

U-Pull-It

by Hal Stemmler

How do you ever know it's *really* over? Haven't you been in that space before, where you've broken up, at least for the record, with the love of your life, but you can't let yourself believe she won't come around somehow? Let me tell you exactly how you can know it's over. I don't consider myself lucky, by any means, but I *know* it's over between me and Irene. Oh yeah, there's no doubt about it. I guess I can thank U-Pull-It. It's not how I wanted things to work out, God knows. I'm not kidding when I say you can find just about anything you need, or anything you even *think* you need, down at the big U-Pull-It wrecking yard over on Marysville Road.

I really don't mind going down there. In fact, I like it. I'm a people watcher, in my own way, and believe me, you get a lot to watch over there. I'm not an *artist* or anything, and I'm not going over there for a good time, but you sure do get some surprises in a place where they drop off all those wrecks.

Man, I *do* mean surprises. I'm talking about car wrecks, of course. It's a funny idea, if you think about it. I think we're smarter with our graveyards for cars than we are about our graveyards for people, and the whole sick business of what we do when somebody dies. You've got the undertakers and funeral parlors, the layers of middle men who are nothing but leeches. Do you know what they'll do with *you* when you keel over? I don't. Mostly I don't care to think about it. I've never really been to a funeral I liked, if you know what I mean. We're just more adult, more civilized, just smarter about what we do with cars that die. *They* don't just keel over; they keel into something. But when people say they totalled their car, they're talking insurance talk. It's just too damn much work for the insurance company to pay for repairs, so they call it a "total." You and I know, or you do if you've ever had to fix your own car, and God knows I've had to fix a few; anyway, you and I know most of a "totalled" car is still perfectly good, and if half of it is bashed in and you can't get to the parts you need on that side, you can usually find another one that's bashed in on the other side, so you've got practically a whole car willing to give you what you

want. Now if we were that rational about humans, we'd never have a problem coming up with the body parts we need to save the living, would we? And I, for one, wouldn't shed a tear for a single unemployed undertaker, or anyone else who lives off other people's grief.

So picture this: row after row of dead cars, all neat and organized, for as far as you can see. But you look at it for a minute, and you realize this is no ordinary parking lot. From overhead it probably looks like one, only somebody has dumped a bunch of junk around the cars. For sure, you'd have a hard time pulling out of this lot. You've got



your old-school GM boats in one section. It's mostly Mexican kids you'll see there, looking for stuff for their low riders. You've got another huge section of Japanese sedans, mostly Toyotas and Nissans, but some others, too. You'll find just about anybody there, and a fair number of women, too. Those Japanese cars look

the most picked over, or maybe they just get more mangled at their moment of death. There's a smaller section with the European cars, like Volvos and Saabs, some old Mercedes, the occasional Jag, but not too many Beemers. There's vans in one area, and pickups in another, but the pickups are kind of separate, too: American pickups here, the Fords, Dodges, and Chevys, and Japanese there.

None of these cars is standing on its own wheels! When you think about it, aren't tires and wheels about the easiest things to turn over quick for cash? So these thousands of cars have their wheels removed, somebody must sell the tires, and then the wheels that nobody wants they set down on the gravel, pretty much where the wheels were to start with, and they plunk the wreck on them like they were four poles in the ground. I've seen them do it. This guy in a big, yellow, diesel rig, like a big fork lift, slides those tongs under the wreck's belly, then he cruises down the lane like a parking valet—only he isn't worrying too much if he dings a car or two on the way in—and he sets the carcass neatly on the four wheels that have been stripped of their tires. It's like being buried in somebody else's shoes, isn't it? Talk about skilled labor. I mean, when you become an expert at placing wrecks at U-Pull-It, what do you do

next? What do you put on your resume?

But I'm trying to tell you how I know it's over between me and Irene. I had to go down to the yard last Saturday because I'm down to one car. Scary, isn't it? I mean, these days, who can get by with just one set of wheels? You got one car, and some morning it doesn't start, so then where are you? Not only can you not get to work, but you can't even get to the parts store to fix the car. Sure, if you have a brand new car, you're not supposed to worry about that. But I have news for you: new cars don't stay new. No, I've never had one, but I know plenty of people who have—you probably have, right? A couple of years down the road, and bang, you're paying twelve or fourteen hundred bucks to keep it running. If it's one of these Lexus or Acura type cars, they'll call it routine maintenance. If it's a regular car, they'll call it repair work, but it's a lot of money either way.

My Toyota suddenly overheated last Tuesday. I won't tell you the whole story about that, but I finally had to jerry-rig the belts to get it home. It turned out the fan assembly on the front of the engine was frozen, so the fan wouldn't turn. I quickly found out this was one of those dealer specials, guaranteed to cost you a fortune. I swear the engineers try to put at least one of these parts on every car. This one is a fan blade mounting assembly, nobody else makes it, and the dealer lists it at over \$600. Independent shops don't complain because it's a special markup deal. Half that money is going to the shop that installs it. What can you do except try to find a used one? After all, the shops will tell you this is a part that doesn't go bad all that often. So I head over to U-Pull-It to see if I can pull one off a wreck.

The Toyota breaking down isn't the only reason I'm down to driving the van around town. If it were, I guess I wouldn't be telling you this story. The truth is, Irene took the Mercedes when she left me three weeks ago. The truth is, she stole it, because I sure didn't say she could have it. What do you call it when somebody borrows something without asking permission and has no plans to give it back? I call it stealing. Yeah, it pissed me off big time. Big time.

It was a nice car. It was a '81 chocolate brown Mercedes. I don't think they really make them that big anymore, and it didn't have much wrong with it. I got it about five years ago when I first moved out here, and I swear I bought it from a little old lady who only drove it to church on Sundays. The body wasn't perfect, but it cleaned up real nice. The dash had seen too much sun, and I really needed to get one of those covers they make to hide the cracks and stains, but I never did get around to it. The rest of the interior was in really good condition. It had a cream leather upholstery, and while the color was worn away in a lot of places, especially in the front seats, there were no holes at all. It was intact, from front to back, and the back seat was

in great shape. It was better than new, really. The leather still had its color, but felt very soft to the touch, not sticky at all like some cars with that shiny, never-been-rubbed stuff that almost passes for vinyl.

That back seat was Irene's favorite place to fuck. Mine, too, but I wasn't as picky. We'd find a place to park, and she would tell me to roll the windows up so she wouldn't mind making a little noise. She didn't have to tell me twice, no, I didn't hesitate for a minute. I think she really liked the feel of her bare ass sliding on that worn leather in the back seat while I was pounding down into her. Yeah, she made noise alright! And I knew how to shut her up, too. That back seat was just wide enough so I could plant my feet on the armrest on the driver's side, and she would reach up with both hands and hang on for dear life to the leather loop just over the passenger window while I was doing it to her. I'd have my hands squeezing her tits and when I moved in, I'd reach around, dig my thumbs into her armpits, and kind of grab her by the shoulder blades and work her good. When she really started moaning, I'd slide my hands down and grab her ass, and I could feel the extra heat on her skin. That's what I think she liked best about that car, sliding her hot ass on that friendly, worn leather.

Anyway, she took the Mercedes, but I knew she'd be back. That didn't help my car situation, though, not to mention my love life. My Mercedes is "borrowed," my pickup is boiling over waiting for that \$600 part, and I've got nothing but my big old van to drive me to the one place that always makes sense: U-Pull-It.

When I pulled into the parking lot it was already past two in the afternoon, and the sun was smothered in the hot haze of a summer air inversion. I paid the two bucks, let them look through my small tool box, and the plump Mexican girl stamped my hand. She smiled but didn't say anything, though she had talked up a storm in Spanish with the guys in front of me. The haze seemed to hiss and buzz; the freeway is just beyond the ten-foot cyclone fence and the ratty trailer park that backs up to it, and there's a generating plant a little further down the road. I was sweating already when I started down the first row of steel cadavers.

I looked under the yellow metal awning bolted to the side of the checkout trailer to see if Coinpicker was there, but I guessed he was sleeping in today. Maybe they don't drop off any new wrecks on Saturdays. I used to see him there, lounging on a plastic chair, wearing blue denim farmer john overalls and I never saw him wear a shirt, even when it was cold. He was a pretty big guy, white; didn't have a lot of hair. If I hadn't talked to him once a couple of years ago, I probably wouldn't have noticed him. I still had the Volvo then, and I was looking for a better driver seat because the one in there was killing my back. I had just started down a row of European cars when I heard the grind of the lift

truck behind me. I turned around and saw a pretty new 240 two-door towering over me. The first three slots in the row were empty—don't ask me what they do with the bodies that have been so picked over there's nothing left—and I hadn't noticed the wheel rim pedestals were already in place. I moved back and the operator lowered the Volvo tenderly, dropped the forks to the ground, backed up and disappeared. This is my lucky day, I thought, since the seat I was looking for had to come from a two-door model so it would flip forward. This car was in great shape, and yes, the seats' upholstery was still good.

I had no sooner opened the driver's side door to plan the extraction when the door on the other side swung open and this fifty-something, bald white guy with bare arms and shoulders, wearing a dirty blue farmer john, leans in and asks if I mind him looking the car over. I said I was just taking the seat, so go ahead. His big hand immediately dove into the pouch on the back of the front passenger seat and deftly removed several coins. I was bringing the wrenches out of my travel kit, and I watched Coinpicker from the corner of my eye. Like a pair of ballroom dancers, his beefy hands waltzed along the edges of the floor upholstery, jitterbugged around the shift box and the cup holders, and foxtrotted under the passenger seat, front and then back. By now I was staring. From every nook and cranny came pennies, nickels, dimes, and a surprising number of quarters. After he had flipped up the back seat and worked through the trunk, I insisted he shake down the front seat I was removing. In less than five minutes, he had pocketed a total of seven dollars and twenty-three cents, all coins except for the dollar bill that had been wrapped up with the car jack. I had asked him about the total—he hadn't volunteered it, but shared the information matter-of-factly. Volvos were generally pretty good, he said, but there probably wasn't a wreck on these ten acres that didn't have enough petty change to buy at least a candy bar.

He seemed like a nice enough guy, but I thought my God! What is this country coming to if people are making a living ferreting coins out of old wrecks in junk yards?

That's how I feel about tattoo guys, too. What is this world coming to if guys can make a living tricking people into defacing their god-given skin with smudgy abominations they call "art." Tattoos didn't bother me much, until Irene took up with a so-called "tattoo artist." The last time I talked to her on the phone, she told me she had met this guy named Max who did tattoos. Basically, he was doing her, too. What the fuck! She had never said anything about wanting to get a tattoo! She hung up on me before I could find out anything else. I don't remember what I said to her, but I wasn't exactly calm about it. She hadn't answered the phone the last couple of times I had called, including the night before when I had called all night, every half hour. I didn't get a lot of sleep, so I was pretty cranky, and maybe I raised my voice.

I checked around and found out there was a tattoo parlor with a guy named Max in this little dive behind the video store on 14th Avenue. I staked the place out for the next couple of days, and caught sight of him three times. He was a pretty big guy with a bright red flat top; the longest waxed strands stood up from a widow's peak that marched aggressively down his forehead. Each time he was wearing a sleeveless denim vest separating two massive shoulders, each hung with a big meat hook of an arm. Each triceps, biceps, and forearm had tattoos, but not as many as you might expect from a creep who smears up other people's skin for a buck. The first two times I saw the guy, he was wearing wraparound shades; the third time I got a pretty good look at his face. I was going to talk to him, but I gave it up. What could I say? He didn't look like a poet, if you know what I mean. It was unbelievable Irene would go for that, but there it was. She had told me herself.

I walked around the end of the row by the fence, down another line of pickups, and when I turned back into the main roadway I saw a man standing under a great, white Mexican straw hat, staring at the first wreck in the next row. I walked around him, but he didn't notice me at all. I looked at him. He was dressed more for going to a rodeo than for a greasy junk yard. He was in his 40's, heavily built, starting with his face, heavy, reddish, with thin black hair and a thin black moustache. His white, collared, almost dressy shirt betrayed the beginnings of a pot belly; his new-looking jeans tapered tightly into his black cowboy boots. He was leaning on his back foot, his arms hanging straight down on both sides, his small steel tool box on the ground next to him. He was staring at what looked like a Wagoneer, seriously smashed in on one side. What was *he* looking at? I found a Toyota about four cars in, and as I lifted the hood, I looked back. The man had not moved. Did he recognize something? Was he waiting for the car to speak to him? Was he thinking about the part he was going to remove, or was he thinking about something totally separate?

I met Irene on a Friday night almost six months ago at the video store, not the one on 14th Avenue, but the one on Childs Street that carries adult movies in a back room protected by a thick black curtain. I had already had a couple of drinks at Hanley's, and I was cheering myself up with the idea of taking home a movie. I wasn't planning on picking up any porn, but there I was backing in the direction of the black curtain, with *Kill Bill* tucked under my arm, pretending to look at the titles in the classics section when I bumped into her. I turned around and in measured thoughts saw she was not a teenager, and she was beautiful. Brown hair curved gracefully to her shoulders. I looked down and saw brown eyes, freckles sprinkled across her cheeks, a silver mounted emerald lying on a clinging yellow jersey that held up gorgeous breasts. I saw the pockets on the back of tight jeans that swelled up with promise from

the nape of her back. I stopped breathing. It felt like my arms were already around her waist. I sensed no panic, no embarrassment in my own unreliable thoughts. The rest of the evening was a movie and I was in it. I spoke to her. I don't remember what I said. She spoke to me. She was smiling. I was smiling. She was alone. We stopped looking for movies—she had pulled *Bend It Like Beckham*. We walked out into the parking lot. I asked her for her phone number. She laughed. We drifted out of the light, over to my pickup. We were kissing. She came to my apartment. We put on *Bend It Like Beckham* and didn't watch it. We hooked up. It was after midnight when I took her in the Mercedes back to her car. Before we even left the parking lot behind my building she laughed, scrambled over the headrest and into the back seat.

The Toyota's engine had already been pulled. I hoisted my tool box and looked back. The man in the white hat was still studying his Wagoneer. I kept walking. The endless rows of wrecks have a hypnotic effect after awhile. You start to lose your grip on what part you were looking for, and which cars might harbor it. I found myself looking at models I had parted with years ago. Sometimes I would look inside cars for no reason other than sick curiosity. When a front end is smashed in like that, what happens to the people sitting inside? Let's see how far the steering column has been rammed through the driver's seat. I have become a junk yard voyeur. What kind of person would own an early 80's Jag? Let's take a peek inside; there certainly will be clues. A cracked High Endurance deodorant stick on the back seat floor. The indestructible package of a bag of Reese's peanut butter cups, with the candy gone, still the brightest star in a constellation of trash in the coverless trunk. The artifacts of the last of this poor car's lineage of ownership and abuse.

I noticed an Indian lady walking around carrying a black trash bag. Nobody stands out at U-Pull-It, but when my eye caught her a second time, I looked a bit more closely. She was short and plump, her gown covered her feet, a drape of faded purple hung over one shoulder, and a scarf covered her black hair. She was homely, with the air of a grandmother, although she didn't look that old. When I rounded another row of pickups, I saw her again. That's when it hit me. She had no tools, and what can a person carry in a plastic trash bag? It sure wouldn't hold any car parts, even if she found something already pulled and lying on the ground.

That made me think about Heather. I don't think about her that often anymore, even though we were married for almost five years. She always carried a purse the size of a suitcase, but never once did I see her reach into it or use anything from it. The only times she needed something a person might be expected to carry in a purse—tissues, address book, a pen, perhaps—she never had it with her. Not once. I started keeping track. It was like that at the

end with the cell phone she got. She never had it with her. One time when her car broke down, she had to stop a total stranger to borrow a phone to call for help. She would call me at the most irritating times, with nothing to say, but she never once answered that phone when I tried to call her. She was born on the wrong planet. I guess it's a good thing we never had kids. What would that have been like? Yeah, I was surprised when she told me she was pregnant with her new man, and she had a girl within a year of our divorce. I can't picture it, but it's not my problem.

I found another Toyota, but this one had its front end smashed in, and although the engine was still there, after I had removed the destroyed radiator and a couple of the bolts holding the assembly in place, I could see the shaft was probably bent, and the fan would wobble if I installed it on my car.

The haze seemed to thicken with the peak of the afternoon heat. I didn't seem right to breathe it, and I was uncomfortable with feeling myself wrapped in its smother. I bent down to grab my toolbox when I was startled by a vision that appeared down the row of junked cars. Two men had materialized out of the hissing mists, as though transported through time to a portal in U-Pull-It. They were large, faceless creatures, clad in dingy yellow, grease-streaked mechanics overalls, stooped in oxen exertion, shoulders wracked against a yellow steel yoke that seemed an extension of their suits. They were dragging a lurching, two-story tower of tubular steel, teetering on four widely-spaced, reluctant wheels. Each had draped a white tee-shirt over their heads that made me think of Egypt. They might have been slaves dragging enormous stone blocks on wheelless sleds across pitted sands to build the Pharaoh's pyramids. But was there evidence of human sacrifice in ancient Egypt? Surely these drones were sent from a culture far more cruel, for a chain pulley dangled from the top center of their four-legged spider. From the pulley hung the bleeding heart of a large car. Black blood oozed from the engine's severed aorta, and odd ventricles, valves, and vessels twitched in protest of the violent extraction. What pagan ceremony could sanction such inglorious suffering? A power plant so large surely had been taken from an American car—possibly still alive when the amputation was performed, likely with no anesthetic.

Money's been the problem. The divorce ruined me financially. I guess it would have ruined Heather, too, if she hadn't hooked up with that guy who built the shopping center on the north side. We had more debts than assets to split up, and that's why I've been renting for the past three years. Being married to Heather was about as close as I've ever come to owning a new car, and it wasn't all that close. I should have sold the Mercedes this spring, but I met Irene. And now what do I have to show for it? No Mercedes, and no Irene. I couldn't accept that. I couldn't cut loose. How long could that Max creep keep her interested? She

had to come back. I *knew* she'd be back.

I must have been getting cranky since I hadn't gotten my part, it was really hot, and I only had about an hour left before closing, but this time when I saw the Indian bag lady, I put my tools down, walked over to her, and asked what was in the bag. I could tell she didn't speak English and I pointed to the bag. I knew I was scaring her, but after I pointed a third time I took it from her and looked inside. Kid clothes! There wasn't anything in it except little shirts, shorts, even some sandals. I couldn't look at her when I gave the bag back.

You wouldn't believe the crap people keep in their cars. It's not just fast food cups and trash, but coffee mugs, plates, knives, forks, spoons, chop sticks. I found a perfectly good toaster in the back seat of a Volkswagen once. Want to spiff up your appearance? I've seen berets, razors, hair ties, combs, brushes, neck ties, bracelets, necklaces, rings. You'll find every kind of food imaginable, if the rats, mice, and other wildlife don't find it first. How many times have I seen fruit loops glued to the upholstery with crusted milk? What goes in must come out. How many wrecks have soiled paper diapers lying around, and toilet paper, in rolls and in so many used forms?

I was bent over, deep under the hood of my third Toyota, when I came up for air and saw two people walk by. They were both heavy, the same height, wearing the same pony tails, the same shorts, and the same wife-beater undershirts exposing the same pudgy arms. The one further from me had a bulge above the waist line, a stubbly jaw, and carried a small tool box. The one closer to me bulged at the chest. They both had tattoos on their arms, but the arm closest to me looked like it had just come from the tattoo parlor. I saw at once the ooze seeping from the rusty lines of the drawing. There, glistening in the searing glare of a hot afternoon, was the suppurating image of Winnie the Pooh. Winnie the fucking Pooh! What the hell kind of tattoo is that?

"Hey! You know an asshole named Max?"

I almost shouted it out loud. I felt nauseous.

What did Max burn into my sweet Irene? How did that scum bag leave his fucking mark? Where did he do his dirt? How about a nice prick? Oh, let's see... Where would be a good place to put it? Jesus Christ! I can't do this if I want her back. Do I have to say I like it? I've read there are ways to remove tattoos. From where? What if she doesn't want it removed? What do I do then?

By now I couldn't even see what I was doing. The haze had turned acid and my eyes were watering. I might have been talking out loud. Anyway, nobody else walked by for quite awhile. It seemed I was turning the same damn bolt for a long, long time.

Okay, there's something I haven't told you yet. I borrowed a handgun Monday from this crazy guy—an ex-cop—who I met when I was living in the building on

Circle Drive. I mean, think about it. What kind of idiot would lend somebody a gun? But that's the kind of idiot Scott is. I knew he would do it, no questions asked. He asked me if I knew how to use it and I lied. I don't even know what kind of pistol it was. All I knew is he gave it to me loaded.

The day before I went to U-Pull-It I paid a visit to Max's parlor. I had cleaned myself up, and I acted real cheerful when I talked to the girl who answered the door. I asked for Max and the girl said he wasn't there. I said he had been recommended to me as somebody who did good work. I almost choked when I thought what I should say if she asked me who recommended Max to me. I couldn't say Irene, now could I? If I made up a name, and she didn't know the person, she might get suspicious. She didn't ask anything, though. I kept staring at her nose ring. It was silver, large but very fine, and it was worked into a form that I couldn't quite make out. A mud flap girl? She just told me Max had gone to L.A. with Lydia on Monday for a week, and he wouldn't be working again until next Tuesday.

Lydia? Who the hell was Lydia?

I couldn't force myself to ask that, so I thanked the girl and left. I gave the gun back to Scott that evening. What the hell had I been thinking? All I knew now was Irene *had* to come back. Did she know about Lydia? How can I get a hold of Irene? It wasn't over. I never believed it was over. What can I say to her to get us past this?

That's what I was thinking when I gave up on the bolt. I needed to focus to get this plate off the front of the block, and I just couldn't concentrate on what I was doing. I needed to walk for a minute.

A row or two closer to the farthest fence on the lot my eyes fell upon a carcass that simply didn't fit into this graveyard. Sandwiched between a pair of typical corpses a sweeping sculpture from another time seemed to struggle out of the fetid grime. I saw a movie once about a modernist sculptor in England who became famous not by making realistic statues, but by creating shapes of stone that suggested beautiful bodies doing elegant things. Had he done this? Being where I was, I knew it was the frame of an ancient truck, and a pretty good-sized one. All its parts had been pulled, until what remained was the essential skeleton. Two graceful black steel channels flowed in parallel from the rise in the front that once held an engine, dipping earthward in a sensual curve to where truck drivers and hitchhikers once had entered the cab. In symmetrical arcs they rose again, like bulging, polished muscles, to the rear flat bed. These sleek, massive bones had been picked so perfectly clean by the vultures and vermin that ravage junk yards, and polished by so many seasons of rain and scorching sun, that they seemed ready to soar silently to the heavens, leaving lifetimes of drudgery and pretense behind in the mud. I couldn't take my eyes

away from this beautiful carriage. I wanted to touch its smoothness. I thought of lying down with it and caressing its rounded flank.

I may have been talking to it when the ominous growl of the car plucker interrupted. I stepped aside and the spell was broken. Hulking down the row, the yellow monster stopped on the far side of my steel channel swan, squatted next to the neighboring wreck, jabbed in its tines and lifted it with a smooth yank. A moment later it was gone and silence shut me in again.

That's when a flash of chocolate brown scratched across my sight. I had been drifting slowly around this altar in the temple when I looked up and somehow that color of brown stirred a memory. I knew what it had to be. I didn't walk, I ran toward it. I tripped over a monstrous carburetor that had been pulled and then rejected before payment had been made. I didn't stop to think how lucky I was not to cut my face or arms, but I could tell my knee was bleeding. A few more steps and there was my Mercedes, freshly crossed over this River Styx, its windshield a maze of shattered safety glass. Something, and I already knew what, had been hurled forward on the driver's side with such force that a small hole had been punched clear through.

I approached warily, like I thought I might frighten it away. The driver's side front fender was caved in, and shards of creosote-soaked wood were wedged between folds of sheet metal. The door responded to my hesitant tug, and I lowered myself slowly into the seat behind what was left of the steering wheel. The sheared shaft had no handle grip, and I couldn't recognize anything I saw in the stump's center. Chunks of shattered glass were strewn about. I leaned forward and saw several spots of dried blood on the jagged rim of the hole. And there, curving gracefully from crack on the hole's edge to the dash I hadn't gotten around to covering, was a single strand of brown hair. I wrapped my fingers around it, and suddenly felt sick. I wretched over the side, still careful to lean over far enough to protect the finish so I wouldn't allow myself to blame Irene for the stain when she brought the Mercedes, and her own beautiful self, back to me. I couldn't sit back down. I stared at my vomit as it sank in. Yeah, it was over.

Irene! I was so furious with her I had thought more than once about killing her, even strangling her slowly with my own hands. But God! I didn't want her dead! How could she be so crazy? How could she let herself drive like that? I crawled into the back seat and curled up on the faded white leather. I could feel some of the nuggets of glass under me, but I didn't care. I laid there and bawled like a baby. I cried for Coinpicker, for the bag lady, for that guy still staring at the car, for the slaves of Egypt; for all the sorry losers who've gotten a tattoo hoping it might change their life, for fucking Max, for Irene—Oh! Irene!—and for my own sorry self. Doubt is a horrible thing, but nothing could be worse than the pit of knowing for sure. It was over. Oh yeah, no doubt. It was over.

When I woke up in that back seat, it was dark. The daytime's hissing drone had carried into the night. My cheek was stuck to the leather. I had been cut; I lay still and thought about the drool and blood dried up on my face. My mouth tasted salty, and I couldn't think straight. The place would be locked up, and it would be just as hard to get out as it would be to break in, and that would be pretty hard, I knew. Seems like any business that deals with poor people—and I know perfectly well that people with money don't get their rocks off at auto wrecking yards—will have the most thorough and effective means for protecting their low-value goods from the desperate who covet them. Poor people don't covet expensive things; they only know to steal what is within reach. If I started wandering the yard, I would probably get chased by their dogs. I hadn't seen any today. I had heard some barking but wasn't certain the sound came from inside the yard. I had seen enough dog shit during the day, old and crusty and even a fresh steaming pile, to warn me there were dogs on patrol. Better I stay where I am, I thought, and I settled in to sleep out the night.

I didn't dream about Irene at all that night. If I dreamt of anything, it was about being up all night at U-Pull-It, so naturally I was exhausted in the morning. It had rained during the night, and it never rains in the Valley in the summer. The haze was gone, but the smell of wet wrecks promised the haze would return with the heat of a summer afternoon.