

When the panicky letter arrived from Luke.

"Dear Art: Oh, it's terrible, I am so scared. I don't sleep. See from the writing paper I am manager of the Sunset Pines Motel on Metralia Road. I need your help. By the time you read this I may already be dead. The enclosed note arrived this week. It shows what is coming to me. For old time's sake, Art -- can you come and help me? We had fun, everything was good. I got your address from Jenny Lennox. Sorry for what I said about her. Come soon. Luke."

An enclosed sheet of folded paper was printed in red crayon, block letters. It said, YOU CAN RUN BUT YOU CAN'T HIDE. YOU ARE SO MEAN WITH ROOM 18. TIME TO PAY.

There was no question, Harper had to show up for his friend. Time was not a problem. The Expos were on the road for 10 days. The girl he was dating had gone with the team, fascinated by the new first baseman. So the former sportswriter threw a bag into his car and headed west on the 401.

Harper's first stop was at the Coronet Hotel where he checked in and then drifted through the dining room in search of Jenny Lennox. The place had just closed and she was filling salt shakers.

"What you see when you don't have a gun," she said. She had aged just enough to look better than ever. She was more platinum now, her face fuller than the gaunt teenager she used to be. She was calm, very much in control.

"I got into town this minute," Harper said. He stood over her and kissed the part in her hair.

"Don't pretend you came to see me."

"That's part of the reason. I got this letter from Luke Luftspring. Bad stuff going on."

"He's going crazy out there at the Pines."

"You see him?"

"He came by weeks ago. Very freaky."

"It's Friday." Harper moved the conversation on. "They still dance at the Pavilion?"

"So they tell me."

"How would it be if I pick you up at nine and drive us up there?"

"Better than a poke in the eye with a burnt stick," Jenny said.

She was right about Luke. Harper hardly recognized him. He had always been lean and eager but now his skin scarcely hid his bones. The green eyes were wide and rimmed with moisture. His cheeks and jaw and upper lip carried a three-day growth of beard, brown and grey.

When Harper drove onto the gravel forecourt he found Luke turning the earth along a long bed of flowers, marigolds and petunias, in front of the motel office. The low building was isolated with a stand of pines and a distant view of the Bay.

"Thanks for coming, Artie."

"How you feeling? You look stressed as hell."

"I got another of the warnings. Come inside, I'll show you."

The motel office was just big enough for Luke behind the counter and one guest on the other side. This latest page of red crayon said, "THAT ROOM 18 -- UNCLEAN, UNCLEAN! COMING TO GET YOU!"

Harper looked at the envelop that carried the note. "This thing was mailed locally."

"So was the other one."

"Have you been to the police?"

"Chief Greb has nothing to go on. My fingerprints are the only ones."

"Can he put a guard on you?"

"He doesn't have the people. I'm to call if anything happens. Do you want a beer?" Luke opened a small refrigerator behind the desk.

Thinking of his date that evening, Harper decided to remain sober. "I'll take a soft drink."

"I'm out here in charge," the former bellboy said. "It's so lonely. If I didn't need the money, I'd run so fast." A

shirt on the desk.

"What can I do? I want to help."

"You're doing it. I feel better just having you here."

"Can you think of some enemy? Now or in the past?"

"I've tried. To have enemies you have to do something. I've never done anything. Never been anywhere. You, Artie, you worked for the paper. Now you're in Montreal with the baseball team for God's sake. Know where I am?" He slapped his head so hard it must have hurt. "In here! That's where I live."

"What's with Room 18? Whoever this is thinks it's important."

Luke just shook his head.

"Could be from the Coronet, from the old days. Do you have a Room 18 here?"

Luke pointed with the beer bottle, now empty. "Down the row."

"Greb should get onto it. Check registrations in both locations. See if there's anything to go on."

Luke repeated the excuse. "He doesn't have the people."

The Friday night dance at the Pavilion was a sweet journey back in time. It was a gorgeous evening; the hinged wooded windows were slung down. The Baytown Serenaders, incredibly, were still playing standards from the '50s. Jenny's hair was tied back in a ponytail with a swatch of green ribbon. They danced close during the slow numbers -- "Blue Rain" and "Sweet and Lovely." Harper could not handle the fast ones. He let Jenny go with a stag named Pete who could really do it. To the up-tempo swing of "One O'clock Jump" they jive-danced like professionals, Jenny's smooth legs flashing under the tinted lights.

Later, over midnight coffee in her kitchen by the Bay, she asked, "How is our friend Luke?"

"You were right. He's freaking out." Harper decided to add, "It's something about a Room 18. The threats he's been getting keep mentioning it."

"It can't be the Coronet. They closed that wing last year. No more Room 18."

For lack of anything else to do, Harper took Luke for a drive two days later. Leaving Chuck in charge, they drove over the Bay Bridge into Prince Edward County. The apples were ripening in the orchards. Art stopped by the car and they did what he used to do as a kid -- sneaked in and stole some "greenies."

Later Harper parked and they stood on a bluff looking down at the measured mile where the hydroplane races used to take place near Picton. "Remember the guy from Ohio who stayed at the hotel that summer? Parked a trailer with his boat on it outside on Front Street. Buckeye Baby was painted on the hull."

Harper's cheery reminiscence had no effect on his companion. Luke stared at Lake Ontario and said nothing. His eyes were narrowed, his lips working. It was as if he saw the enemy and was making plans.

Back at the hotel, having dropped Luke at the Sunset Pines, Harper went to his room, showered and changed, then lay on

the office. Don't know what you think you want to do about

this, Chief. That guy Chuck, the handyman from the Sunset Pines, he called and said Luke is missing. Chuck came on duty at eleven to work the night shift. Luke was not around. He expected him to wander in but he hasn't."

"Whadya think?" Greb said to his guest.

"We should drive out there," Harper said.

Chuck met them in the parking lot. He was a retired fireman, still in great shape. His steel-grey hair was an inch long all over and looked like it never needed cutting. "This feels bad," he said.

"When did you see him last?" the Chief asked.

"This morning when the girls checked out of 18. I changed the beds and put in towels and dumped the trash. Luke had worked last night. He told me to go home and get some sleep so I could cover tonight. When I show up, he's supposed to be here, turn over the cash drawer."

Harper said, "If he worked last night, how was he supposed to work today?"

"He keeps Room 17 as a storeroom and a place to bed down. I knocked on the door earlier and put my head inside. Nobody home."

Greb read Harper's mind. "I think we better take a close look at Room 17."

As Chuck had said, there was nobody in the room. But there was a message from Luke Luftspring and answer to the mystery of the threats on his life. The note, in red crayon, said, "I'M NOT A MAN. I'M NOTHING. BUT I'VE THOUGHT OF A WAY OUT. THANKS FOR SHOWING UP, ARTIE. WE HAD FUN, EH?"

A prescription pill bottle lay on its side, empty with the lid off. Also empty was a large gin bottle. Harper read the prescription label and recognized the medication as a powerful sedative.

Greb said, "The question is where did he go? And why was he so depressed?"

"I think I have the answer to the second question," Harper said. A rectangular mark on the wall where a picture had been taken down drew his attention to a small peep hole. Peering through it, he was able to see inside Room 18.

Chuck presented the registration card for the two girls who had spent a couple of nights there. They worked as subscription representatives for a firm that published sports magazines. Were they attractive? The handyman said they were dynamite.

Now Chuck was outside the office examining the flower bed. "Look here," he called. The plants had been removed leaving a length of freshly turned earth. The shovel used to do the job was lying on the grass.

There was a mood of apprehension. "Who wants to dig?" Greb said.

"This is what I came here to do," Harper said. He took up the shovel and began lifting out the soil. It was easy work because the grave was shallow. Luke must have prepared the excavation, laid himself down in it. Then, his mind shutting down from the effect of the drug overdose, he must have used his hands to pull the earth back on top his body, finishing with his face and pulling his fingers back under the earth.

He looked peaceful, lying there in the moonlight.

"I'll be damned," the police chief said. "He was a peeping tom!"

"I knew Luke Luftspring for a long time," Harper declared. "He was a lot more than that."

Jack Danforth offered Harper the job as manager of the Coronet Hotel; he accepted. And so, in the peaceful Baytown summer, the former bellboy came back to where he started. It was paradise in the company of Jenny Lennox. But it would never be the same without Luke.

