she got some guy she knew from grad school to help her load all the stuff in his truck and take it to 13th, where they piled it up in the back bedroom—the one that now has that Farrah Fawcett poster on the wall.

"Tonight, after dinner, we were just starting to go through everything, sitting on the floor of the living room with some photo albums, the fire-proof box of family papers, and one random box of stuff we brought out from the back. We hadn't made it any further than the photo album when there was a knock at the door.

"Cee-Cee answered. Three men came through the door, dressed in black, balaclavas hiding their faces. One was short. He had mean eyes. Very mean eyes. And he was the one with the gun.

"What do want from us, Cee-Cee said. Shut up bitch, the little man said, and looked around until he saw the metal box. The key, where is the fucking key, Mean Eyes said, and Cee-Cee told him it was right there, taped to the bottom of the box. Good girl, Mean Eyes said. Then he went through the papers, one by one—throwing each on the floor when he was

finished, getting madder and madder everytime. When he was done, he heaved the metal box against the wall.”

Maria paused for a moment. She was taking it all in—as if she could see it—for the second time. Then she began again.

“Mean Eyes looked down at the cardboard box from the basement. Dump that box on the table, he said to the other two. Go through it, you know the kind of thing we want. Every once in a while one of them would hand the little man a paper, and he would frown at it, read a little, and then throw it on the floor.

“My sister asked what do you want with our family papers, and he said Shut up bitch, do you want some of this—raising his gun over his head, acting like he would hit her. Soon that box was empty too. They still hadn’t found what they wanted.

“Is this all, he said, and Cee-Cee said no, there are more boxes in the back. So they marched us down the hall, making us go first, into the back bedroom.

“The little man cursed again when he saw them, a dozen and a half more boxes lined up against the wall.

“Any books in here, he said. Any diary books? I don’t think so, I said. Aunt Sofia never kept a diary.

“Too many goddam boxes, Mean Eyes said. Too many goddam people too.

“He whispered a few words to the others. They grabbed me, gagged me, blindfolded me. Then I guess they took me to the back lot behind the apartments. There they shoved me in a van.

“They drove around. For at least a half hour. But it seemed to last forever.

“Then I heard the door open, and they pulled me out of the van. I heard a click. Then something like a meteor hit me in the back of the head.

“The next thing I know, I woke up in the cemetery. And met you, Archie. That’s all I remember.”