

The Midnight Meat Train

Books of Blood, #2

by Clive Barker, 1952-

Published: 1984



Leon Kaufman was no longer new to the city. The Palace of Delights, he'd always called it, in the days of his innocence. But that was when he lived Atlanta, and New York still a kind promised land, where anything everything possible.

Now Kaufman had lived three and a half months in his dream-city, and the Palace of Delights seemed less than delightful.

Was it really only a season since he stepped out of Port Authority Bus Station and looked up 42nd Street towards the Broadway intersection? So short a time to lose so many treasured illusions.

He was embarrassed now even to think of his naivety. It made him wince to remember how he had stood and announced aloud: "New York, I love you."

Love? Never.

It had been at best an infatuation.

And now, after only three months living with his object of adoration, spending his days and nights in her presence, she had lost her aura of perfection. New York was just a city.

He had seen her wake in the morning like a slut, and pick murdered men from between her teeth, and suicides from the tangles of her hair. He had seen her late at night, her dirty back streets shamelessly courting depravity. He had watched her in the hot afternoon, sluggish and ugly, indifferent to the atrocities that were being committed every hour in her throttled passages.

It was no Palace of Delights.

It bred death, not pleasure.

Everyone he met had brushed with violence; it was a fact of life. It was almost chic to have known someone who had died a violent death. It was proof of living in that city.

But Kaufman had loved New York from afar for almost twenty years. He'd planned his love affair for most of his adult life. It was not easy, therefore, to shake the passion off, as though he had never felt it. There were still times, very early, before the cop-sirens began, or at twilight, when Manhattan was still a miracle.

For those moments, and for the sake of his dreams, he still gave her the benefit of the doubt, even when her behavior was less than ladylike.

She didn't make such forgiveness easy. In the few months that Kaufman had lived in New York her streets had been awash with spilt blood.

In fact, it was not so much the streets themselves, but the tunnels beneath those streets.

"Subway Slaughter" was the catch-phrase of the month. Only the previous week another three killings had been reported. The bodies had been discovered in one of the subway cars on the AVENUE OF THE AMERICAS, hacked open and partially disemboweled, as though an efficient abattoir operative had been interrupted in his work. The killings were so thoroughly professional that the police were interviewing every man on their records who had some past connection with the butchery trade. The meat-packaging plants on the water-front were being watched, the slaughter-houses scoured for clues. A swift arrest was promised, though none was made.

This recent trio of corpses was not the first to be discovered in such a state; the very day that Kaufman had arrived a story had broken in The Times that was still the talk of every morbid secretary in the office.

The story went that a German visitor, lost in the subway system late at night, had come across a body in a train. The victim was a well-built, attractive thirty-year-old woman from Brooklyn. She had been completely stripped. Every shred of clothing, every article of jewellery. Even the studs in her ears.

More bizarre than the stripping was the neat and systematic way in which the clothes had been folded and placed in individual plastic bags on the seat beside the corpse.

This was no irrational slasher at work. This was a highly-organized mind: a lunatic with a strong sense of tidiness. Further, and yet more bizarre than the careful stripping of the corpse, was the outrage that had then been perpetrated upon it. The reports claimed, though the Police Department failed to confirm this, that the body had been meticulously shaved. Every hair had been removed: from the head, from the groin, from beneath the arms; all cut and scorched back to the flesh. Even the eyebrows and eyelashes had been plucked out.

Finally, this all too naked slab had been hung by the feet from one of the holding handles set in the roof of the car, and a black plastic bucket, lined with a black plastic bag, had been placed beneath the corpse to catch the steady fall of blood from its wounds.

In that state, stripped, shaved, suspended and practically bled white, the body of Loretta Dyer had been found. It was disgusting, it was meticulous, and it was deeply confusing.

There had been no rape, nor any sign of torture. The woman had been swiftly and efficiently dispatched as though she was a piece of meat. And the butcher was still loose.

The City Fathers, in their wisdom, declared a complete close-down on press reports of the slaughter. It was said that the man who had found the body was in protective custody in New Jersey, out of sight of enquiring journalists. But the cover-up had failed. Some greedy cop had leaked the salient details to a reporter from The Times. Everyone in New York now knew the horrible story of the slaughters. It was a topic of conversation in every Deli and bar; and, of course, on the subway.

But Loretta Dyer was only the first.

Now three more bodies had been found in identical circumstances; though the work had clearly been interrupted on this occasion. Not all the bodies had been shaved, and the jugulars had not been severed to bleed them. There was another, more significant difference in the discovery: it was not a tourist who had stumbled on the sight, it was a reporter from The New York Times.

Kaufman surveyed the report that sprawled across the front page of the newspaper. He had no prurient interest in the story, unlike his elbow mate along the counter of the Deli. All he felt was a mild disgust, that made him push his plate of over-cooked eggs aside. It was simply further proof of his city's decadence. He could take no pleasure in her sickness.

Nevertheless, being human, he could not entirely ignore the gory details on the page in front of him. The article was unsensationally written, but the simple clarity of the style made the subject seem more appalling. He couldn't help wondering, too, about the man behind the atrocities. Was there one psychotic loose, or several, each inspired to copy the original murder? Perhaps this was only the beginning of the horror. Maybe more murders would follow, until at last the murderer, in his exhilaration or exhaustion, would step beyond caution and be taken. Until then the city, Kaufman's adored city, would live in a state somewhere between hysteria and ecstasy.

At his elbow a bearded man knocked over Kaufman's coffee.

"Shit!" he said.

Kaufman shifted on his stool to avoid the dribble of coffee running off the counter.

"Shit," the man said again.

No harm done," said Kaufman.

He looked at the man with a slightly disdainful expression on his face. The clumsy bastard was attempting to soak up the coffee with a napkin, which was turning to mush as he did so.

Kaufman found himself wondering if this oaf, with his florid cheeks and his uncultivated beard, was capable of murder. Was there any sign on that over-fed face, any clue in the shape of his head or the turn of his small eyes that gave his true nature away?

The man spoke.

"Wannanother?"

Kaufman shook his head.

"Coffee. Regular. Dark," the oaf said to the girl behind the counter. She looked up from cleaning the grill of cold fat. "Huh?"

"Coffee. You deaf?"

The man grinned at Kaufman.

"Deaf," he said.

Kaufman noticed he had three teeth missing from his lower jaw.

"Looks bad, huh?" he said.

What did he mean? The coffee? The absence of his teeth?

"Three people like that. Carved up." Kaufman nodded.

"Makes you think," he said. "Sure."

"I mean, it's a cover-up isn't it? They know who did it."

This conversation's ridiculous, thought Kaufman. He took off his spectacles and pocketed them: the bearded face was no longer in focus. That was some improvement at least.

"Bastards," he said. "Fucking bastards, all of them. I'll lay you anything it's a cover-up."

"Of what?"

"They got the evidence: they're just keeping us in the fucking dark. There's something out there that's not human." Kaufman understood. It was a conspiracy theory the oaf was trotting out. He'd heard them so often; a panacea. "See, they do all this cloning stuff and it gets out of hand.

They could be growing fucking monsters for all we know.

There's something down there they won't tell us about.

Cover-up, like I say. Lay you anything." Kaufman found the man's certainty attractive. Monsters, on the prowl. Six heads: a dozen eyes. Why not?

He knew why not. Because that excused his city: that let her off the hook. And Kaufman believed in his heart that the monsters to be found in the tunnels were perfectly human.

The bearded man threw his money on the counter and got up, sliding his fat bottom off the stained plastic stool. "Probably a fucking cop," he said, as his parting shot. "Tried to make a fucking hero, made a fucking monster instead." He grinned grotesquely. "Lay you anything," he continued and lumbered out without

another word. Kaufman slowly exhaled through his nose, feeling the tension in his body abate.

He hated that sort of confrontation: it made him feel tongue-tied and ineffectual. Come to think of it, he hated that kind of man: the opinionated brute that New York bred so well.

It was coming up to six when Mahogany woke. The morning rain had turned into a light drizzle by twilight. The air was about as clear-smelling as it ever got in Manhattan. He stretched on his bed, threw off the dirty blanket and got up for work.

In the bathroom the rain was dripping on the box of the air-conditioner, filling the apartment with a rhythmical slapping sound. Mahogany turned on the television to cover the noise, uninterested in anything it had to offer. He went to the window. The street six floors below was thick with traffic and people.

After a hard day's work New York was on its way home: to play, to make love. People were streaming out of their offices and into their automobiles. Some would be testy after a day's sweaty labour in a badly-aired office; others, benign as sheep, would be wandering home down the Avenues, ushered along by a ceaseless current of bodies. Still others would even now be cramming on to the subway, blind to the graffiti on every wall, deaf to the babble of their own voices, and to the cold thunder of the tunnels.

It pleased Mahogany to think of that. He was, after all, not one of the common herd. He could stand at his window and look down on a thousand heads below him, and know he was a chosen man.

He had deadlines to meet, of course, like the people in the street. But his work was not their senseless labour, it was more like a sacred duty.

He needed to live, and sleep, and shit like them, too. But it was not financial necessity that drove him, but the demands of history.

He was in a great tradition, that stretched further back than America. He was a night-stalker: like Jack the Ripper, like Gilles de Rais, a living embodiment of death, a wraith with a human face. He was a haunter of sleep, and an awakener of terrors.

The people below him could not know his face; nor would care to look twice at him. But his stare caught them, and weighed them up, selecting only the ripest from the passing parade, choosing only the healthy and the young to fall under his sanctified knife.

Sometimes Mahogany longed to announce his identity to the world, but he had responsibilities and they bore on him heavily. He couldn't expect fame. His was a secret life, and it was merely pride that longed for recognition. After all, he thought, does the beef salute the butcher as it throbs to its knees?

All in all, he was content. To be part of that great tradition was enough, would always have to remain enough. Recently, however, there had been discoveries. They weren't his fault of course. Nobody could possibly blame him. But it was a bad time. Life was not as easy as it had been ten years ago. He was that much older, of course, and that made the job more exhausting; and more and more the obligations weighed on his shoulders. He was a chosen man, and that was a difficult privilege to live with.

He wondered, now and then, if it wasn't time to think about training a younger man for his duties. There would need to be consultations with the Fathers, but sooner or later a replacement would have to be found, and it would be, he felt, a criminal waste of his experience not to take on an apprentice.

There were so many felicities he could pass on. The tricks of his extraordinary trade. The best way to stalk, to cut, to strip, to bleed. The best meat for the purpose. The simplest way to dispose of the remains. So much detail, so much accumulated expertise.

Mahogany wandered into the bathroom and turned on the shower. As he stepped in he looked down at his body. The small paunch, the greying hairs on his sagging chest, the scars, and pimples that littered his pale skin. He was getting old. Still, tonight, like every other night, he had a job to do.

Kaufman hurried back into the lobby with his sandwich, turning down his collar and brushing rain off his hair. The clock above the elevator read seven-sixteen. He would work through until ten, no later.

The elevator took him up to the twelfth floor and to the Pappas offices. He traipsed unhappily through the maze of empty desks and hooded machines to his little territory, which was still illuminated. The women who cleaned the offices were chatting down the corridor: otherwise the place was lifeless.

He took off his coat, shook the rain off it as best he could, and hung it up.

Then he sat down in front of the piles of orders he had been tussling with for the best part of three days, and began work. It would only take one more night's labour, he felt sure, to break the back of the job, and he found it easier to concentrate without the incessant clatter of typists and typewriters on every side.

He unwrapped his ham on whole-wheat with extra mayonnaise and settled in for the evening.

It was nine now.

Mahogany was dressed for the nightshift. He had his usual sober suit on, with his brown tie neatly knotted, his silver cufflinks (a gift from his first wife) placed in the sleeves of his immaculately pressed shirt, his thinning hair gleaming with oil, his nails snipped and polished, his face flushed with cologne.

His bag was packed. The towels, the instruments, his chain-mail apron.

He checked his appearance in the mirror. He could, he thought, still be taken for a man of forty-five, fifty at the outside.

As he surveyed his face he reminded himself of his duty. Above all, he must be careful. There would be eyes on him every step of the way, watching his performance tonight, and judging it. He must walk out like an innocent, arousing no suspicion.

If they only knew, he thought. The people who walked, ran and skipped past him on the streets: who collided with him without apology: who met his gaze with contempt: who smiled at his bulk, looking uneasy in his ill-fitting suit. If only they knew what he did, what he was and what he carried.

Caution, he said to himself, and turned off the light. The apartment was dark. He went to the door and opened it, used to walking in blackness. Happy in it.

The rain clouds had cleared entirely. Mahogany made his way down Amsterdam towards the Subway at 145th Street. Tonight he'd take the AVENUE OF THE AMERICAS again, his favourite line, and often the most productive.

Down the Subway steps, token in hand. Through the automatic gates. The smell of the tunnels was in his nostrils now. Not the smell of the deep tunnels of course. They had a scent all of their own. But there was reassurance even in the stale electric air of this shallow line. The regurgitated breath of a million travelers circulated in this warren, mingling with the breath of creatures far older; things with voices soft like clay, whose appetites were abominable. How he loved it. The scent, the dark, the thunder.

He stood on the platform and scanned his fellow-travelers critically. There were one or two bodies he contemplated following, but there was so much dross amongst them: so few worth the chase. The physically wasted, the obese, the ill, the weary. Bodies destroyed by excess and by indifference. As a professional it sickened him, though he understood the weakness that spoiled the best of men.

He lingered in the station for over an hour, wandering between platforms while the trains came and went, came and went, and the people with them. There was so little of quality around it was dispiriting. It seemed he had to wait longer and longer every day to find flesh worthy of use.

It was now almost half past ten and he had not seen a single creature who was really ideal for slaughter. No matter, he told himself, there was time yet. Very soon the theatre crowd would be emerging. They were always good for a sturdy body or two. The well-fed intelligentsia, clutching their ticket-stubs and opining on the diversions of art—oh yes, there'd be something there.

If not, and there were nights when it seemed he would never find something suitable, he'd have to ride downtown and corner a couple of lovers out late, or find an athlete or two, fresh from one of the gyms. They were always sure to offer good material, except that with such healthy specimens there was always the risk of resistance. He remembered catching two black bucks a year ago or more, with maybe forty years between them, father and son perhaps. They'd resisted with knives, and he'd been hospitalized for six weeks. It had been a close fought encounter and one that had set him doubting his skills. Worse, it had made him wonder what his masters would have done with him had he suffered a fatal injury. Would he have been delivered to his family in New Jersey, and given a decent Christian burial? Or would his carcass have been thrown into the dark, for their own use?

The headline of the New York Post, discarded on the seat across from him caught Mahogany's eye: *Police All-Out to Catch Killer*. He couldn't resist a smile. Thoughts of failure, weakness and death evaporated. After all, he was that man, that killer, and tonight the thought of capture was laughable. After all, wasn't his career sanctioned by the highest possible authorities? No policeman could hold him, no court pass judgement on him. The very forces of law and order that made such a show of his pursuit served his masters no less than he; he almost wished some two-bit cop would catch him, take him in triumph before the judge, just to see the looks on their faces when the word came up from the dark that Mahogany was a protected man, above every law on the statute books.

It was now well after ten-thirty. The trickle of theatre goers had begun, but there was nothing likely so far. He'd want to let the rush pass anyway: just follow one or two choice pieces to the end of the line. He bided his time, like any wise hunter.

Kaufman was not finished by eleven, an hour after he'd promised himself release. But exasperation and ennui were making the job more difficult, and the sheets of figures were beginning to blur in front of him. At ten past eleven he threw down his pen and admitted defeat. He rubbed his hot eyes with the cushions of his palms till his head filled with colours.

"Fuck it," he said.

He never swore in company. But once in a while to say fuck it to himself was a great consolation. He made his way out of the office, damp coat over his arm, and headed for the elevator. His limbs felt drugged and his eyes would scarcely stay open.

It was colder outside than he had anticipated, and the air brought him out of his lethargy a little. He walked towards the Subway at 34th Street. Catch an Express to Far Rockaway. Home in an hour.

Neither Kaufman nor Mahogany knew it, but at 96th and Broadway the Police had arrested what they took to be the Subway Killer, having trapped him in one of the up-town trains. A small man of European extraction, wielding a hammer and a saw, had cornered a young woman in the second car and threatened to cut her in half in the name of Jehovah.

Whether he was capable of fulfilling his threat was doubtful. As it was, he didn't get the chance. While the rest of the passengers (including two Marines) looked on, the intended victim landed a kick to the man's testicles. He dropped the hammer. She picked it up and broke his lower jaw and right cheek-bone with it before the Marines stepped in. When the train halted at 96th the Police were waiting to arrest the Subway Butcher. They rushed the car in a horde, yelling like banshees and scared as shit. The Butcher was lying in one corner of the car with his face in pieces. They carted him away, triumphant. The woman, after questioning, went home with the Marines.

It was to be a useful diversion, though Mahogany couldn't know it at the time. It took the Police the best part of the night to determine the identity of their prisoner, chiefly because he couldn't do more than drool through his shattered jaw. It wasn't until three-thirty in the morning that one Captain Davis, coming on duty, recognized the man as a retired flower salesman from the Bronx called Hank Vasarely. Hank, it seemed, was regularly arrested for threatening behavior and indecent exposure, all in the name of Jehovah. Appearances deceived: he was about as dangerous as the Easter Bunny. This was not the Subway Slaughterer. But by the time the cops had worked that out, Mahogany had been about his business a long while.

It was eleven-fifteen when Kaufman got on the Express through to Mott Avenue. He shared the car with two other travelers. One was a middle-aged black woman in a purple coat, the other a pale, acne-ridden adolescent who was staring at the "Kiss My White Ass' graffiti on the ceiling with spaced-out eyes.

Kaufman was in the first car. He had a journey of thirty-five minutes' duration ahead of him. He let his eyes slide closed, reassured by the rhythmical rocking of the train. It was a tedious journey and he was tired. He didn't see Mahogany's face, either, staring through the door between the cars, looking through for some more meat. At 14th Street the black woman got out. Nobody got in. Kaufman opened his eyes briefly, taking in the empty platform at 14th, then shut them again. The doors hissed closed. He was drifting in that warm somewhere between awareness and sleep and there was a fluttering of nascent dreams in his head. It was a good feeling. The train was off again, rattling down into the tunnels.

Maybe, at the back of his dozing mind, Kaufman half-registered that the doors between the second and first cars had been slid open. Maybe he smelt the sudden gush of tunnel-air, and registered that the noise of wheels was momentarily louder. But he chose to ignore it.

Maybe he even heard the scuffle as Mahogany subdued the youth with the spaced-out stare. But the sound was too distant and the promise of sleep was too tempting. He drowsed on.

For some reason his dreams were of his mother's kitchen. She was chopping turnips and smiling sweetly as she chopped. He was only small in his dream and was looking up at her radiant face while she worked. *Chop. Chop. Chop.*

His eyes jerked open. His mother vanished. The car was empty and the youth was gone.

How long had he been dozing? He hadn't remembered the train stopping at West 4th Street. He got up, his head full of slumber, and almost fell over as the train rocked violently. It seemed to have gathered quite a substantial head of speed. Maybe the driver was keen to be home, wrapped up in bed with his wife. They were going at a fair lick; in fact it was bloody terrifying.

There was a blind drawn down over the window between the cars which hadn't been down before as he remembered. A little concern crept into Kaufman's sober head. Suppose he'd been sleeping a long while, and the guard had overlooked him in the car. Perhaps they'd passed Far Rockaway and the train was now speeding on its way to wherever they took the trains for the night.

"Fuck it," he said aloud.

Should he go forward and ask the driver? It was such a bloody idiot question to ask: where am I? At this time of night was he likely to get more than a stream of abuse by way of reply?

Then the train began to slow.

A station. Yes, a station. The train emerged from the tunnel and into the dirty light of the station at West 4th Street. He'd missed no stops...

So where had the boy gone?

He'd either ignored the warning on the car wall forbidding transfer between the cars while in transit, or else he'd gone into the driver's cabin up front. Probably between the driver's legs even now, Kaufman thought, his lip curling. It wasn't unheard of. This was the Palace of Delights, after all, and everyone had their right to a little love in the dark.

Kaufman shrugged to himself. What did he care where the boy had gone?

The doors closed. Nobody had boarded the train. It shunted off from the station, the lights flickering as it used a surge of power to pick up some speed again.

Kaufman felt the desire for sleep come over him afresh, but the sudden fear of being lost had pumped adrenalin into his system, and his limbs were tingling with nervous energy.

His senses were sharpened too.

Even over the clatter and the rumble of the wheels on the tracks, he heard the sound of tearing cloth coming from the next car. Was someone tearing their shirt off?

He stood up, grasping one of the straps for balance.

The window between the cars was completely curtained off, but he stared at it, frowning, as though he might suddenly discover X-ray vision. The car rocked and rolled. It was really travelling again.

Another ripping sound.

Was it rape?

With no more than a mild voyeuristic urge he moved down the see-sawing car towards the intersecting door, hoping there might be a chink in the curtain. His eyes were still fixed on the window, and he failed to notice the splatters of blood he was treading in. Until—his heel slipped. He looked down. His stomach almost saw the blood before his brain and the ham on whole-wheat was half-way up his gullet catching in the back of his throat. Blood. He took several large gulps of stale air and looked away—back at the window.

His head was saying: blood. Nothing would make the word go away.

There was no more than a yard or two between him and the door now. He had to look. There was blood on his shoe, and a thin trail to the next car, but he still had to look.

He had to.

He took two more steps to the door and scanned the curtain looking for a flaw in the blind: a pulled thread in the weave would be sufficient. There was a tiny hole. He glued his eye to it.

His mind refused to accept what his eyes were seeing beyond the door. It rejected the spectacle as preposterous, as a dreamed sight. His reason said it couldn't be real, but his flesh knew it was. His body became rigid with terror. His eyes, unblinking, could not close off the appalling scene through the curtain. He stayed at the door while the train rattled on, while his blood drained from his extremities, and his brain reeled from lack of oxygen. Bright spots of light flashed in front of his vision, blotting out the atrocity.

Then he fainted.

He was unconscious when the train reached Jay Street. He was deaf to the driver's announcement that all travelers beyond that station would have to change trains. Had he heard this he would have questioned the sense of it. No trains disgorged all their passengers at Jay Street; the line ran to Mott Avenue, via the Aqueduct Race Track, past JFK Airport. He would have asked what kind of train this could be. Except that he already knew. The truth was hanging in the next car. It was smiling contentedly to itself from behind a bloody chain-mail apron. This was the Midnight Meat Train.

There's no accounting for time in a dead faint. It could have been seconds or hours that passed before Kaufman's eyes flickered open again, and his mind focused on his new-found situation.

He lay under one of the seats now, sprawled along the vibrating wall of the car, hidden from view. Fate was with him so far he thought: somehow the rocking of the car must have jockeyed his unconscious body out of sight. He thought of the horror in Car Two, and swallowed back vomit. He was alone. Wherever the guard was (murdered perhaps), there was no way he could call for help. And the driver? Was he dead at his controls? Was the train even now hurtling through an unknown tunnel, a tunnel without a single station to identify it, towards its destruction? And if there was no crash to be killed in, there was always the Butcher, still hacking away a door's thickness from where Kaufman lay.

Whichever way he turned, the name on the door was Death.

The noise was deafening, especially lying on the floor. Kaufman's teeth were shaking in their sockets and his face felt numb with the vibration; even his skull was aching.

Gradually he felt strength seeping back into his exhausted limbs. He cautiously stretched his fingers and clenched his fists, to set the blood flowing there again.

And as the feeling returned, so did the nausea. He kept seeing the grisly brutality of the next car. He'd seen photographs of murder victims before, of course, but these were no common murders. He was in the same train as the Subway Butcher, the monster who strung his victims up by the feet from the straps, hairless and naked. How long would it be before the killer stepped through that door and claimed him? He was sure that if the slaughterer didn't finish him, expectation would.

He heard movement beyond the door.

Instinct took over. Kaufman thrust himself further under the seat and tucked himself up into a tiny ball, with his sickwhite face to the wall. Then he covered his head with his hands and closed his eyes as tightly as any child in terror of the Bogeyman.

The door was slid open. *Click. Whoosh.* A rush of air up from the rails. It smelt stranger than any Kaufman had smelt before: and colder. This was somehow primal air in his nostrils, hostile and unfathomable air. It made him shudder.

The door closed. *Click.*

The Butcher was close, Kaufman knew it. He could be standing no more than a matter of inches from where he lay. Was he even now looking down at Kaufman's back? Even now bending, knife in hand, to scoop Kaufman out of his hiding place, like a snail hooked from its shell?

Nothing happened. He felt no breath on his neck. His spine was not slit open.

There was simply a clatter of feet close to Kaufman's head; then that same sound receding.

Kaufman's breath, held in his lungs 'til they hurt, was expelled in a rasp between his teeth.

Mahogany was almost disappointed that the sleeping man had alighted at West 4th Street. He was hoping for one more job to do that night, to keep him occupied while they descended. But no: the man had gone. The potential victim hadn't looked that healthy anyway, he thought to himself, he was an anemic Jewish accountant probably. The meat wouldn't have been of any quality. Mahogany walked the length of the car to the driver's cabin. He'd spend the rest of the journey there.

My Christ, thought Kaufman, he's going to kill the driver.

He heard the cabin door open. Then the voice of the Butcher: low and hoarse.

"Hi."

"Hi."

They knew each other.

"All done?"

"All done."

Kaufman was shocked by the banality of the exchange. All done? What did that mean: all done? He missed the next few words as the train hit a particularly noisy section of track.

Kaufman could resist looking no longer. Warily he uncurled himself and glanced over his shoulder down the length of the car. All he could see was the Butcher's legs, and the bottom of the open cabin door. Damn. He wanted to see the monster's face again.

There was laughter now.

Kaufman calculated the risks of his situation: the mathematics of panic. If he remained where he was, sooner or later the Butcher would glance down at him, and he'd be mincemeat. On the other hand, if he were to move from his hiding place he would risk being seen and pursued. Which was worse: stasis, and meeting his death trapped in a hole; or making a break for it and confronting his Maker in the middle of the car?

Kaufman surprised himself with his mettle: he'd move.

Infinitesimally slowly he crawled out from under the seat, watching the Butcher's back every minute as he did so. Once out, he began to crawl towards the door. Each step he took was a torment, but the Butcher seemed far too engrossed in his conversation to turn round.

Kaufman had reached the door. He began to stand up, trying all the while to prepare himself for the sight he would meet in Car Two. The handle was grasped; and he slid the door open.

The noise of the rails increased, and a wave of dank air, stinking of nothing on earth, came up at him. Surely the Butcher must hear, or smell? Surely he must turn -But no. Kaufman skinned his way through the slit he had opened and so through into the bloody chamber beyond.

Relief made him careless. He failed to latch the door properly behind him and it began to slide open with the buffeting of the train.

Mahogany put his head out of the cabin and stared down the car towards the door.

"What the fuck's that?" said the driver.

"Didn't close the door properly. That's all."

Kaufman heard the Butcher walking towards the door. He crouched, a ball of consternation, against the intersecting wall, suddenly aware of how full his bowels were. The door was pulled closed from the other side, and the footsteps receded again.

Safe, for another breath at least.

Kaufman opened his eyes, steeling himself for the slaughter-pen in front of him.

There was no avoiding it.

It filled every one of his senses: the smell of opened entrails, the sight of the bodies, the feel of fluid on the floor under his fingers, the sound of the straps creaking beneath the weight of the corpses, even the air, tasting salty with blood. He was with death absolutely in that cubby-hole, hurtling through the dark.

But there was no nausea now. There was no feeling left but a casual revulsion. He even found himself peering at the bodies with some curiosity.

The carcass closest to him was the remains of the pimply youth he'd seen in Car One. The body hung upside-down, swinging back and forth to the rhythm of the train, in unison with its three fellows; an obscene dance macabre.

Its arms dangled loosely from the shoulder joints, into which gashes an inch or two deep had been made, so the bodies would hang more neatly.

Every part of the dead kid's anatomy was swaying hypnotically. The tongue, hanging from the open mouth. The head, lolling on its slit neck. Even the youth's penis flapped from side to side on his plucked groin. The head wound and the open jugular still pulsed blood into a black bucket. There was an elegance about the whole sight: the sign of a job well-done.

Beyond that body were the strung-up corpses of two young white women and a darker skinned male. Kaufman turned his head on one side to look at their faces. They were quite blank. One of the girls was a beauty. He decided the male had been Puerto Rican. All were shorn of their head and body hair. In fact the air was still pungent with the smell of the shearing. Kaufman slid up the wall out of the crouching position, and as he did so one of the women's bodies turned around, presenting a dorsal view.

He was not prepared for this last horror.

The meat of her back had been entirely cleft open from neck to buttock and the muscle had been peeled back to expose the glistening vertebrae. It was the final triumph of the Butcher's craft. Here they hung, these shaved, bled, slit slabs of humanity, opened up like fish, and ripe for devouring.

Kaufman almost smiled at the perfection of its horror. He felt an offer of insanity tickling the base of his skull, tempting him into oblivion, promising a blank indifference to the world.

He began to shake, uncontrollably. He felt his vocal cords trying to form a scream. It was intolerable: and yet to scream was to become in a short while like the creatures in front of him.

"Fuck it," he said, more loudly than he'd intended, then pushing himself off from the wall he began to walk down the car between the swaying corpses, observing the neat piles of clothes and belongings that sat on the seats beside their owners. Under his feet the floor was sticky with drying bile. Even with his eyes closed to cracks he could see the blood in the buckets too clearly: it was thick and heady, flecks of grit turning in it.

He was past the youth now and he could see the door into Car Three ahead. All he had to do was run this gauntlet of atrocities. He urged himself on, trying to ignore the horrors, and concentrate on the door that would lead him back into sanity.

He was past the first woman. A few more yards, he said to himself, ten steps at most, less if he walked with confidence.

Then the lights went out.

"Jesus Christ," he said.

The train lurched, and Kaufman lost his balance.

In the utter blackness he reached out for support and his flailing arms encompassed the body beside him. Before he could prevent himself he felt his hands sinking into the lukewarm flesh, and his fingers grasping the open edge of muscle on the dead woman's back, his fingertips touching the bone of her spine. His cheek was laid against the bald flesh of the thigh.

He screamed; and even as he screamed, the lights flickered back on.

And as they flickered back on, and his scream died, he heard the noise of the Butcher's feet approaching down the length of Car One towards the intervening door.

He let go of the body he was embracing. His face was smeared with blood from her leg. He could feel it on his cheek, like war paint.

The scream had cleared Kaufman's head and he suddenly felt released into a kind of strength. There would be no pursuit down the train, he knew that: there would be no cowardice, not now. This was going to be a primitive confrontation, two human beings, face to face. And there would be no trick—none—that he couldn't contemplate using to bring his enemy down. This was a matter of survival, pure and simple.

The door-handle rattled.

Kaufman looked around for a weapon, his eye steady and calculating. His gaze fell on the pile of clothes beside the Puerto Rican's body. There was a knife there, lying amongst the rhinestone rings and the imitation gold chains. A long-bladed, immaculately clean weapon, probably the man's pride and joy. Reaching past the well-muscled body, Kaufman plucked the knife from the heap. It felt good in his hand; in fact it felt positively thrilling. The door was opening, and the face of the slaughterer came into view.

Kaufman looked down the abattoir at Mahogany. He was not terribly fearsome, just another balding, overweight man of fifty. His face was heavy and his eyes deep-set. His mouth was rather small and delicately lipped. In fact he had a woman's mouth.

Mahogany could not understand where this intruder had appeared from, but he was aware that it was another oversight, another sign of increasing incompetence. He must dispatch this ragged creature immediately. After all they could not be more than a mile or two from the end of the line. He must cut the little man down and have him hanging up by his heels before they reached their destination.

He moved into Car Two.

"You were asleep," he said, recognizing Kaufman. "I saw you."

Kaufman said nothing.

"You should have left the train. What were you trying to do? Hide from me?"

Kaufman still kept his silence.

Mahogany grasped the hand of the cleaver hanging from his well-used leather belt. It was dirty with blood, as was his chain-mail apron, his hammer and his saw.

"As it is," he said, "I'll have to do away with you." Kaufman raised the knife. It looked a little small beside the Butcher's paraphernalia.

"Fuck it," he said.

Mahogany grinned at the little man's pretensions to defence.

"You shouldn't have seen this: it's not for the likes of you," he said, taking another step towards Kaufman. "It's secret."

Oh, so he's the divinely-inspired type is he? Thought Kaufman. That explains something.

"Fuck it," he said again.

The Butcher frowned. He didn't like the little man's indifference to his work, to his reputation. "We all have to die some time," he said. "You should be well pleased: you're not going to be burnt up like most of them: I can use you. To feed the fathers."

Kaufman's only response was a grin. He was past being terrorized by this gross, shambling hulk. The Butcher unhooked the cleaver from his belt and brandished it.

"A dirty little Jew like you," he said, "should be thankful to be useful at all: meat's the best you can aspire to." Without warning, the Butcher swung. The cleaver divided the air at some speed, but Kaufman stepped back. The cleaver sliced his coat-arm and buried itself in the Puerto Rican's shank. The impact half-severed the leg and the weight of the body opened the gash even further. The exposed meat of the thigh was like prime steak, succulent and appetizing.

The Butcher started to drag the cleaver out of the wound, and in that moment Kaufman sprang. The knife sped towards Mahogany's eye, but an error of judgement buried it instead in his neck. It transfixed the column and appeared in a little gout of gore on the other side. Straight through. In one stroke. Straight through. Mahogany felt the blade in his neck as a choking sensation, almost as though he had caught a chicken bone in his throat. He made a ridiculous, half-hearted coughing sound. Blood issued from his lips, painting them, like lipstick on his woman's mouth. The cleaver clattered to the floor.

Kaufman pulled out the knife. The two wounds spouted little arcs of blood.

Mahogany collapsed to his knees, staring at the knife that had killed him. The little man was watching him quite passively. He was saying something, but Mahogany's ears were deaf to the remarks, as though he was under water. Mahogany suddenly went blind. He knew with a nostalgia for his senses that he would not see or hear again. This was death: it was on him for certain.

His hands still felt the weave of his trousers, however, and the hot splashes on his skin. His life seemed to totter on its tiptoes while his fingers grasped at one last sense.

Then his body collapsed, and his hands, and his life, and his sacred duty folded up under a weight of grey flesh. The Butcher was dead.

Kaufman dragged gulps of stale air into his lungs and grabbed one of the straps to steady his reeling body. Tears blotted out the shambles he stood in. A time passed: he didn't know how long; he was lost in a dream of victory. Then the train began to slow. He felt and heard the brakes being applied. The hanging bodies lurched forward as the careering train slowed, its wheels squealing on rails that were sweating slime.

Curiosity overtook Kaufman.

Would the train shunt into the Butcher's underground slaughterhouse, decorated with the meats he had gathered through his career? And the laughing

driver, so indifferent to the massacre, what would he do once the train had stopped? Whatever happened now was academic. He could face anything at all; watch and see. The tannoy crackled. The voice of the driver: "We're here man. Better take your place eh?"

Take your place? What did that mean?

The train had slowed to a snail's pace. Outside the windows, everything was as dark as ever. The lights flickered, then went out. This time they didn't come back on.

Kaufman was left in total darkness.

"We'll be out in half-an-hour," the tannoy announced, so like any station report.

The train had come to a stop. The sound of its wheels on the tracks, the rush of its passage, which Kaufman had grown so used to, were suddenly absent. All he could hear was the hum of the tannoy. He could still see nothing at all.

Then, a hiss. The doors were opening. A smell entered the car, a smell so caustic that Kaufman clapped his hand over his face to shut it out.

He stood in silence, hand to mouth, for what seemed a lifetime. See no evil. Hear no evil. Speak no evil. Then, there was a flicker of light outside the window. It threw the door frame into silhouette, and it grew stronger by degrees. Soon there was sufficient light in the car for Kaufman to see the crumpled body of the Butcher at his feet, and the sallow sides of meat hanging on every side of him.

There was a whisper too, from the dark outside the train, a gathering of tiny noises like the voices of beetles. In the tunnel, shuffling towards the train, were human beings. Kaufman could see their outlines now. Some of them carried torches, which burned with a dead brown light. The noise was perhaps their feet on the damp earth, or perhaps their tongues clicking, or both.

Kaufman wasn't as naive as he'd been an hour before. Could there be any doubt as to the intention these things had, coming out of the blackness towards the train? The Butcher had slaughtered the men and women as meat for these cannibals, they were coming, like diners at the dinner-gong, to eat in this restaurant car.

Kaufman bent down and picked up the cleaver the Butcher had dropped. The noise of the creatures' approach was louder every moment. He backed down the car away from the open doors, only to find that the doors behind him were also open, and there was the whisper of approach there too.

He shrank back against one of the seats, and was about to take refuge under them when a hand, thin and frail to the point of transparency appeared around the door.

He could not look away. Not that terror froze him as it had at the window. He simply wanted to watch. The creature stepped into the car. The torches behind it threw its face into shadow, but its outline could be clearly seen.

There was nothing very remarkable about it.

It had two arms and two legs as he did; its head was not abnormally shaped. The body was small, and the effort of climbing into the train made its breath coarse. It seemed more geriatric than psychotic; generations of fictional maneaters had not prepared him for its distressing vulnerability.

Behind it, similar creatures were appearing out of the darkness, shuffling into the train. In fact they were coming in at every door.

Kaufman was trapped. He weighed the cleaver in his hands, getting the balance of it, ready for the battle with these antique monsters. A torch had been brought into the car, and it illuminated the faces of the leaders. They were completely bald. The tired flesh of their faces was pulled tight over their skulls, so that it shone with tension. There were stains of decay and disease on their skin, and in places the muscle had withered to a black pus, through which the bone of cheek or temple was showing. Some of them were naked as babies, their pulpy, syphilitic bodies scarcely sexed. What had been breasts were leathery bags hanging off the torso, the genitalia shrunk away. Worse sights than the naked amongst them were those who wore a veil of clothes. It soon dawned on Kaufman that the rotting fabric slung around their shoulders, or knotted about their midriffs was made of human skins. Not one, but a dozen or more, heaped haphazardly on top of each other, like pathetic trophies.

The leaders of this grotesque meal-line had reached the bodies now, and the gracile hands were laid upon the shanks of meat, and were running up and down the shaved flesh in a manner that suggested sensual pleasure. Tongues were dancing out of mouths, flecks of spittle landing on the meat. The eyes of the monsters were flickering back and forth with hunger and excitement.

Eventually one of them saw Kaufman.

Its eyes stopped flickering for a moment, and fixed on him. A look of enquiry came over the face, making a parody of puzzlement.

"You," it said. The voice was as wasted as the lips it came from.

Kaufman raised the cleaver a little, calculating his chances. There were perhaps thirty of them in the car and many more outside. But they looked so weak, and they had no weapons, but their skin and bones.

The monster spoke again, its voice quite well modulated, when it found itself, the piping of a once-cultured, once charming man.

"You came after the other, yes?"

It glanced down at the body of Mahogany. It had clearly taken in the situation very quickly. "Old anyway," it said, its watery eyes back on Kaufman, studying him with care.

"Fuck you," said Kaufman.

The creature attempted a wry smile, but it had almost forgotten the technique and the result was a grimace which exposed a mouthful of teeth that had been systematically filed into points.

"You must now do this for us," it said through the bestial grin. "We cannot survive without food."

The hand patted the rump of human flesh. Kaufman had no reply to the idea. He just stared in disgust as the fingernails slid between the cleft in the buttocks, feeling the swell of tender muscle.

"It disgusts us no less than you," said the creature. "But we're bound to eat this meat, or we die. God knows, I have no appetite for it."

The thing was drooling nevertheless.

Kaufman found his voice. It was small, more with a confusion of feelings than with fear.

"What are you?" He remembered the bearded man in the Deli.

"Are you accidents of some kind?"

"We are the City fathers," the thing said. "And mothers, and daughters and sons. The builders, the law-makers. We made this city."

"New York?" said Kaufman. The Palace of Delights? "Before you were born, before anyone living was born." As it spoke the creature's fingernails were running up under the skin of the split body, and were peeling the thin elastic layer off the luscious brawn. Behind Kaufman, the other creatures had begun to unhook the bodies from the straps, their hands laid in that same delighting manner on the smooth breasts and flanks of flesh. These too had begun skinning the meat.

"You will bring us more," the father said. "More meat for us. The other one was weak."

Kaufman stared in disbelief.

"Me?" he said. "Feed you? What do you think I am?"

"You must do it for us, and for those older than us. For those born before the city was thought of, when America was a timberland and desert."

The fragile hand gestured out of the train.

Kaufman's gaze followed the pointing finger into the gloom. There was something else outside the train which he'd failed to see before; much bigger than anything human.

The pack of creatures parted to let Kaufman through so that he could inspect more closely whatever it was that stood outside, but his feet would not move.

"Go on," said the father.

Kaufman thought of the city he'd loved. Were these really its ancients, its philosophers, its creators? He had to believe it. Perhaps there were people on the surface -bureaucrats, politicians, authorities of every kind—who knew this horrible secret and whose lives were dedicated to preserving these abominations, feeding them, as savages feed lambs to their gods. There was a horrible familiarity about this ritual. It rang a bell—not in Kaufman's conscious mind, but in his deeper, older self.

His feet, no longer obeying his mind, but his instinct to worship, moved. He walked through the corridor of bodies and stepped out of the train.

The light of the torches scarcely began to illuminate the limitless darkness outside. The air seemed solid, it was so thick with the smell of ancient earth. But Kaufman smelt nothing. His head bowed, it was all he could do to prevent himself from fainting again.

It was there; the precursor of man. The original American, whose homeland this was before Passamaquoddy or Cheyenne. Its eyes, if it had eyes, were on him.

His body shook. His teeth chattered.

He could hear the noise of its anatomy: ticking, crackling, sobbing.

It shifted a little in the dark.

The sound of its movement was awesome. Like a mountain sitting up.

Kaufman's face was raised to it, and without thinking about what he was doing or why, he fell to his knees in the shit in front of the Father of Fathers.

Every day of his life had been leading to this day, every moment quickening to this incalculable moment of holy terror.

Had there been sufficient light in that pit to see the whole, perhaps his tepid heart would have burst. As it was he felt it flutter in his chest as he saw what he saw.

It was a giant. Without head or limb. Without a feature that was analogous to human, without an organ that made sense, or senses. If it was like anything, it was like a shoal of fish. A thousand snouts all moving in unison, budding, blossoming and withering rhythmically. It was iridescent, like mother of pearl, but it was sometimes deeper than any colour Kaufman knew, or could put a name to.

That was all Kaufman could see, and it was more than he wanted to see. There was much more in the darkness, flickering and flapping.

But he could look no longer. He turned away, and as he did so a football was pitched out of the train and rolled to a halt in front of the Father.

At least he thought it was a football, until he peered more attentively at it, and recognized it as a human head, the head of the Butcher. The skin of the face had been peeled off in strips. It glistened with blood as it lay in front of its Lord.

Kaufman looked away, and walked back to the train. Every part of his body seemed to be weeping but his eyes. They were too hot with the sight behind him, they boiled his tears away.

Inside, the creatures had already set about their supper. One, he saw, was plucking the blue sweet morsel of a woman's eye out of the socket. Another had a hand in its mouth. At Kaufman's feet lay the Butcher's headless corpse, still bleeding profusely from where its neck had been bitten through.

The little father who had spoken earlier stood in front of Kaufman.

"Serve us?" it asked, gently, as you might ask a cow to follow you.

Kaufman was staring at the cleaver, the Butcher's symbol of office. The creatures were leaving the car now, dragging the half-eaten bodies after them. As the torches were taken out of the car, darkness was returning. But before the lights had completely disappeared the father reached out and took hold of Kaufman's face, thrusting him round to look at himself in the filthy glass of the car window.

It was a thin reflection, but Kaufman could see quite well enough how changed he was. Whiter than any living man should be, covered in grime and blood.

The father's hand still gripped Kaufman's face, and its forefinger hooked into his mouth and down his gullet, the nail scoring the back of his throat. Kaufman gagged on the intruder, but had no will left to repel the attack. "Serve," said the creature. "In silence."

Too late, Kaufman realized the intention of the fingers.

Suddenly his tongue was seized tight and twisted on the root. Kaufman, in shock, dropped the cleaver. He tried to scream, but no sound came. Blood was in his throat, he heard his flesh tearing, and agonies convulsed him. Then the hand was out of his mouth and the scarlet, spittle-covered fingers were in front of his face, with his tongue, held between thumb and forefinger.

Kaufman was speechless.

"Serve," said the father, and stuffed the tongue into his own mouth, chewing on it with evident satisfaction. Kaufman fell to his knees, spewing up his sandwich.

The father was already shuffling away into the dark; the rest of the ancients had disappeared into their warren for another night.

The tannoy crackled.

"Home," said the driver.

The doors hissed closed and the sound of power surged through the train. The lights flickered on, then off again, then on.

The train began to move.

Kaufman lay on the floor, tears pouring down his face, tears of discomfiture and of resignation. He would bleed to death, he decided, where he lay. It wouldn't matter if he died. It was a foul world anyway.

The driver woke him. He opened his eyes. The face that was looking down at him was black, and not unfriendly. It grinned. Kaufman tried to say something, but his mouth was sealed up with dried blood. He jerked his head around like a driveller trying to spit out a word. Nothing came but grunts.

He wasn't dead. He hadn't bled to death.

The driver pulled him to his knees, talking to him as though he were a three-year-old.

"You got a job to do, my man: they're very pleased with you."

The driver had licked his fingers, and was rubbing Kaufman's swollen lips, trying to part them. "Lots to learn before tomorrow night..."

Lots to learn. Lots to learn.

He led Kaufman out of the train. They were in no station he had ever seen before. It was white-tiled and absolutely pristine; a station-keeper's Nirvana. No graffiti disfigured the walls. There were no token-booths, but then there were no gates and no passengers either. This was a line that provided only one service: The Meat Train. A morning shift of cleaners were already busy hosing the blood off the seats and the floor of the train. Somebody was stripping the Butcher's body, in preparation for dispatch to New Jersey. All around Kaufman people were at work.

A rain of dawn light was pouring through a grating in the roof of the station. Motes of dust hung in the beams, turning over and over. Kaufman watched them, entranced. He hadn't seen such a beautiful thing since he was a child. Lovely dust. Over and over, and over and over.

The driver had managed to separate Kaufman's lips. His mouth was too wounded for him to move it, but at least he could breathe easily. And the pain was already beginning to subside.

The driver smiled at him, then turned to the rest of the workers in the station.

"I'd like to introduce Mahogany's replacement. Our new butcher," he announced.

The workers looked at Kaufman. There was a certain deference in their faces, which he found appealing. Kaufman looked up at the sunlight, now falling all around him. He jerked his head, signifying that he wanted to go up, into the open air. The driver nodded, and led him up a steep flight of steps and through an alleyway and so out on to the sidewalk.

It was a beautiful day. The bright sky over New York was streaked with filaments of pale pink cloud, and the air smelt of morning.

The Streets and Avenues were practically empty. At a distance an occasional cab crossed an intersection, its engine a whisper; a runner sweated past on the other side of the street.

Very soon these same deserted sidewalks would be thronged with people. The city would go about its business in ignorance: never knowing what it was built upon, or what it owed its life to. Without hesitation, Kaufman fell to his knees and

kissed the dirty concrete with his bloody lips, silently swearing his eternal loyalty to its continuance.

The Palace of Delights received the adoration without comment.

