PAYING ATTENTION

When I fired Vera up and headed for the freeway, I had no clear idea of where I was going. I just had to be out of that bedroom. If I stayed there, I knew I would be taking another trip down the stretch of memory lane that I’d just traveled. Once was enough. If Kyle hadn’t been on the premises I might have opted to roam around the house awhile. But he was there, and his company was about as welcome to me right then as a kick in the ribs. To avoid an accidental encounter with him I slipped out through the bedroom’s sliding glass door.

The afternoon rush was still more than an hour away and the traffic moved well. I reached Old Olives inside thirty minutes, pulling up in front of Val’s house without ever announcing to myself that I had decided to go there. Without thought or hesitation, like a salmon going back to the source, I climbed the front steps and passed through the two doorways between the outside world and the inner sanctum. I found the red-bearded colossus seated in his usual spot, paler, bigger, and balder even than I remembered him. I walked over to him and waited, standing still, staring across at two eyelids that looked like dried apricots. They seemed to be staring back.

When the lids lifted the blue of the eyes surprised me, as if I hadn’t seen it before.

“You may not remember me,” I said after a moment of stunned silence. “I was here a few weeks ago...”

“Yes?” His tenor surprised me too, the pure intensity of it—like the sun shooting free of the clouds at the end of an overcast day.
“Yeah,” I said, “one of the things that happened that day, you went to touch my stomach and I batted your hand away.” The eyes gave no sign of recognition or memory. “Well, I’ve been thinking about that ever since because my stomach—it’s been bothering me.”

“Bothering?” he said.

“Sharp pains, cramps, flutters—not all the time. The thing is, I’m ready for you to lay hands on it, if you think that’ll help.” I undid the top three buttons on my shirt and then stopped. “Should I take my clothes off?”

“As you wish.”

I stripped down to my shorts, folding my clothes as I took them off, stacking them in a small pile to one side. “What can you do about a stomach like this?” I said. “I’m wondering about the options.”

“There is always a doctor,” Val said.

“Doctor? I thought you were against all that.”

The apricots dropped, then rose. “You did.”

“Doctors give you pills,” I said, pointing a thumb at my stomach. “I don’t think they’ve got one to deal with the commotion in here.”

I gave him a moment, but he didn’t say anything.

“That’s why I came to you. I’m curious what you can do for me.”

A full minute passed, maybe more. It was all I could do to keep my mouth shut. Finally he said, “It would be useful to know the source of the trouble.”

“Look,” I said, “no offense, but I hope you don’t mean spirits. Hocus pocus, black magic, that’s not my cup of tea. My background’s in the sciences,” I explained. “I believe in rational inquiry, objective analysis, all that. I just don’t trust doctors. A bunch of bandits, the whole tribe.”

Again I waited, wishing he’d nod or something, egg me on a little. I watched his chest, checking for signs of respiration. God, did he sit still. His quiet changed the very pressure of the air
around us, creating a vacuum that seemed to suck the words right out of me.

“No, I don’t trust the doctors with what I’ve got here. I go in there, they’ll give me some pill. Who knows, they might decide to cut me open. None of that’s going to cure it, if you ask me. Not all the way.”

He waited, not even blinking.

“You mentioned the source,” I said. “Well, what do you make of this? It seems like lately, whenever it acts up, I’m thinking about my son. Or I end up thinking about him, remembering him. He died twelve or thirteen years ago. I know you’re supposed to deal with these things, but I didn’t.”

I could have sworn that he swayed forward slightly. Encouraged, I asked if he thought there was anything to that.

“Your thoughts are the important ones,” he said. “It’s your stomach, after all.”

“Maybe, but you’re the one with the trick hands. I was thinking you might be able to feel around a little bit, tell me what’s what.”

“You can do it,” he said.

“Sure I can.”

“Simply pay attention.”

“Hey,” I said, “easy as that.”

“Paying attention is easy?”

I shook my head. “All right, touché. So what am I supposed to pay attention to?”

“What you notice.”

“What I notice. Should I close my eyes?” I asked.

“As you wish.”

I closed them. Luckily I didn’t pause to think how dumb I looked, standing there in my undershorts with my hands spread out on my belly and my eyes shut tight. I tried to pay attention.

I opened my eyes. “How we doing?”
Val said, “Have you ever paid close attention before?”
“Sure, I guess I have. How do you define close?”
“How would you define it?” he said.
“Let’s see. I used to do laboratory work, my training’s in microbiology. I had a kind of knack for seeing things through the microscope, tiny things.”

This time he did sway forward—I was sure enough to bet on it.

“Ohkay,” I said, “close attention.” I closed my eyes again. I saw what I usually see before falling asleep—a bunch of bright shapes against a dark background. I began to pay attention to these but then I noticed something going on with my feet, and Val had told me to pay attention to what I notice. They felt warm, clammy, cramped—like my shoes were too tight. Should I report this to Val? I thought I would but then I noticed something else, a feeling like clothing on all my limbs, as if I were all dressed again. Overdressed, in fact. I was hot. Cramped. Uncomfortable, but it seemed very important to keep still, stay in the same position and pay attention to what I was hearing. An outdoor noise, the sound of wind in the trees, strong wind tossing the branches back and forth, pulling a gate loose from its latch, rattling the windows in their frames. What I listened for was in that wind, under it, using the wind for camouflage, hiding its own sounds under the sounds of the wind. What I listened for was a lurking thing, it was a killing thing and I was the next one to kill. It was patient. It knew I was listening, knew I was all dressed and ready to run. And so it lurked, waiting for its chance, waiting for me to stop listening, drift off, let down my defenses. Or maybe it knew about the terror, the way the terror trickled thickly into my blood, the way it gummed my joints, molding me into this stiff listening shape, this shape that felt more permanent every minute, like plaster drying, like a fossil forming, so that even if I did hear it now, even if it did come after me, I might be too stiff, too stuck to flee, the easiest of prey.