

Friedrich Dürrenmatt

Translated by Joel Agee

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Smithy **by Friedrich Dürrenmatt**

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His problems started in the morning already, they were unexpected and they depressed him all the more as J. G. Smith—he had finally settled on this name after many others—had been feeling, not exactly that he had made it, but financially secure; his income had reached a level a person could live on, just about, the authorities tolerated him, not officially, but more or less; which made Leibnitz's waffling all the more idiotic. Of course Leibnitz could be replaced, by any medical student with some training in dissection; but J. G. Smith just happened to be attached to Leibnitz, God knows the man made a decent living, and even though Leibnitz had obtained a permit—it had been granted just that morning—to open a medical practice again, surely he must realize that this permit was no longer of any use to him now, not because of his earlier lapses—abortions and the like—but because Leibnitz had been working for J. G. Smith for nearly four years now, too long for him to pull out at this point; it wasn't exactly pleasant, having to rub it in, but finally Leibnitz had caught on, and he understood, too, that he wouldn't be getting a raise, Smith was implacable on this account, you don't threaten to give notice, not to Smith anyway, an attitude that Smith naturally couldn't assume toward the new cop on the beat, he was out for dough and he got it, there were natural laws you couldn't do anything about. "Look here, Smithy," the new guy had said right at the start of the discussion, picking his teeth—they were standing on the corner of Lexington and Fifty-Second Street, opposite a City Bank construction site—"Look here, Smithy, sure, the guy before me had four kids, and I'm a bachelor, but I just happen to have higher expectations of life," and when Smithy vaguely threatened to turn to the Port Authority commissioner, who, after all, tolerated him too, who, when you got right down to it, was his friend, all the cop said was, well, in that case the whole thing blows up. Problems, nothing but problems. And then the heat, it was just May third, you'd think it was the middle of summer, Smithy was sweating continuously, he'd been sweating already when Leibnitz showed

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up with his demands, everything was wavering in the heat, Brooklyn was almost invisible, Smithy could no longer afford to use air-conditioning, you could smell the corpses, the super didn't care, and Smithy's apartment was somewhere else, and he could always be reached by telephone at Simpson's, also Leibnitz was used to it all, but still it was embarrassing, once in a while a customer would lose his way and show up in the dissecting room instead of sitting down at the counter at Simpson's, and besides Leibnitz couldn't always keep the bodies stored in the freezing chamber, he had to drag them up into the dissecting room before he got to work; all things considered, Smithy thought, the business ought to be disguised as a laboratory, as something technical, super-clean, with white tiles—the present setup under the Triborough Bridge had an unsavory air. Sure, there were some advantages he could appreciate: being near the East River, mainly. Smithy cursed; there was no time to go home, shower, change his shirt. And on top of the heat, the stink. Not the smell of corpses in the morning, that smell was part of his profession and didn't bother him any more than a tanner minds the smell of leather, no, it was the smell of the city that was driving him crazy, this smell that he hated and that clung to everything, scalding hot and sticky, clogged with countless dust and coal molecules, tiny particles of oil, inseparable from the pavement, the fronts of buildings, the steaming streets. He was drinking. He'd already been drinking during his talk with Leibnitz. Gin. He'd gone to Belmont's drugstore with the new cop. Two Schlitz. Later he drank bourbon with the Port Authority commissioner somewhere on Fiftieth. The Port Authority commissioner drank beer, ate two steaks, Smithy didn't touch his steak, the chief of police, who showed up later, as the Port Authority commissioner had promised, was a disgusting intellectual, didn't look like a cop at all, some kind of egghead who had wangled his way upstairs through his faggot connections, Smithy imagined, the battle lines were getting more and more fuzzy, that gangster recently, the one for whom Smithy got rid of the millionaire's daughter, another fag, he'd been a priest once. Still running around like that. But maybe the chief of police wasn't a fag at all, that horny look he'd given the waitress, maybe he was a communist. He knew about the priest, it was he who had referred him to Smithy, not the Port Authority commissioner, as Smithy had thought at first. Now Smithy had to pay the chief of police for the millionaire's daughter, after he'd already paid the Port Authority commissioner, a goddamn losing proposition. Smithy drained his glass of bourbon. He really should have

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gone to Simpson's, but the chief of police started running at the mouth. The guy could afford to blab, time was no object to him, and to top it all off, this stinking heat despite the air-conditioning: it was better, he said, if the Emergency Medical Services handled the whole thing, in secret of course, even Holy (the priest) thought it was too risky to leave this matter to a private individual like Smithy, he said, and the priest was the new secret boss in the precinct. Smithy went back to drinking gin. He still left his steak untouched, the chief of police kept yakking: the old way of fighting crime had become ineffective, he said, these days the government had to live with crime; ever since he'd come to an understanding with Holy, the crime rate had gone down, it was tolerance that made the difference, he said, and Smithy should get it into his head that his constant maneuvering between the legal and the illegal camp was over, because legality, while it hadn't eradicated illegality, was definitely steering it; otherwise, if Smithy refused to listen to reason, the EMS would be brought in, and if worse came to worst, the Port Authority Police, even though they might object on hygienic grounds. Smithy ordered a coffee, took three lumps of sugar, stirred the coffee. "How much?" "Half of each case," said the chief of police, took off his rimless glasses, breathed on them, polished them, put them on again, and scrutinized Smithy like a scientist examining a louse. The Port Authority commissioner was picking his teeth, just like the cop opposite the City Bank. The chief of police took off his glasses again, polished them once more. The sight of Smithy disgusted him. He couldn't work at this rate, Smithy said, he had to pay Leibnitz twice that amount, the son of a bitch had become a legitimate doctor again. All right, the chief of police said after ordering another coffee, he would talk to the EMS. Smithy ordered another gin. "Sorry, Smithy," the Port Authority commissioner said. Smithy gave in, hoping that he would be able to come to terms with Holy somewhere behind the back of the police—there were always deals that the chief of police wasn't supposed to know about, just like there were deals that weren't any of Holy's business—and ordered another Schlitz. But when close to midnight he went to Tommy's French restaurant (why it was supposed to be a French restaurant no one knew) and had himself a steak and french fries after all, it wasn't Holy who sat down next to him but van der Seelen, who liked to pass himself off as Polish or Russian, whichever was convenient, but was probably Italian or Greek with a completely different name; although some people claimed he was actually Dutch, with a name that wasn't van der Seelen but whatever

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the word for "cheese" was in Danish; in any case, he had swum over here a couple of years ago, a half-dead immigrant from goddamn Europe, which turns out all these rats—the president ought to do something about that—and now he was all spiffed up in a damned expensive suit, silk, reeking of perfume, smoking a Havana, Monte Christo. Holy was unfortunately held up, van der Seelen said. "On business?" Smithy asked, who didn't care one way or the other. He was annoyed that he had to make a deal with Holy. "You might say so," van der Seelen replied, ordered a lobster salad, and said Holy was probably already in Smithy's freezing chamber or maybe even on Leibnitz's dissection table. "Too bad about the fag," Smithy said deplorably, resting a thoughtful gaze on van der Seelen and promising himself to find out what the Danish word for "cheese" was, there was a Swedish cop on the beat under the Triborough Bridge, and then he wondered whether the Chief of Police already knew that someone other than Holy was boss. Van der Seelen gave him a fatherly grin: "There was one too many in the precinct. We'll get along all right, Smithy." Smithy said he'd unfortunately have to up the rate, Leibnitz had gotten more expensive. Van der Seelen shook his head. "I got married, Smithy, last week," he said. "So what?" Smithy asked. His wife had a brother, van der Seelen said, a medical student, but unfortunately he was shooting up, a damned expensive habit. Smithy understood: "Let's stick to the old rate," he suggested. "Ten percent less," van der Seelen replied. "After all, I've got my brother-in-law to support." Smithy's business was in worse shape than ever, and on top of that this murderous heat, it was like diving into hot soup when he stepped out of Tommy's French restaurant. What he really wanted to do was go home, to his three furnished rooms with kitchen and bathroom, horrible furnishings, German, crammed full of unreadable books, an apartment he had taken over from the professor, Leibnitz's predecessor, a stuffy dump, never ventilated, never cleaned, but pure luxury when he remembered the shack in the Bronx he'd lived in for years. Well, if business continued

like this with the new partners, he'd be holing up in some basement pretty soon, the chief of police was a communist, obviously, and van der Seelen was a Jew, that was even more obvious, maybe a Dutch Jew whose name was like "cheese" in Danish; the best thing, Smithy thought, was if he beat it right now, just get the hell out of here and open up shop somewhere else, maybe L.A., there would always be a need for a man like Smithy, wherever he went there would always be a need for bodies to disappear. Opposite

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Tommy's French restaurant there was a little bar. Smithy crossed the street, a car stopped abruptly, slithered, the driver cursed. In the bar, Smithy ordered another gin, the best thing was to get plastered. Through the open door of the bar he saw van der Seelen getting into his Cadillac, next to his driver Sam. Smithy downed the gin and didn't go home after all. Van der Seelen's fat face had made him suddenly sad, he felt sorry for Holy. Smithy blew his nose after telling the taxi driver the name of a street near the Triborough Bridge, Holy had still believed in some kind of justice, he was always talking about God, kind of weird in his line of work, Smithy was sure the fag had secretly recited his rosary, although Smithy had no idea what that was about. The taxi driver was incessantly talking to himself, in Spanish, Smithy was glad when the taxi arrived at the street he had indicated, the taxi driver seemed crazy to him, but the heat was getting to everyone. Smithy had a few more blocks to walk and then down to the East River, he never took a cab directly to where he worked, it was an old habit. The streets, narrow canyons blasted into a meaningless antediluvian landscape, were apparently empty, but on the sidewalks, alongside the walls and on the fire escapes people were lying about and sleeping, half naked and naked, almost impossible to make out in the bad lighting, but present on all sides as a beastly, spongy something; Smithy walked as if through hot, snoring, wet walls. He was sweating, he had had too much to drink. He reached the half-crumbled warehouse. On the fourth floor was Leibnitz's workroom, not exactly practical, but Leibnitz had insisted on these premises, and anyway, what Leibnitz exactly did in that room and how he managed to get rid of the remains—because there had to be some remains, though apparently not much—from the fourth floor to wherever, this was something Smithy had never been able to figure out, maybe it all just dissolved into liquid and got poured into the sewers. Smithy shuddered at the thought that before Leibnitz, the Professor had still done his work in the apartment Smithy was living in now, even though at the time the turnover was low, just one body a month. Smithy had just opened the door, in the vague hope of seeing Holy once again after all—as a corpse, but still—when into this hope, drunk as he was, full of sentimental piety, a voice coming from the street behind him said: "I want to sleep with you." Smithy, with his hand on the knob of the half-open door, on the verge of crossing the threshold, looked back. A woman stood close behind him by the door, visible only as a silhouette, for Smithy had not switched on the light in the lobby. Some kind of hooker, he thought. Smithy was about to

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slam the door in her face when he was suddenly seized by a wild sense of humor. "Come," he said, groping his way through the dark to the elevator. The woman followed, he could feel her in the incubator heat of the hallway, the elevator was descending. They stood close together, it took a while before the elevator—a freight elevator, old, slow—reached the ground floor, Smithy in his drunkenness forgot the woman. Not until he was leaning against the wall of the brightly lit elevator did he remember that he had brought her along. She was about thirty, slender, with straight dark hair, big eyes, maybe pretty, maybe not, in his drunkenness Smithy couldn't quite put her appearance together, an impression of something classy, something unusual penetrated through his stupor, a somehow unsettling impression, her dress had to be incredibly expensive, and while the figure underneath it was okay, it didn't belong in this environment. As for why that was so, Smithy had no idea, he just felt it, her body just wasn't a hooker's body, and though he had a vague inkling that he shouldn't be letting himself in for this adventure, he started the elevator. The woman stared at him, not mockingly, not anxiously either, just indifferently. Now he figured she was twenty-five, he was used to estimating people's age, part of his job. "How much?" Smithy asked. "For free." Again Smithy was overcome by a devilish sense of humor, she was in for an experience, he imagined her losing her composure, that damned high-class attitude, which suddenly bothered him, he pictured her screaming, racing down the stairs, to the cops maybe, and all they would do was grin. As he imagined this, he grinned at her, but she didn't move a muscle, she just stared him straight in the face. The elevator stopped, Smithy stepped out, opened the door to the dissection room, went in without looking back at the woman. She followed him, stopped in the doorway. Smithy stepped up to the dissecting table, staring at Holy, who was lying there naked and dead, bullet holes in his chest, surprisingly clean, Leibnitz must have washed the body. Over the back of the chair hung Holy's cassock, carefully folded, and Holy's silk underwear, vermilion. "No rosary?" Smithy asked. "This is it," Leibnitz said, "except for that," pointing at the corner next to the window: ammunition belts, guns, a submachine gun, some hand grenades. "It was all hidden under his cassock, it's a miracle he didn't blow up!" Leibnitz let water run into an old bathtub, which Smithy had never seen before. "I don't think he was a priest at all. Just a fag." "Could be," Smithy said, "did you just buy this?" He was looking at the canisters and bottles standing around. "What?" Leibnitz asked. "The tub," Smithy said. It had always

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been there, Leibnitz replied, rolling the cart with the surgical instruments to the dissecting table. "You don't know any Danish either?" "No," Leibnitz replied. Smithy turned away, disappointed, saw the woman still standing in the door in her expensive dress, casually leaning against the doorpost with her left shoulder. He had forgotten her again and suddenly remembered that he had imagined she would scream and run to the cops. "Beat it," Smithy said in a rage, but he already knew it wouldn't mean a thing. She didn't respond. She had no makeup on, her hair was hanging in long soft strands. Smithy was freezing, it was so hot he suddenly felt ice cold. Then Smithy asked: "Leibnitz, where do you sleep?" without taking his eyes off the woman, who was still leaning against the doorpost. "One floor up," Leibnitz said, already cutting into Holy. Smithy went over to the woman. She said nothing, watched him indifferently. "Get into the elevator," Smithy said. Again they stood facing each other, leaning against the elevator walls, looking at each other for minutes. Smithy closed the gate, through the open door of the dissection room he could see Leibnitz slicing away at Holy's body. Then the elevator went up, stopped. Neither of them moved, Smithy looked at the woman, the woman looked at him as if he were something irrelevant, as if he weren't there at all and yet still there, she wasn't just staring at nothing, she wasn't pretending that she didn't see him, that's what was so crazy. On the contrary, she was watching him, exploring him, touching each pore of his unshaved, sweaty face with her gaze, gliding along each wrinkle, and still he didn't mean a thing to her, she just wanted to be mounted like an animal by another animal. And animals, Smithy thought, probably don't mean a thing to each other either, he thought it in passing as he looked at her, her shoulders, her breasts under the smartly tailored dress, and at the same time Smithy thought of Holy's naked corpse being cut into pieces by Leibnitz one floor down. Cold sweat ran down Smithy's face, he was afraid, he needed something close, soft, warm in the chill of this petrified heat, he violently dragged the woman with him, kicked open the door opposite the elevator, pulled the woman into the room, dimly saw a mattress, threw the woman on it, the only light was the light coming from the elevator through the open door, and after taking the woman, who had let it all happen, he searched for his pants, on all fours, he had thrown them somewhere and they were outside the beam of light coming into the room from the elevator, ridiculous the whole thing, idiotic. "Taxi," the woman calmly said. Smithy stepped into his pants, stuffed his shirt in, looked for his jacket, found it, stumbling over books,

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the whole room seemed to be full of books, just like at home, where the professor's books were all over the place, except here the only piece of furniture was the mattress, unbelievable how low Leibnitz had sunk, and the bum had the nerve to ask for a raise. Smithy didn't turn on the light, he was ashamed, though again he thought: you don't have to be ashamed in front of a whore, but he suddenly knew she wasn't a whore. The woman was still lying on the mattress, in the light from the elevator, naked, white, Smithy was surprised, he couldn't really remember anything, he must have torn off her dress, fine, let her figure out how to patch it together, apparently the expensive dress had made him mad. Anyway, it was her problem, she had come on to him, not the other way around, but then Smithy went down to Leibnitz after all, walked into the dissection room, whose door was still open, all that was left of Holy was the trunk, what an amazing job, suddenly Smithy was proud of Leibnitz, God knows he had earned his raise. He watched Leibnitz

stirring about in the tub, in some kind of pulpy foam, then there was a gurgling sound, and the bathtub slowly emptied. It was rather practical, really, Smithy grew solemn in view of the transience of earthly things, then he saw the woman standing in the door again, as she had before, again in her dress, which was undamaged, she must have taken it off herself. Smithy got embarrassed, probably because he had been wondering about the transience of earthly things, but he could hardly imagine that she would have noticed in this heat, which he was suddenly feeling again, which was attacking him, sweat was pouring down his body, he felt disgusting. He went to the telephone on the window sill, called van der Seelen, whom he had never called before, but he knew his number from Sam. It took a while before van der Seelen accepted the call, each time someone else would come to the phone and say that van der Seelen wasn't available, but when he finally was available, since Smithy just kept calling back, and van der Seelen yelled at Smithy, asking him what the hell he thought he was doing, Smithy yelled back that he demanded twenty percent more, otherwise he was closing shop. "Okay, okay," van der Seelen replied, suddenly super-friendly again, "twenty percent more." But now he wanted to get some sleep, Smithy shouted. And he wanted Sam with the Cadillac, he added. Well, where did Smithy want Sam to drive to, van der Seelen asked, still super-friendly. Under the Triborough Bridge, Smithy said, and he didn't want to be kept waiting. "Coming up, coming up," van der Seelen appeased him, and Smithy put down the receiver. By now there was nothing left of

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Holy except his cassock, which Leibnitz dropped into the tub with the vermilion underwear. Smithy went downstairs with the woman. The front door was still open. It hadn't gotten any cooler, but dawn was breaking, the morning sprang on the city like a mugger, it was bright daylight when Sam pulled up in the Cadillac. Smithy sat down next to Sam, the woman sat down behind Smithy. "Where to?" Smithy asked. "The Coburn," the woman said. Sam grinned. "Okay," Smithy said, "to the Coburn." They drove through the still empty streets. The sun came. It was pleasantly cool in the car. Air-conditioning. In the second rearview mirror Holy had installed when Sam was his driver, because Holy always thought van der Seelen was after him—well, he wasn't so wrong about that—Smithy observed the woman. She had black and blue marks on her throat. He must have choked her, he remembered nothing, but at least now he was sober, and tomorrow he would talk to that commie police chief the way he had talked to van der Seelen, Smithy was needed, that much was clear now. Then Sam stopped in front of the Coburn's main entrance. A doorman opened the door of the Cadillac, the woman got out, the doorman bowed, a second one bowed by the door, whose glass panels automatically parted. "God damn," Sam muttered in amazement, "I could have sworn they'd boot her out again." "Drive me home, Sam," Smithy said, suddenly dead tired, and when he went into his apartment he threw himself onto the bed without getting undressed. Bookcases everywhere, a desk in the other room, and the third room, too, was crammed full of books, German books with names on them that meant nothing to him, titles he didn't understand. What the professor's business was, nobody knew, he always needed dope, and Smithy had delivered the dope, and when the professor could no longer pay for the dope, Smithy came up with his idea, and so the professor started making bodies disappear for high-class clients, and for not so high-class clients as well, and when one day the professor OD'd on his dope, Leibnitz took over the job, he had proved his competence by dissolving the professor. Smithy fell asleep and slept so soundly that it took him a long time to realize that the phone was disturbing him. He cast a glance at the alarm clock, he had barely had two hours' sleep. It was the chief of police. What did he want, Smithy asked. "Come to the Coburn." "All right," Smithy said. "I've sent you a car." "Nice," Smithy said, groping his way to the bathroom, found the sink, let the water run till the sink was full, dipped his face in it, the water was warm too, it didn't refresh him, the city seemed to be gradually coming to a boil. The doorbell rang, Smithy dipped his face

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in the sink once more, then he wanted to change his shirt, but the bell was still ringing, so he went to the door. Two policemen were standing there, sweating, their shirts sticking to their bodies. "Come on, let's go!" one of them said to Smithy, the other one was already turning his back to Smithy to walk down the stairs. Smithy, with water still dripping off his face onto his shirt and jacket, said he wanted to change and shave first. "Stop fucking around," the policeman on the stairway said, yawning. Smithy locked the apartment door behind him, and only now did he realize how miserable he felt, his head hurt, stinging pains in the back of the head, earlier he hadn't felt anything, it seemed to him, neither the pain nor the heat, just that disgusting warm water in the sink. They squeezed him into the Chevy, he had to sit in the front between the two of them, when they reached the Coburn they dropped him off at the delivery entrance. Detective Cover was there and an agitated, elegant man dressed in black with a white handkerchief in his breast pocket. "This is the man," Cover said, pointing at Smithy. "Friedli," the man with the white handkerchief introduced himself, "Jakob Friedli." Smithy didn't understand what he meant, it sounded like German, apparently it was his name, or was it good morning in German or Dutch, it was close to 7:00 a.m., after all, and suddenly Smithy felt like asking the man what the word for "cheese" was in Danish, but then the man, wiping his face with his handkerchief, spoke English after all: "Follow me, please," he said. Smithy followed him, the detective stayed by the delivery entrance. "I'm Swiss," said the man with the white handkerchief as they walked down a hallway that seemed to be leading to the housekeeping quarters. Smithy didn't give a damn what the man was and why he was telling him what he was, for all he cared he could be Italian or straight out of Greenland. This had never happened to him before, the Swiss guy said, never. Smithy nodded, even though he was wondering, how could this never have happened to the Swiss guy before, there was always a body that ended up dead, more or less legally, in every hotel, and that the guy was talking about a body was obvious, otherwise the chief of police wouldn't have had Smithy dragged out here at this godawful hour. They went up in a freight elevator, endlessly, Smithy didn't care where they were going, but after the twentieth floor he had the feeling this had to be one high-class corpse. The elevator stopped. They entered a kind of kitchen, probably a sort of dressing room for food where dishes prepared in the main kitchen were given their finishing touch before being served to the super-high-class folk up here, Smithy imagined, and right in

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the middle of this dressing room or this kitchen, in front of a gleaming table, stood the Chief of Police, drinking black coffee. "This is the man, Nick," the Swiss guy said. "Hello, Smithy," the police chief said. "You look awful. Want some coffee too?" He said he needed it. "Get Smithy some coffee, Jack," the chief of police said. The Swiss guy went to a sideboard, brought Smithy a cup of black coffee, wiped the sweat off his face with his handkerchief. Smithy was glad that a high-class guy like that sweated too. "Leave the rest to me, Jack," the chief of police said. The Swiss guy left the kitchen. The chief of police sipped his coffee. "Holy has disappeared." "Could be," Smithy said. "Was he lying on Leibnitz's dissecting table?" "I never look there," Smithy said. "Van der Seelen?" "Has not disappeared," Smithy replied, put his cup on the gleaming table, and asked what it was Nick wanted of him. It was the first time he had called the chief of police Nick. He had called the previous one Dick. Nick grinned, went to the sideboard, came back with a coffeepot. How much of a cut was van der Seelen demanding of Smithy, Nick asked, pouring coffee first into his own cup, then into Smithy's. "Twenty percent less than Holy," Smithy said. "He had vermilion underwear." "Who?" Nick asked. "Holy," Smithy replied. "Oh well," Nick said, van der Seelen hadn't quite had the time to set himself up yet, and took another sip of coffee. Then he said: "Smithy, at lunch yesterday you and I made a deal. What did we agree on? I totally forgot." "Thirty percent," Smithy said. "Thirty percent for you?" Nick asked. "Thirty percent for you," Smithy said. Nick said nothing, finished his coffee, poured some more into Smithy's cup. "Smithy," he said calmly, "we agreed to go fifty-fifty. I do intend to abide by that, on the whole. But not today. Today you will settle for ten percent, that is, if you keep your mouth shut and van der Seelen doesn't get wind of what's happening today, otherwise you'll have to deliver to him too." Ten percent, Smithy said, no way. He was closing shop. Nick could approach the EMS. "We're talking about half a million bucks," Nick said calmly, "that's five thousand for you." "That's different," Smithy said, he could agree to that. He said Nick should send him the body. Nick looked at Smithy thoughtfully. For a sum this high, he finally said, Smithy would have to negotiate for himself. Smithy poured himself coffee. "I see," he said, "so you can stay out of it." "That's right," Nick said, "let's go." Smithy took another sip of coffee and stepped through a sliding door with Nick. They entered a room that was similar to the one they had left, but without windows, with another sliding door, and stepped into a wide imposing corridor, actually more like a

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longish hall at the two ends of which, behind huge glass walls, the hot sky stood like a wall of concrete. It was pleasantly cool. They walked across a green carpet. "Do you know any Danish?" "No," Nick said, "let's go to the client." "Let's go to the body," Smithy said. Nick stopped. "What for? You'll have it delivered!" Smithy replied: "It's easier to negotiate afterward." Nick patted him on the back: "Smithy, you'll turn into a businessman yet." They had crossed the corridor, Nick pressed a button. "Apartment ten," he said. An elderly man opened the door, bald, apparently in black tie, Smithy wasn't sure, he only knew clothes like that from the movies. "We're going to have a look at it," Nick said. The bald man didn't answer, stepped aside, a small drawing room, a gold-colored wall-to-wall carpet, classy furniture, as Smithy would say if he were to describe the furniture, then Nick opened a door, white, with gold-framed panels, a bedroom, a white rug, a broad white four-poster with a gilded gable and a canopy from which white veils hung down like trailing clouds. Nick parted the veils. The bed was freshly made, the top sheet turned back, and on top of it lay the woman, still in the same dress she had worn just a little over three hours ago when she slipped past the bowing doormen into the Coburn. Her eyes were wide open, she seemed to be staring at Smithy the way she had always stared at him, attentively and indifferently, her dark hair rested on her shoulders and was spread out on the white sheet, only her throat was in a truly ugly condition now, someone must have choked her much more forcefully than Smithy, and as Smithy stared at the dead woman, he noticed with surprise how beautiful she was. "A hooker?" he asked, basically just to say something, feeling suddenly embarrassed, because right after asking the question it sounded dirty to him. "No," Nick said behind him. Bored, he was staring through the curtains at the street far below. "Otherwise we couldn't have asked for five hundred thousand." "Let's go to the client," Smithy said wearily. In the little drawing room—which was probably just a foyer, Smithy imagined, once again embarrassed by the elegant setting, by all these pictures and pieces of furniture—stood the bald man. Apparently a butler. This thought came to Smithy in a flash, he was not unhappy with this revelation, he always liked having an overview of complicated situations. "Is he sleeping?" Nick asked. "The doctor . . ." the bald man wanted to continue. "Bring him out," Nick said, opening the door opposite the door to the bedroom where the body lay, pushing it open and going in. Smithy followed him. A large room, a terrace in front of the windows, a desk. Nick sprawled out in a huge armchair. "Sit

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down, Smithy," he said, pointing to another armchair. Smithy sat down, it bothered him that he wasn't shaved. "The doctor," the bald man began again. "There are problems," Nick said. "Very well," said the bald man, opening a door behind the desk. "Smithy, now's your big moment." "Where are we here?" Smithy asked. Stretching in his huge armchair, sinking into it, Nick placed his legs on the upholstered footrest, pressing his splayed fingertips together, with his thumbs on his chest, massaging his nose with the tips of his index fingers and watching Smithy with amusement. "I guess reading the newspapers isn't your thing," he said. "No," Smithy replied. "You don't have a clue about politics?" Smithy said he was only interested in ice hockey. Nick didn't say anything. Then he said this wasn't the right season for ice hockey. Smithy said he hated everything about summer, and put his legs on the footrest in front of him too. "Special session of the UN General Assembly," Nick said. "And?" Smithy asked. "I'm just saying," Nick said and fell silent again. The door behind the desk opened, Smithy recognized the man right away, that is, he didn't know who he was but he had seen him many times. Smithy racked his brain, he couldn't remember, but the man in the elegant pajamas had to be someone from Europe, some head of government or foreign minister or at any rate someone important, enormously famous, a man who just barely glanced at Smithy, as if Smithy wasn't anyone at all, the same kind of look the woman had given him last night, indifferent, but not as observant, in fact not observant at all, a look that put Smithy suddenly into a rage, without Smithy's being able to account for this rage, but now he too pressed his fingertips together, assuming the same position Nick had assumed in his huge armchair before the man had appeared, this man who was as serene, as lofty as the Good Lord Himself, for whom Smithy was just a louse, less than that, because Smithy was already a louse to Nick, but Smithy didn't know what being less than a louse was, which was what he, Smithy, must amount to in the eyes of the Good Lord. "Problems?" our Heavenly Father asked Nick, who had risen to his feet. "Problems, the man is causing problems." "That one?" asked Oh-Lord-my-God in his wine-red pajamas without casting a second glance at Smithy. "That one," Nick said, with his hands in his pockets. "What does he want?" asked the Lord of Hosts. Smithy had unwittingly retained all the divine appellations Holy used to cite, now they were shooting from his memory, but he suppressed the wish to ask the Supreme Being whether he knew any Danish. "Don't know," Nick said. The Ruler of Heaven and Earth sat down behind the

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desk, toying with his golden ballpoint pen. "Well?" he asked. "Who is the body?" Smithy asked. Yahweh remained silent, still toying with his golden ballpoint pen, and cast a surprised glance at Nick, who was standing behind the chair he had sat in before. Nick turned to Smithy, baffled, but then suddenly amused, as if something were suddenly dawning on him. "Your daughter?" Smithy asked. The King of Glory put the golden ballpoint pen back on the desk, pulled a short, flat cigarette from a green case, and lit it with a golden lighter. "Why these questions?" he asked, still refusing to bestow a glance upon Smithy. "I have to know whether I want to let the body disappear," Smithy said. "Tell me your price, and you will know," Jehovah replied, bored. Smithy stuck to his guns. He could only tell him his price if he knew who the body was, he insisted, quite to Nick's amusement, Smithy sensed, and now God Almighty actually looked at him for the first time, took notice of him once and for all, angrily for a moment, indeed wrathfully, as if at any moment he would cleave Smithy in two with a thunderbolt, but since he was not a god, but like Smithy only a man, although an incomparably more important one, socially, historically, and in the way of education and wealth as well, the rage in the famous, perhaps somewhat too bloated face of the otherwise skinny representative of history in wine-red pajamas behind the desk was visible, or more precisely, was faintly suggested for only a second, or even more precisely, for a fraction of a second, and then he smiled at Smithy in a downright friendly manner: "The body is my wife." Smithy studied the bloated red face of the famous man behind the desk and still couldn't remember which country's president or prime minister or foreign minister or chancellor or vice-chancellor he was, or whatever his job was, if in fact he was a politician and not a famous industrialist or banker or maybe just an actor who had played a president or foreign minister in a movie and now Smithy was taking him for someone else, but Smithy suddenly didn't care, the man behind the desk was the husband of the woman Smithy had slept with, barely an hour before the break of this day that was already thickening into another blindingly white cloud behind the large windows and would be even more hellish to plunge into than the day before. "Who killed her?" Smithy asked mechanically. "I did," the man behind the desk replied nonchalantly. "Why?" Smithy asked. The man behind the desk said nothing. He smoked. "You intend to interrogate me," he noted. "I have to decide," Smithy said. The guy in the wine-red pajamas let his cigarette drop into a round enamel ashtray, opened the green cigarette case, lit a new

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cigarette, all without haste, without embarrassment, pondering something all the while, and then turned to Smithy: "I lost my nerve," he said then, smiled, and fell silent, suddenly observing Smithy with curiosity. "My wife," he continued, carefully choosing one word after the other, in his textbook English, which Smithy knew only from English movies, though possibly it wasn't textbook English at all, but English crudely blended with some European language, which of course sounded like classical English compared with the English Smithy spoke, as Smithy suddenly realized, he didn't know why that annoyed him. "My wife left this house two days ago. Since then she slept indiscriminately with many men, she told me this when she came back to the hotel this morning. Shortly after four. Or close to four thirty." The fellow behind the desk observed Smithy with amusement, and Smithy thought he could imagine Holy sitting behind that same desk and looking just as swell, and that faces like this one, red and bloated above those wine-red pajamas, were a dime a dozen. "That's why you strangled your wife," Smithy noted. She must have had a reason for running away, he said. The guy behind the desk smiled. "She just wanted to annoy me," he said. "And she succeeded. I was annoyed. For the first time in my life." The mug behind the desk looked disgusting to Smithy. "For the first time in my life," he repeated, yawned and asked: "How much?" Nick jumped in: "Five hundred thousand, he told me." "All right," said the shabby rat behind the desk, "five hundred thousand." "If you absolutely insist,"

Nick said, "I am powerless." "No," Smithy said. "A million," smiled the lousy bedbug in the wine-red pajamas, while Nick stared at him, flabbergasted, beaming. "I'll let your wife disappear for nothing," Smithy said to the shabby louse behind the desk, without really knowing what he was saying as he thought of the dead woman lying eight, nine, ten yards away behind the walls on the sheets of the white four-poster. He thought of her beauty and how she had stared at him with her dead eyes, and then he said, rising to his feet: "From you I don't take anything!" He left the big room, the apartment, looked around briefly in the hall with the green carpet, the Swiss fellow with the ridiculous handkerchief in his breast pocket approached him, accompanied him to the freight elevator. Smithy rode down, Cover was still standing in the delivery entrance, wiping sweat off his face. "Nick can send me the merchandise," Smithy said as he stepped out into the merciless heat, which had built up, trapped in the canyons of the city, but Smithy no longer cared about anything, the

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monstrous sun over the gigantic city, the gigantic city and the people moving about in it, the steam billowing from the manhole covers, the crawling, stinking convoys of cars, he walked and walked, whether it was along Fifth Avenue or Madison, Park, or Lexington or along Third, Second, or First Avenue he didn't know, he walked, drank a beer somewhere, ate in some greasy spoon, he didn't know what, sat on a bench in the park for a long time, he didn't know how long, at one point a young woman sat next to him, then an old woman, then it suddenly seemed to him that someone had been reading a newspaper next to him, he didn't care, he only thought of the dead woman and how she had gone to the Coburn in the early morning, past the doormen, how he had watched her in the rearview mirror of the Cadillac, how she had stood upstairs leaning with her left shoulder against the doorpost of the dissecting room, how she had been naked on Leibnitz's mattress, how she had given herself to him, how she had stared at him in the elevator and how he hadn't understood anything. There was a wild tenderness in him and a wild pride, Smithy was worthy of her, he had shown that bastard God in Heaven behind the desk where it was at, just like she had shown him, and then suddenly it was night. The street lamps were burning, and probably the night would be even hotter, even more hellish than the day before and the night before and the day that had just glided into the night that surrounded him, but he didn't care. He did everything without knowing, thinking only of the woman, about whom he knew nothing, no name, no first name, basically nothing except what she had looked like when she was dead, but he had made love to her, and when he stood in Leibnitz's dissecting room, it was all over already, all that was left was the dead woman's dress on the back of the chair, neatly folded, as was Leibnitz's habit. Smithy took the dress. He rode the elevator to Leibnitz's room, but Leibnitz wasn't there either. Leibnitz must have gone out, which he usually never did at this hour, but Smithy had already known in the elevator that he would find the dirty, dark, stuffy joint empty. Smithy left the elevator door open, the light from the elevator fell on him, he sat down on the mattress, leaning with his back against the wall, on his lap the dress of the woman who was dead now, whom he had made love to on this mattress, though he couldn't remember it, only the indistinct light in the window remained, Smithy felt nothing except the fabric of the dress, which his hands were stroking, a light rag, nothing more. Suddenly the elevator was there again, a shadow pushed itself between the light and Smithy, filling the door frame, suddenly the room became bright, van der Seelen

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had switched on the light, and behind van der Seelen was Sam. Smithy closed his eyes, the light blinded him, and his hands stroked the dress. "You messed up the deal of a lifetime," van der Seelen said, not even sounding particularly angry, but rather surprised, and Smithy proudly replied: "Nick's deal," whereupon van der Seelen stepped aside. Sam was holding something in his hands that no longer made any impression on Smithy, he was not afraid of what Sam now had to do, and when Sam had done it, van der Seelen, already in the elevator, remarked, with some anger after all: "Too bad about my cut."