

## QUITTERS, INC. by Stephen King

Morrison was waiting for someone who was hung up in the air traffic jam over Kennedy International when he saw a familiar face at the end of the bar and walked down.

'Jimmy? Jimmy McCann?'

It was. A little heavier than when Morrison had seen him at the Atlanta Exhibition the year before, but otherwise he looked awesomely fit. In college he had been a thin, pallid chain smoker buried behind huge horn-rimmed glasses. He had apparently switched to contact lenses.

'Dick Morrison?'

'Yeah. You look great.' He extended his hand and they shook.

'So do you,' McCann said, but Morrison knew it was a lie. He had been overworking, overeating, and smoking too much. 'What are you drinking?'

'Bourbon and bitters,' Morrison said. He hooked his feet around a bar stool and lighted a cigarette. 'Meeting someone, Jimmy?'

'No. Going to Miami for a conference. A heavy client. Bills six million. I'm supposed to hold his hand because we lost out on a big special next spring.'

'Are you still with Crager and Barton?'

'Executive veep now.'

'Fantastic! Congratulations! When did all this happen?' He tried to tell himself that the little worm of jealousy in his stomach was just acid indigestion. He pulled out a roll of antacid pills and crunched one in his mouth.

'Last August. Something happened that changed my life.' He looked speculatively at Morrison and sipped his drink. 'You might be interested.'

My God, Morrison thought with an inner wince. Jimmy McCann's got religion.

'Sure,' he said, and gulped at his drink when it came. 'I wasn't in very good shape,' McCann said. 'Personal problems with Sharon, my dad died - heart attack - and I'd developed this hacking cough. Bobby Crager dropped by my office one day and gave me a fatherly little pep talk. Do you remember what those are like?'

'Yeah.' He had worked at Crager and Barton for eighteen months before joining the Morton Agency. 'Get your butt in gear or get your butt out.'

McCann laughed. 'You know it. Well, to put the capper on it, the doc told me I had an incipient ulcer. He told me to quit smoking.' McCann grimaced. 'Might as well tell me to quit breathing.' Morrison nodded in perfect understanding. Non-smokers could afford to be smug. He looked at his own cigarette with distaste and stubbed it out, knowing he would be lighting another in five minutes.

'Did you quit?' He asked.

'Yes, I did. At first I didn't think I'd be able to - I was cheating like hell. Then I met a guy who told me about an outfit over on Forty-sixth Street. Specialists. I said what do I have to lose and went over. I haven't smoked since.'

Morrison's eyes widened. 'What did they do? Fill you full of some drug?'

'No.' He had taken out his wallet and was rummaging through it. 'Here it is. I knew I had one kicking around.' He laid a plain white business card on the bar between them.

QUITTERS, INC.

Stop Going Up in Smoke!

237 East 46th Street

Treatments by Appointment

'Keep it, if you want,' McCann said. 'They'll cure you. Guaranteed.'

'How?'

'I can't tell you,' McCann said.

'Huh? Why not?'

'It's part of the contract they make you sign. Anyway, they tell you how it works when they interview you.'

'You signed a contract?'

McCann nodded.

'And on the basis of that -'

'Yep.' He smiled at Morrison, who thought: Well, it's happened. Jim McCann has joined the smug bastards.

'Why the great secrecy if this outfit is so fantastic? How come I've never seen any spots on TV, billboards, magazine ads -'

'They get all the clients they can handle by word of mouth.'

'You're an advertising man, Jimmy. You can't believe that.'

'I do,' McCann said. 'They have a ninety-eight per cent cure rate.'

'Wait a second,' Morrison said. He motioned for another drink and lit a cigarette. 'Do these guys strap you down and make you smoke until you throw up?'

'No.'

'Give you something so that you get sick every time you light -'

'No, it's nothing like that. Go and see for yourself.' He gestured at Morrison's cigarette. 'You don't really like that, do you?'

'Nooo, but -'

'Stopping really changed things for me,' McCann said. 'I don't suppose it's the same for everyone, but with me it was just like dominoes falling over. I felt better and my relationship with Sharon improved. I had more energy, and my job performance picked up.'

'Look, you've got my curiosity aroused. Can't you just -' 'I'm sorry, Dick. I really can't talk about it.' His voice was firm.

'Did you put on any weight?'

For a moment he thought Jimmy McCann looked almost grim. 'Yes. A little too much, in fact. But I took it off again. I'm about right now. I was skinny before.'

'Flight 206 now boarding at Gate 9,' the loudspeaker announced.

'That's me,' McCann said, getting up. He tossed a five on the bar. 'Have another, if you like. And think about what I said, Dick. Really.' And then he was gone, making his way through the crowd to the escalators. Morrison picked up the card, looked at it thoughtfully, then tucked it away in his wallet and forgot it.

The card fell out of his wallet and on to another bar a month later. He had left the office early and

had come here to drink the afternoon away. Things had not been going so well at the Morton Agency. In fact, things were bloody horrible.

He gave Henry a ten to pay for his drink, then picked up the small card and reread it - 237 East Forty-sixth Street was only two blocks over; it was a cool, sunny October day outside, and maybe, just for chuckles -When Henry brought his change, he finished his drink and then went for a walk.

Quitters, Inc., was in a new building where the monthly rent on office space was probably close to Morrison's yearly salary. From the directory in the lobby, it looked to him like their offices took up one whole floor, and that spelled money. Lots of it. He took the elevator up and stepped off into a lushly carpeted foyer and from there into a gracefully appointed reception room with a wide window that looked out on the scurrying bugs below. Three men and one woman sat in the chairs along the walls, reading magazines. Business types, all of them. Morrison went to the desk.

'A friend gave me this,' he said, passing the card to the receptionist. 'I guess you'd say he's an alumnus.'

She smiled and rolled a form into her typewriter. 'What is your name, sir?'

'Richard Morrison.'

Clack-clackety-clack.

But very muted clacks; the typewriter was an IBM.

'Your address?'

'Twenty-nine Maple Lane, Clinton, New York.'

'Married?'

'Yes.'

'Children?'

'One.' He thought of Alvin and frowned slightly. 'One' was the wrong word. 'A half' might be better. His son was mentally retarded and lived at a special school in New Jersey.

'Who recommended us to you, Mr Morrison?'

'An old school friend. James McCann.'

'Very good. Will you have a seat? It's been a very busy day.'

'All right.'

He sat between the woman, who was wearing a severe blue suit, and a young executive type wearing a herring-bone jacket and modish sideburns. He took out his pack of cigarettes, looked around, and saw there were no ashtrays.

He put the pack away again. That was all right. He would see this little game through and then light up while he was leaving. He might even tap some ashes on their maroon shag rug if they made him wait long enough. He picked up a copy of Time and began to leaf through it.

He was called a quarter of an hour later, after the woman in the blue suit. His nicotine centre was speaking quite loudly now. A man who had come in after him took out a cigarette case, snapped it open, saw there were no ashtrays, and put it away looking a little guilty, Morrison thought. It made him feel better.

At last the receptionist gave him a sunny smile and said, 'Go right in, Mr Morrison.'

Morrison walked through the door beyond her

desk and found himself in an indirectly lit hallway. A heavy-set man with white hair that looked phoney shook his hand, smiled affably, and said, 'Follow me, Mr Morrison.'

He led Morrison past a number of closed, unmarked doors and then opened one of them about halfway down the hall with a key. Beyond the door was an austere little room walled with drilled white cork panels. The only furnishings were a desk with a chair on either side. There was what appeared to be a small oblong window in the wall behind the desk, but it was covered with a short green curtain. There was a picture on the wall to Morrison's left -a tall man with iron-grey hair. He was holding a sheet of paper in one hand. He looked vaguely familiar.

'I'm Vic Donatti,' the heavy-set man said. 'If you decide to go ahead with our programme, I'll be in charge of your case.'

'Pleased to know you,' Morrison said. He wanted a cigarette very badly.

'Have a seat.'

Donatti put the receptionist's form on the desk, and then drew another form from the desk drawer. He looked directly into Morrison's eyes. 'Do you want to quit smoking?'

Morrison cleared his throat, crossed his legs, and tried to think of a way to equivocate. He couldn't. 'Yes,' he said.

'Will you sign this?' He gave Morrison the form. He scanned it quickly. The undersigned agrees not to divulge the methods or techniques or et cetera, et cetera.

'Sure,' he said, and Donatti put a pen in his hand. He scratched his name, and Donatti signed below it. A moment later the paper disappeared back into the desk drawer. Well, he thought ironically, I've taken the pledge.

He had taken it before. Once it had lasted for two whole days.

'Good,' Donatti said. 'We don't bother with propaganda here, Mr Morrison. Questions of health or expense or social grace. We have no interest in why you want to stop smoking. We are pragmatists.'

'Good,' Morrison said blankly.

'We employ no drugs. We employ no Dale Carnegie people to sermonize you.

We recommend no special diet. And we accept no payment until you have stopped smoking for one year.'

'My God,' Morrison said.

'Mr McCann didn't tell you that?'

'No.'

'How is Mr McCann, by the way? Is he well?'

'He's fine.'

'Wonderful. Excellent. Now . . . just a few questions, Mr Morrison. These are somewhat personal, but I assure you that your answers will be held in strictest confidence.'

'Yes?' Morrison asked noncommittally.

'What is your wife's name?'

'Lucinda Morrison. Her maiden name was Ramsey.'

'Do you love her?'

Morrison looked up sharply, but Donatti was looking at him blandly. 'Yes, of course,' he said.

'Have you ever had marital problems? A separation, perhaps?'

'What has that got to do with kicking the habit?' Morrison asked. He sounded a little angrier than he had intended, but he wanted - hell, he needed - a cigarette.

'A great deal,' Donatti said. 'Just bear with me.'

'No. Nothing like that.' Although things had been a little tense just lately.

'You just have the one child?'

'Yes. Alvin. He's in a private school.'

'And which school is it?'

'That,' Morrison said grimly, 'I'm not going to tell you.'

'All right,' Donatti said agreeably. He smiled disarmingly at Morrison. 'All your questions will be answered tomorrow at your first treatment.'

'How nice,' Morrison said, and stood.

'One final question,' Donatti said. 'You haven't had a cigarette for over an hour. How do you feel?'

'Fine,' Morrison lied. 'Just fine.'

'Good for you!' Donatti exclaimed. He stepped around the desk and opened the door. 'Enjoy them tonight. After tomorrow, you'll never smoke again.'

'Is that right?'

'Mr Morrison,' Donatti said solemnly, 'we guarantee it.'

He was sitting in the outer office of Quitters, Inc., the next day promptly at three. He had spent most of the day swinging between skipping the appointment the receptionist had made for him on the way out and going in a spirit of mulish cooperation - Throw your best pitch at me, buster.

In the end, something Jimmy McCann had said convinced him to keep the appointment - It changed my whole life. God knew his own life could do with some changing. And then there was his own curiosity. Before going up in the elevator, he smoked a cigarette down to the filter. Too damn bad if it's the last one, he thought. It tasted horrible.

The wait in the outer office was shorter this time. When the receptionist told him to go in, Donatti was waiting. He offered his hand and smiled, and to Morrison the smile looked almost predatory. He began to feel a little tense, and that made him want a cigarette.

'Come with me,' Donatti said, and led the way down to the small room. He sat behind the desk again, and Morrison took the other chair.

'I'm very glad you came,' Donatti said. 'A great many prospective clients never show up again after the initial interview. They discover they don't want to quit as badly as they thought. It's going to be a pleasure to work with you on this.'

'When does the treatment start?' Hypnosis, he was thinking. It must be hypnosis.

'Oh, it already has. It started when we shook hands in the hall. Do you have cigarettes with you, Mr Morrison?'

'Yes.'

'May I have them, please?'

Shrugging, Morrison handed Donatti his pack. There were only two or three left in it, anyway.

Donatti put the pack on the desk. Then, smiling into Morrison's eyes, he curled his right hand into

a fist and began to hammer it down on the pack of cigarettes, which twisted and flattened. A broken cigarette end flew out. Tobacco crumbs spilled. The sound of Donatti's fist was very loud in the closed room. The smile remained on his face in spite of the force of the blows, and Morrison was chilled by it. Probably just the effect they want to inspire, he thought.

At last Donatti ceased pounding. He picked up the pack, a twisted and battered ruin. 'You wouldn't believe the pleasure that gives me,' he said, and dropped the pack into the wastebasket. 'Even after three years in the business, it still pleases me.'

'As a treatment, it leaves something to be desired. Morrison said mildly. 'There's a news-stand in the lobby of this very building. And they sell all brands.'

'As you say,' Donatti said. He folded his hands. 'Your son, Alvin Dawes Morrison, is in the Paterson School for Handicapped Children. Born with cranial brain damage. Tested IQ of 46. Not quite in the educable retarded category. Your wife -

'How did you find that out?' Morrison barked. He was startled and angry. 'You've got no goddamn right to go poking around my -'

'We know a lot about you,' Donatti said smoothly. 'But, as I said, it will all be held in strictest confidence.'

'I'm getting out of here,' Morrison said thinly. He stood up.

'Stay a bit longer.'

Morrison looked at him closely. Donatti wasn't upset. In fact, he looked a little amused. The face of a man who has seen this reaction scores of times - maybe hundreds.

'All right. But it better be good.'

'Oh, it is.' Donatti leaned back. 'I told you we were pragmatists here. As pragmatists, we have to start by realizing how difficult it is to cure an addiction to tobacco. The relapse rate is almost eight-five per cent. The relapse rate for heroin addicts is lower than that. It is an extraordinary problem. Extraordinary.'

Morrison glanced into the wastebasket. One of the cigarettes, although twisted, still looked smokeable.

Donatti laughed good-naturedly, reached into the wastebasket, and broke it between his fingers.

'State legislatures sometimes hear a request that the prison systems do away with the weekly cigarette ration. Such proposals are invariably defeated. In a few cases where they have passed, there have been fierce prison riots. Riots, Mr Morrison. Imagine it.'

'I,' Morrison said, 'am not surprised.'

'But consider the implications. When you put a man in prison you take away any normal sex life, you take away his liquor, his politics, his freedom of movement. No riots - or few in comparison to the number of prisons. But when you take away his cigarettes - wham! bam!' He slammed his fist on the desk for emphasis.

'During World War I, when no one on the German home front could get cigarettes, the sight of German aristocrats picking butts out of the gutter

was a common one. During World War II, many American women turned to pipes when they were unable to obtain cigarettes. A fascinating problem for the true pragmatist, Mr Morrison.'

'Could we get to the treatment?'

'Momentarily. Step over here, please.' Donatti had risen and was standing by the green curtains Morrison had noticed yesterday. Donatti drew the curtains, discovering a rectangular window that looked into a bare room. No, not quite bare. There was a rabbit on the floor, eating pellets out of a dish.

'Pretty bunny,' Morrison commented.

'Indeed. Watch him.' Donatti pressed a button by the window-sill. The rabbit stopped eating and began to hop about crazily. It seemed to leap higher each time its feet struck the floor. Its fur stood out spikily in all directions. Its eyes were wild.

'Stop that! You're electrocuting him!'

Donatti released the button. 'Far from it. There's a very low-yield charge in the floor. Watch the rabbit, Mr Morrison!'

The rabbit was crouched about ten feet away from the dish of pellets. His nose wriggled. All at once he hopped away into a corner.

'If the rabbit gets a jolt often enough while he's eating,' Donatti said, 'he makes the association very quickly. Eating causes pain. Therefore, he won't eat. A few more shocks, and the rabbit will starve to death in front of his food. It's called aversion training.'

Light dawned in Morrison's head.

'No, thanks.' He started for the door.

'Wait, please, Morrison.'

Morrison didn't pause. He grasped the doorknob and felt it slip solidly through his hand. 'Unlock this.'

'Mr Morrison, if you'll just sit down -'

'Unlock this door or I'll have the cops on you before you can say Marlboro Man.'

'Sit down.'

The voice was as cold as shaved ice.

Morrison looked at Donatti. His brown eyes were muddy and frightening. My God, he thought, I'm locked in here with a psycho. He licked his lips. He wanted a cigarette more than he ever had in his life.

'Let me explain the treatment in more detail,' Donatti said.

'You don't understand,' Morrison said with counterfeit patience. 'I don't want the treatment. I've decided against it.'

'No, Mr Morrison. You're the one who doesn't understand. You don't have any choice. When I told you the treatment had already begun, I was speaking the literal truth. I would have thought you'd tipped to that by now.'

'You're crazy,' Morrison said wonderingly.

'No. Only a pragmatist. Let me tell you all about the treatment.'

'Sure,' Morrison said. 'As long as you understand that as soon as I get out of here I'm going to buy five packs of cigarettes and smoke them all on the way to the police station.' He suddenly realized he was biting his thumb-nail, sucking on it, and made himself stop.

'As you wish. But I think you'll change your mind when you see the whole picture.'

Morrison said nothing. He sat down again and folded his hands.

'For the first month of the treatment, our operatives will have you under constant supervision,' Donatti said. 'You'll be able to spot some of them. Not all. But they'll always be with you. Always. If they see you smoke a cigarette, I get a call.'

'And I suppose you bring me here and do the old rabbit trick,' Morrison said. He tried to sound cold and sarcastic, but he suddenly felt horribly frightened. This was a nightmare.

'Oh, no,' Donatti said. 'Your wife gets the rabbit trick, not you.'

Morrison looked at him dumbly.

Donatti smiled. 'You,' he said, 'get to watch.'

After Donatti let him out, Morrison walked for over two hours in a complete daze. It was another fine day, but he didn't notice. The monstrosity of Donatti's smiling face blotted out all else.

'You see,' he had said, 'a pragmatic problem demands pragmatic solutions. You must realize we have your best interests at heart.'

Quitters, Inc., according to Donatti, was a sort of foundation - a non-profit organization begun by the man in the wall portrait. The gentleman had been extremely successful in several family businesses - including slot machines, massage parlours, numbers, and a brisk (although clandestine) trade between New York and Turkey. Mort 'Three-Fingers' Minelli had been a heavy smoker - up in the three-pack-a-day range. The paper he was holding in the picture was a doctor's diagnosis: lung cancer. Mort had died in 1970, after endowing Quitters, Inc., with family funds.

'We try to keep as close to breaking even as possible,' Donatti had said. 'But we're more interested in helping our fellow man. And of course, it's a great tax angle.'

The treatment was chillingly simple. A first offence and Cindy would be brought to what Donatti called 'the rabbit room'. A second offence, and Morrison would get the dose. On a third offence, both of them would be brought in together. A fourth offence would show grave co-operation problems and would require sterner measures. An operative would be sent to Alvin's school to work the boy over.

'Imagine,' Donatti said, smiling, 'how horrible it will be for the boy. He wouldn't understand it even if someone explained. He'll only know someone is hurting him because Daddy was bad. He'll be very frightened.'

'You bastard,' Morrison said helplessly. He felt close to tears. 'You dirty, filthy bastard.'

'Don't misunderstand,' Donatti said. He was smiling sympathetically. 'I'm sure it won't happen. Forty per cent of our clients never have to be disciplined at all - and only ten per cent have more than three falls from grace. Those are reassuring figures, aren't they?'

Morrison didn't find them reassuring. He found them terrifying.

'Of course, if you transgress a fifth time -'

'What do you mean?'

Donatti beamed. 'The room for you and your wife, a second beating for your son, and a beating for your wife.'

Morrison, driven beyond the point of rational consideration, lunged over the desk at Donatti. Donatti moved with amazing speed for a man who had apparently been completely relaxed. He shoved the chair backwards and drove both of his feet over the desk and into Morrison's belly. Gagging and coughing, Morrison staggered backward.

'Sit down, Mr Morrison,' Donatti said benignly. 'Let's talk this over like rational men.'

When he could get his breath, Morrison did as he was told. Nightmares had to end some time, didn't they?

Quitters, Inc., Donatti had explained further, operated on a ten-step punishment scale. Steps six, seven, and eight consisted of further trips to the rabbit room (and increased voltage) and more serious beatings. The ninth step would be the breaking of his son's arms.

'And the tenth?' Morrison asked, his mouth dry.

Donatti shook his head sadly. 'Then we give up, Mr Morrison. You become part of the unregenerate two per cent.'

'You really give up?'

'In a manner of speaking.' He opened one of the desk drawers and laid a silenced .45 on the desk. He smiled into Morrison's eyes. 'But even the unregenerate two per cent never smoke again. We guarantee it.'

The Friday Night Movie was Bullitt, one of Cindy's favourites, but after an hour of Morrison's mutterings and fidgetings, her concentration was broken.

'What's the matter with you?' she asked during station identification.

'Nothing . . . everything,' he growled. 'I'm giving up smoking.'

She laughed. 'Since when? Five minutes ago?'

'Since three o'clock this afternoon.'

'You really haven't had a cigarette since then?'

'No,' he said, and began to gnaw his thumb-nail. It was ragged, down to the quick.

'That's wonderful! What ever made you decide to quit?'

'You,' he said. 'And. . . and Alvin.'

Her eyes widened, and when the movie came back on, she didn't notice. Dick rarely mentioned their retarded son. She came over, looked at the empty ashtray by his right hand, and then into his eyes: 'Are you really trying to quit, Dick?'

'Really.' And if I go to the cops, he added mentally, the local goon squad will be around to rearrange your face, Cindy.

'I'm glad. Even if you don't make it, we both thank you for the thought, Dick.'

'Oh, I think I'll make it,' he said, thinking of the muddy, homicidal look that had come into Donatti's eyes when he kicked him in the stomach.

He slept badly that night, dozing in and out of sleep. Around three o'clock he woke up completely. His craving for a cigarette was like a low-grade fever. He went downstairs and to his study. The room was in the middle of the house.

No windows. He slid open the top drawer of his desk and looked in, fascinated by the cigarette box. He looked around and licked his lips.

Constant supervision during the first month, Donatti had said. Eighteen hours a day during the next two - but he would never know which eighteen. During the fourth month, the month when most clients backslid, the 'service' would return to twenty-four hours a day. Then twelve hours of broken surveillance each day for the rest of the year. After that? Random surveillance for the rest of the client's life.

For the rest of his life.

'We may audit you every other month,' Donatti said. 'Or every other day. Or constantly for one week two years from now. The point is, you won't know. If you smoke, you'll be gambling with loaded dice. Are they watching? Are they picking up my wife or sending a man after my son right now? Beautiful, isn't it? And if you do sneak a smoke, it'll taste awful. It will taste like your son's blood.'

But they couldn't be watching now, in the dead of night, in his own study. The house was grave-quiet.

He looked at the cigarettes in the box for almost two minutes, unable to tear his gaze away. Then he went to the study door, peered out into the empty hall, and went back to look at the cigarettes some more. A horrible picture came: his life stretching before him and not a cigarette to be found. How in the name of God was he ever going to be able to make another tough presentation to a wary client, without that cigarette burning nonchalantly between his fingers as he approached the charts and layouts? How would he be able to endure Cindy's endless garden shows without a cigarette? How could he even get up in the morning and face the day without a cigarette to smoke as he drank his coffee and read the paper?

He cursed himself for getting into this. He cursed Donatti. And most of all, he cursed Jimmy McCann. How could he have done it? The son of a bitch had known. His hands trembled in their desire to get hold of Jimmy Judas McCann.

Stealthily, he glanced around the study again. He reached into the drawer and brought out a cigarette. He caressed it, fondled it. What was that old slogan? So round, so firm, so fully packed. Truer words had never been spoken. He put the cigarette in his mouth and then paused, cocking his head.

Had there been the slightest noise from the closet? A faint shifting? Surely not. But -Another mental image - that rabbit hopping crazily in the grip of electricity. The thought of Cindy in that room -He listened desperately and heard nothing. He told himself that all he had to do was go to the closet door and yank it open. But he was too afraid of what he might find. He went back to bed but didn't sleep for a long time.

In spite of how lousy he felt in the morning, breakfast tasted good. After a moment's hesitation, he followed his customary bowl of cornflakes with scrambled eggs. He was grumpily washing out the pan when Cindy came downstairs

in her robe.

'Richard Morrison! You haven't eaten an egg for break-fast since Hector was a pup.

Morrison grunted. He considered since Hector was a pup to be one of Cindy's stupider sayings, on a par with I should smile and kiss a pig.

'Have you smoked yet?' she asked, pouring orange juice.

'No.'

'You'll be back on them by noon,' she proclaimed airily. 'Lot of goddamn help you are!' he rasped, rounding on her. 'You and anyone else who doesn't smoke, you all think ah, never mind.'

He expected her to be angry, but she was looking at him F with something like wonder. 'You're really serious,' she said. 'You really are.'

'You bet I am.' You'll never know how serious. I hope.

'Poor baby,' she said, going to him. 'You look like death warmed over. But I'm very proud.'

Morrison held her tightly.

Scenes from the life of Richard Morrison, October-November:

Morrison and a crony from Larkin Studios at Jack Dempsey's bar. Crony offers a cigarette. Morrison grips his glass a little more tightly and says: I'm quitting. Crony laughs and says: I give you a week.

Morrison waiting for the morning train, looking over the top of the Times at a young man in a blue suit. He sees the young man almost every morning now, and sometimes at other places. At Onde's, where he is meeting a client. Looking at 45s in Sam Goody's, where Morrison is looking for a Sam Cooke album. Once in a foursome behind Morrison's group at the local golf course.

Morrison getting drunk at a party, wanting a cigarette -but not quite drunk enough to take one. Morrison visiting his son, bringing him a large ball that squeaked when you squeezed it. His son's slobbering, delighted kiss. Somehow not as repulsive as before. Hugging his son tightly, realizing what Donatti and his colleagues had so cynically realized before him: love is the most pernicious drug of all. Let the romantics debate its existence. Pragmatists accept it and use it.

Morrison losing the physical compulsion to smoke little by little, but never quite losing the psychological craving, or the need to have something in his mouth - cough drops, Life Savers, a tooth-pick. Poor substitutes, all of them. And finally, Morrison hung up in a colossal traffic jam in the Midtown Tunnel. Darkness. Horns blaring. Air stinking. Traffic hopelessly snarled. And suddenly, thumbing open the glove compartment and seeing the half-open pack of cigarettes in there. He looked at them for a moment, then snatched one and lit it with the dashboard lighter. If anything happens, it's Cindy's fault, he told himself defiantly. I told her to get rid of all the damn cigarettes.

The first drag made him cough smoke out furiously. The second made his eyes water. The third made him feel light-headed and swoony. It tastes awful, he thought.

And on the heels of that: My God, what am I doing?

Horns blatted impatiently behind him. Ahead, the traffic had begun to move again. He stubbed the cigarette out in the ashtray, opened both front windows, opened the vents, and then fanned the air helplessly like a kid who has just flushed his first butt down the john.

He joined the traffic flow jerkily and. drove home.

'Cindy?' he called. 'I'm home.' No answer.

'Cindy? Where are you, hon?'

The phone rang, and he pounced on it. 'Hello? Cindy?'

'Hello, Mr Morrison,' Donatti said. He sounded pleasantly brisk and businesslike. 'It seems we have a small business matter to attend to. Would five o'clock be convenient?'

'Have you got my wife?'

'Yes, indeed.' Donatti chuckled indulgently.

'Look, let her go,' Morrison babbled. 'It won't happen again. It was a slip, just a slip, that's all. I only had three drags and for God's sake it didn't even taste good!'

'That's a shame. I'll count on you for five then, shall I?'

'Please,' Morrison said, close to tears. 'Please -He was speaking to a dead line.

At 5p.m. the reception room was empty except for the secretary, who gave him a twinkly smile that ignored Morrison's pallor and dishevelled appearance. 'Mr Donatti?' she said into the intercom. 'Mr Morrison to see you.' She nodded to Morrison. 'Go right in.'

Donatti was waiting outside the unmarked room with a man who was wearing a SMILE sweatshirt and carrying a .38. He was built like an ape.

'Listen,' Morrison said to Donatti. 'We can work something out, can't we? I'll pay you. I'll-'

'Shaddap,' the man in the SMILE sweatshirt said.

'It's good to see you,' Donatti said. 'Sorry it has to be under such adverse circumstances. Will you come with me? We'll make this as brief as possible. I can assure you your wife won't be hurt. . . this time.'

Morrison tensed himself to leap at Donatti.

'Come, come,' Donatti said, looking annoyed. 'If you do that, Junk here is going to pistol-whip you and your wife is still going to get it. Now where's the percentage in that?'

'I hope you rot in hell,' he told Donatti.

Donatti sighed. 'If I had a nickel for every time someone expressed a similar sentiment, I could retire. Let it be a lesson to you, Mr Morrison. When a romantic tries to do a good thing and fails, they give him a medal. When a pragmatist succeeds, they wish him in hell. Shall we go?'

Junk motioned with the pistol.

Morrison preceded them into the room. He felt numb.

The small green curtain had been pulled. Junk prodded him with the gun. This is what being a witness at the gas chamber must have been like, he thought.

He looked in. Cindy was there, looking around bewilderedly.

'Cindy!' Morrison called miserably. 'Cindy, they -'

'She can't hear or see you,' Donatti said. 'One-way glass. Well, let's get it over with. It really was a very small slip. I believe thirty seconds should be

enough. Junk?'

Junk pressed the button with one hand and kept the pistol jammed firmly into Morrison's back with the other.

It was the longest thirty seconds of his life.

When it was over, Donatti put a hand on Morrison's shoulder and said, 'Are you going to throw up?'

'No,' Morrison said weakly. His forehead was against the glass. His legs were jelly. 'I don't think so.' He turned around and saw that Junk was gone.

'Come with me,' Donatti said.

'Where?' Morrison asked apathetically.

'I think you have a few things to explain, don't you?'

'How can I face her? How can I tell her that I . . . I . . . 'I think you're going to be surprised,' Donatti said.

The room was empty except for a sofa. Cindy was on it, sobbing helplessly.

'Cindy?' he said gently.

She looked up, her eyes magnified by tears. 'Dick?' she whispered. 'Dick? Oh . . . Oh God . . . ' He held her tightly. 'Two men,' she said against his chest. 'In the house and at first I thought they were burglars and then I thought they were going to rape me and then they took me someplace with a blindfold over my eyes and. . . and. . . oh it was h-horrible -'

'Shhh,' he said. 'Shhh.'

'But why?' she asked, looking up at him. 'Why would they -'

'Because of me,' he said 'I have to tell you a story, Cindy -'

When he had finished he was silent a moment and then said, 'I suppose you hate me. I wouldn't blame you.'

He was looking at the floor, and she took his face in both hands and turned it to hers. 'No,' she said. 'I don't hate you.'

He looked at her in mute surprise.

'It was worth it,' she said. 'God bless these people. They've let you out of prison.'

'Do you mean that?'

'Yes,' she said, and kissed him. 'Can we go home now? I feel much better. Ever so much.'

The phone rang one evening a week later, and when Morrison recognized Donatti's voice, he said, 'Your boys have got it wrong. I haven't even been near a cigarette.'

'We know that. We have a final matter to talk over. Can you stop by tomorrow afternoon?'

'Is it -'

'No, nothing serious. Book-keeping really. By the way, congratulations on your promotion.'

'How did you know about that?'

'We're keeping tabs,' Donatti said noncommittally, and hung up.

When they entered the small room, Donatti said, 'Don't look so nervous. No one's going to bite you. Step over here, please.'

Morrison saw an ordinary bathroom scale. 'Listen, I've gained a little weight, but -'

'Yes, seventy-three per cent of our clients do. Step up, please.'

Morrison did, and tipped the scales at one

seventy-four.

'Okay, fine. You can step off. How tall are you, Mr Morrison?'

'Five-eleven.'

'Okay, let's see.' He pulled a small card laminated in plastic from his breast pocket. 'Well, that's not too bad. I'm going to write you a prescrip for some highly illegal diet pills. Use them sparingly and according to directions. And I'm going to set your maximum weight at. . . let's see . . . He consulted the card again. 'One eighty-two, how does that sound? And since this is December first, I'll expect you the first of every month for a weigh-in. No problem if you can't make it, as long as you call in advance.'

'And what happens if I go over one-eighty-two?'

Donatti smiled. 'We'll send someone out to your house to cut off your wife's little finger,' he said. 'You can leave through this door, Mr Morrison. Have a nice day.'

Eight months later:

Morrison runs into the crony from the Larkin Studios at Dempsey's bar. Morrison is down to what Cindy proudly calls his fighting weight: one sixty-seven. He works out three times a week and looks as fit as whipcord. The crony from Larkin, by comparison, looks like something the cat dragged in.

Crony: Lord, how'd you ever stop? I'm locked into this damn habit tighter than Tillie. The crony stubs his cigarette out with real revulsion and drains his scotch.

Morrison looks at him speculatively and then takes a small white business card out of his wallet. He puts it on the bar between them. You know, he says, these guys changed my life.

Twelve months later:

Morrison receives a bill in the mail. The bill says:

QUITTERS ,INC.

237 East 46th Street

New York, N.Y. 10017

1 Treatment \$2500.00

Counsellor (Victor Donatti) \$2500.00

Electricity \$ .50

TOTAL (Please pay this amount) \$5000.50

Those sons of bitches! he explodes. They charged me for the electricity they used to. . . to

Just pay it, she says, and kisses him.

Twenty months later:

Quite by accident, Morrison and his wife meet the Jimmy McCanns at the Helen Hayes Theatre. Introductions are made all around. Jimmy looks as good, if not better than he did on that day in the airport terminal so long ago. Morrison has never met his wife. She is pretty in the radiant way plain girls sometimes have when they are very, very happy.

She offers her hand and Morrison shakes it. There is something odd about her grip, and halfway through the second act, he realizes what it was. The little finger on her right hand is missing.