

RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS

---



# The Reconstructionist

Nick Arvin

# Contents

About the Book  
About the Author  
Title Page  
Dedication  
Chapter 0

Part One: Career  
Chapter 1  
Chapter 2

Part Two: Point of Inflection  
Chapter 3  
Chapter 4  
Chapter 5

Part Three: The Past  
Chapter 6  
Chapter 7

Part Four: Movement  
Chapter 8  
Chapter 9  
Chapter 10  
Chapter 11

Part Five: The Reconstruction  
Chapter 12

Copyright

## About the Book

At a loose end after college, Ellis Barstow drifts back to his home town and a strange profession: reconstructing fatal traffic accidents. He seems to take to the work immediately, and forms a bond with his boss and mentor, John Boggs, an intriguing character of few but telling words.

Yet Ellis is harbouring a secret. He was drawn to the reconstructionist's grisly world by the fatal crash that killed his half-brother Christopher and that still haunts him; in fact his life has been shaped by car accidents. Boggs, in his exacting way, would argue that 'accident' is not the right word, that if two cars meeting at an intersection can be called an accident then anything can - where we live, what we do, even who we fall in love with.

For Ellis these things are certainly no accident. And he harbours a second, more dangerous secret, one that threatens to blow apart the men's lives and which, as the story's quiet momentum builds, leads to a desperate race towards confrontation, reconciliation and survival.

## About the Author

Nick Arvin grew up in Michigan and has degrees in mechanical engineering from the University of Michigan and Stanford. A graduate of the Iowa Writers' Workshop, he is the author of two books: *In the Electric Eden: Stories* and *Articles of War*, which was included in the Books of the Year in the *Independent* and *Esquire* magazine. His work has appeared in the *New Yorker*, the *New York Times*, and the *Rocky Mountain News*, and his numerous awards include the Rosenthal Foundation Award from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, the Boyd Award from the American Library Association, the Colorado Book Award, and fellowships from the Michener-Copernicus Society, the Isherwood Foundation, and the National Endowment for the Arts.

# The Reconstructionist

NICK ARVIN

 WINDMILL BOOKS

*For Rachel and Cade*

0.

AT THE SOUND of shrieking tyres the boys stop and hold. Ellis is nine and Christopher, his half-brother, is eleven. They stand anticipating the resonant crash of large metal bodies at speed, but even so, when it comes, they startle. The glare on the television glass quivers. A lingering metallic sound, like a rolling paint can, drifts away.

Silence resumes.

The boys stampede the door.

A high wooden fence surrounds their subdivision, and on the other side lie what they call *the big streets*. They run nearly a quarter-mile to reach an opening in the fence and turn into the big streets where a line of unmoving traffic is already forming, car behind car, drivers staring dully toward the intersection. Ellis wheezes and feels the shortness of his legs relative to Christopher's, but he keeps up. A pair of teenagers stand on the sidewalk hand in hand, peering toward the stop lights, and the two boys spin around on either side. A siren's howl draws toward the intersection from across town.

Two boxy American sedans - a Chevy and a Plymouth - have a startling appearance: they lie in unnatural postures,

pointed in oblique directions, damaged in dark inversions, their black guts exposed, their glossy surfaces crushed, twisted and torn. An acrid odour cuts the air, and for a minute Ellis holds his breath against it. A green Kool-Aid-coloured fluid glistens in an arc on the asphalt. Across the intersection a chrome hubcap lies shining. It matches the chrome hubcaps on the nearest sedan, the Plymouth, where a fat man and his fat wife stand. The husband peers toward the approaching sirens while his wife glances at her watch, repeatedly, and Ellis wonders why she is barefoot. In the Chevy are two women. One, older, is comforting the other, a young woman with heaps of hair who holds her hands over her face and intermittently moans, a sound Ellis hears faintly, muffled by distance.

A few people gather on the corners. Two more boys from the neighbourhood arrive. A third. They punch one another on the shoulder. A policeman picks up the hubcap and directs traffic around the damaged vehicles. Another policeman talks to the women in the Chevy and scribbles on a notepad. An ambulance arrives. The woman holding her face is placed onto a gurney and swallowed by the ambulance. A wrecker with flashing amber lights backs up to the Plymouth while the ambulance moves off with its siren alternating yowls, bleeps and squawks.

The twins trot in, and they get punched on the shoulders, too.

The sedans are trundled away behind a pair of wreckers. A cop remains, taking notes, talking with people. He measures distances with a wheel on a stick that he rolls from point to point. He retrieves a camera from the trunk of his cruiser and takes photos. 'Go home,' he shouts toward the boys. They sidle a few steps down the sidewalk and loiter there. Only when this cop, too, has climbed into his car and driven away does Christopher start to saunter down the sidewalk, and the others follow. The short twin trips and stumbles, and someone giggles. 'It was an

accident,' the short twin protests, and the others laugh. They pretend to trip, flail around, clutch one another. One of the boys jogs backward in front of the short twin and chants in his face, 'Accident, accident.' Christopher steps a little further ahead, waves a fist in the air and shouts, 'Ax-E-Dent! Ax-E-Dent!'

Ellis shouts, 'Ax-E-Dent!'

Christopher screams, 'Ax! E! Dent!'

The boys parade along the sidewalk, chanting, 'Ax-E-Dent! Ax-E-Dent! Ax! E! Dent!'

The tall twin screams, 'Crash!' A boy shouts, 'Smash!' Another hollers, 'Blood!' And another, the son of a mechanic, yells, 'Glycol!' They beat one another on the shoulders and shake their fists skyward as if on a team that has won. Soon they begin to sprint and strain for speed.

The next day, Ellis rides through the intersection with his mother in her Oldsmobile. The damaged vehicles are gone, of course, and the splash of green fluid has vanished, too. The only indications of the collision are a couple of short dark tyre marks on the road and, at the corners of the intersection, near the kerbs, shards of glass and broken ruby-coloured plastic, pushed by passing tyres into long shallow piles.

# PART ONE: CAREER

# 1.

WHEN ELLIS BARSTOW finished college he took a job in a plant that manufactured axles and driveshafts for pickup trucks and SUVs. His workday began and ended with a journey across the plant floor, and curiosity took him on circuitous routes through the drills and lathes, assembly lines, clapping stamping presses, robot arms manoeuvring weld pincers, and a heat-treatment area where tubular furnaces glowed and flamed under the care of hunched, thin old men wearing goggles and asbestos gauntlets. Ellis liked these walks, liked gawking, liked the spectacle of a mechanised world where the sprawl of machines spread out of sight to all sides, conveyor systems criss-crossed overhead, and grates underfoot showed milk-coloured lubricants coursing in streams. And he liked how sometimes, as if to sharpen the strangeness, a sparrow swooped down from some dark nook overhead and worried at a stray Cheeto or muffin paper on the blackened floor.

But the rest of the job was more difficult.

He had earned a degree in mechanical engineering without developing any concrete ideas about what he wanted to do with it. He had thought maybe he would like

to work with things that made things, so he had taken a job where things were made. His particular realm was a 10.5-inch differential assembly line with twenty-two manned stations that pieced together a set of gears and then secured them into a housing, called a pig-head because it looked like one. The line workers accomplished their work by fitting parts into fixtures, then pressing buttons to engage a press, or spin down a set of bolt drivers. Then they pulled out the result and put it on a conveyor to the next station, until it reached the end of the line, went onto a pallet, and a forklift carried it away.

He was, ostensibly, an engineer. The human resources department had given him a box of business cards that said *Ellis Barstow, Engineer*. And on Ellis's first day a bearing-press operator had come over, shaken his hand and said, 'Great to meet a new engineer.' The man grinned. 'Know why I like engineers?' He then - while Ellis stared with lagging comprehension - dropped his coveralls and danced a naked jig. 'Because,' he shouted, 'they suck great dick!' Then he pulled up his overalls and went back to work.

But Ellis soon began to understand that his own work here had little to do with engineering. Instead he supervised his line in much the way that one would manage a franchise restaurant. He needed to schedule deliveries of parts, and he needed to manage the crew. And while he was soon orchestrating the deliveries of parts with reasonable success, he didn't know how to deal with the people. Every one of them had fifteen to forty years on him. They ignored him. He tried to be nice, tried to be funny, tried to be stern. He gave them gifts - doughnuts, birthday cakes, and for Christmas he bought everyone a toy model of one of the trucks that their axles went into. He was an introvert and none of this was easy for him. And none of it worked. The day after Christmas, the toy trucks he had given away lay piled on his desk. He knew he was doing poorly at this. His jokes weren't funny. His sternness was

tainted with meekness. They had been here before him - they had black in the creases of their skin where years of airborne oils and dust had collected - and they would be here after he left. Ellis spent more and more time at his desk, which stood in a little low-walled office near the line. He executed pointless manipulations of columns of numbers in Excel spreadsheets and waited for the days to end, his mind filled with the noises of parts clanking, impact wrenches clattering, forklift engines roaring, the number eight station sputtering and number fourteen grinding. From time to time a loud buzzer sounded to indicate line halts. Several of the machines on the line broke down routinely, and then everyone sat chatting while an electrician fiddled around, joked with whomever happened to be nearby, and eventually told Ellis that a pipe fitter was needed. When the pipe fitter showed up, he worked for a while, then announced that a millwright was needed. The millwright came, tinkered, muttered that the problem appeared electrical. The electrician had departed long ago, of course. One day, after the buzzer had been clamouring for a full five minutes, Ellis left his desk and found no mechanical problems, only the man who'd pulled down his coveralls asleep at his station, forehead against a bearing press. Ellis lost it. He grabbed him by the shoulder and shook him, yelling. The man's eyes opened wide with surprise and fear, and Ellis shoved him away and circled to yell at several of the others.

When the adrenalin had faded, however, he collapsed at his desk, feeling disturbed, less at what he had done than at how it had happened, in an abrupt loss of control. In losing that, it seemed to him, he lost everything.

To his surprise, for the rest of the week he had a relatively efficient line. But after a weekend the crew resumed old habits and became, if anything, more uncooperative. It struck Ellis that if the only way to do his job was to yell at people who grew negligent about

repetitious, numbing work, then probably he didn't want the job.

Monday of the next week he watched a pair of sparrows hop around in his office doorway. They pecked and preened, observed him with one eye then the other, doubting and verifying. Ellis pulled his earplugs, and faintly in the general roar he heard a chirp. He stood from his desk and approached, hoping to move them toward a building exit, but they only flew into the dark overhead. He turned a circle, then came to a resolution and crossed the plant floor to his manager's large, clean, quiet office.

A stamping-press accident years ago had taken the ends off two fingers on his manager's right hand, and he fidgeted with a micrometer in this hand while Ellis uttered a few irrelevant phrases, then finally blurted, as if an admission of guilt, that he intended to quit. The manager boomed, 'I'll see if we can find you another position!' He was half deaf.

Ellis shrugged, then shook his head. 'I guess I don't think the manufacturing environment feels right for me.'

'OK! What kind of job do you think is right?'

'I don't know.'

The manager set both hands on the surface of the desk, as if to keep it down, and held them there while he stared at Ellis. Then suddenly he smiled and stood and extended his hand. Ellis stared at the two nub fingers, then realised that this was an invitation to shake, and to leave.

He cleaned his desk and escaped through a side door.

Then it seemed as if he had reached the edge of a cliff over a sea. He didn't see any sign of how to move forward.

Over the next years he worked various jobs, none of which were in engineering. He spent a great deal of time reading. As a child he had fed on books, and now he continued to read - mysteries, science fiction, Calvino, Eco - books to carry his thoughts from his own life to someplace else. He

contemplated returning to school for a degree in English, but couldn't imagine what he would do with it. Teach? He doubted whether he could inspire kids, or even merely control a classroom. He felt he lacked a vocation, and that if he had one, his life would gain direction. For consolation he read and grew lost in du Maurier, Chandler, Lem, Borges. *The Big Sleep* and 'The Garden of Forking Paths'.

One winter he spent his savings on a two-week trip to India, which he'd become interested in through reading Rushdie. He was twenty-five years old. He travelled alone, and he found himself anxious and overwhelmed by alienness and sensory density. And, diarrhoeal. At the end of the trip he could hardly say what he had seen except a swirl of colours, gods over doorways, filthy toilets, tattered clothes, outstretched hands. To beggar after beggar he had given away more rupees than he could really afford. He kept thinking that, but for the accident of where he had been born, this life might be his own. After landing again in the US he had to wait for one more flight to carry him home, and he sat in the airport terminal feeling flaccid and ill. His head contained a miasma and the objects around him trailed green auras. As he watched through the windows snow began to fall and soon gathered into a white, obscuring storm. Periodically he trooped to the restroom to discharge his sickness and sip at the water fountains. Flights were delayed. He sat queasy with his bag between his legs and dozed. Delay passed into delay. People around him collapsed to the floor and slept or gazed at windows where the snow fell fast and straight down.

After an indeterminate sleep he stood and began to walk. At the food stalls uniformed employees served the trapped with grumpy languor. Along the hallways travellers lay propped on bags and one another. The fluorescent lighting blued their lips, yellowed their eyes.

Seeing Heather's face here jolted him, and he stopped in the traffic of the hallway and let people push by. He had

last seen Heather Gibson a decade earlier, when he was fourteen and she was sixteen. His memories of her were surrounded by glinting, uncomfortable emotions. She sat with her back against a painted concrete wall, head tilted, eyes closed. A small woman. The skin of the left side of her face bore a slight shine of scar tissue, and Ellis wondered if he would have noticed it at all if he hadn't been looking for it. Her dark hair, which had been curled when they were in high school, now fell straight and neat around her face. But aside from this and the scarring, something more in her face seemed strange, although he could not identify it. Perhaps only age. She had one arm propped on a duffel bag and a small blue blanket lay over her feet. She appeared to be alone. Memories crowded in, of her, and of his half-brother Christopher, who had been her boyfriend - so many memories and of such varied feelings that they crowded and confused one another. She had been burned in the aftermath of the accident that killed Christopher, and as Ellis stood staring with a sensation of wide confusion his attention returned again and again to the alteration of her face.

Then a passer-by struck Ellis's bag and spun him a quarter-turn, and his illness became urgent again. He ran to the restroom.

He returned to the gate for his flight. The chairs were full, so he sat on the floor, put his bag on his knees and rested his head on it. The electronic display at the gate showed yet another delay. He dozed. Then he stood.

Heather, in her sleep, had not moved. He edged himself into an opening between people seated against the opposite wall, and he watched her in the spaces that flickered between passing bodies. She stirred once or twice but did not look toward him. He saw that her eyelids had no lashes. Those, too, had burned away. He still could hardly separate his emotions from his dizziness, his muddled senses and his

abused internal organs, but he knew that he felt, at least, wonder.

Perhaps as much as an hour passed before he moved on again. The snow had slackened, and soon he boarded his flight.

Talking on the phone with his mother about the trip, Ellis mentioned that he had seen someone who looked like Heather Gibson in the airport.

His mother wanted to know why he hadn't approached her, and he said that the woman he saw was asleep and at a distance, and he was sick, and he wasn't entirely certain whether it had been her at all. He asked his mother if she knew anything about what had happened to Heather in the years since Christopher died. She said she didn't.

He guessed that not knowing would bother her. And two days later she called back - she had talked to a friend who knew the Gibsons. Heather lived in the same sprawl of downstate suburbs where Ellis lived, and she had married a man named John Boggs.

This was information enough - he found an address and drove out, to a neighbourhood of two-storey homes, each on a quarter-acre of lawn, each with a two- or three-car garage, each with bits of brass around the front door - knob, knocker, porch light. Maybe a wrought-iron or picket fence. No sidewalks. The last snowfall had melted away except for a scatter of white scraps pocketed in the grass. Near the address he slowed. An asphalt driveway led to a garage on the side of the house, which was faced with brick on the first floor and wood-sided on the second. The garage door stood open. The lawn looked neatly kept, though it remained winter-brown. Several leafless trees scratched at the void. From one hung a brightly painted birdfeeder made from soda cans. A red Taurus wagon rested in the drive; a sticker on its rear bumper had a few words that he could not read and an image of an Egyptian mask, sketched

with simple lines. Ellis had slowed almost to stop when he noticed, in the gloom of the open garage, a large, bearded man with a grocery bag in one hand. The man waved.

Ellis drove away determined not to return.

But weeks passed, and still he recalled again and again the interval of watching Heather's face as she slept against the airport wall. Then on the interstate he happened to glimpse the Egyptian mask, stickered on a Lincoln Navigator a couple hundred feet ahead. Pulling nearer he saw that it advertised the city's art museum.

For half a day he wandered among pieces by Picasso, Bruegel, Donatello, Van Gogh. Sarcophagi and medieval armour. A collection of snuffboxes. A few days later he returned. He came back repeatedly, through that spring and summer, sometimes two or three times a week. He often brought a book, and he liked the empty open peace of the place, where he could sit for an hour or two, alternately reading and watching an object of art, in a hush only rarely interrupted by one or two people strolling by. As he read, as he studied a sculpture, as he walked a high-ceilinged gallery, as he edged nearer to a canvas, a fraction of his attention was always listening for her, watching. Sometimes he sniffed the air for the trace of her presence - as he had years before, when she had visited Christopher in their house in Coil.

Then, stepping from a roomful of paintings - misty images labelled 'Luminist and Tonalist' - into an echoing marbled hallway, he saw her. Loose linen clothing, sandals, sunglasses on her head, as she never would have dressed in high school. She knew him immediately; she smiled, and with enthusiasm she hugged him and looked up at him. The scars. The eyelashes. A clotted feeling in his lungs. 'How have you been?' she asked.

He coughed. He forced himself to speak and told her that he had studied engineering in college but had done little with it. He mentioned odd jobs, reading books. Now

he held a floor job in an appliance store, in the television department.

If that disappointed her, she showed no sign. She said she had majored in art, and since then she had been working on obtaining her teaching certificate. But she had also had a job in graphic design, shelved books at a library, written copy for an advertising firm. 'I guess I'm not entirely focused,' she said. She had been married almost five years. 'He works in automotive stuff,' she said of her husband.

'An engineer?' Ellis said.

'They're a dozen for a dime around here.' She shrugged apologetically.

'Do you think he could get me a job?'

She pulled her sunglasses off her head and folded and opened the temples. 'John's work is unusual.'

'Unusual is OK.'

'I don't know.'

'It has to be better than selling TVs.'

'Forensic engineering,' she said. 'He examines car accidents, to see how they happened.' She inclined her head forward as if they might be overheard. By whom? By Christopher, was all he could think. 'Or maybe the preferred term is accident reconstruction,' she said. 'They hire out to insurance companies and attorneys. I don't know. I should have a better sense of it, but it's pretty dark. I don't really like hearing about it.'

She changed the subject, and they talked of a few people they had known in Coil. Where his mother had kept track of people, Ellis was able to give news, and he could even make Heather laugh. But then she looked at her watch. 'Well, hey,' she said, 'it's good to see you.'

His heart fisted. 'Let me -' Everything gyred. 'Let me give you something,' he said. He groped into the backpack he carried, and his hand came on pens, books, a calculator, and then a computer mouse pad that he had bought some

weeks earlier, here, at the gift shop. A stupid thing, he thought, but he held it forward.

She turned it over and back again. It showed a detail from an oil painting - a grey mouse on rough floorboards, looking upward, a red ribbon around his neck. Ellis couldn't tell what she thought of it and feared she would try to press it back. 'For mouse-on-mouse action,' he said. 'Or, I guess, for the best-laid pads of mice and men.'

She rolled it between her hands. 'You could talk to my husband,' she said, 'if you're serious about looking for a job.'

'Yes. Yes.'

'Maybe it's OK if you can get past the ugliness. He's mentioned that he might take on someone to help with his caseload. I don't know if he's serious, but it won't hurt to ask.' On a slip of paper she wrote a phone number. At the top she wrote 'Boggs'. She said, 'Everyone, except for me, calls him Boggs.'

## 2.

A LARGE AQUA-BLUE SUV lay in the corner of the parking lot, terribly mutilated – windows broken out, front and rear lamps gone, bumper covers hanging, grille missing, wheels settled on flat tyres, doors twisted out of door frames, hood bent like a potato chip.

But otherwise, the place looked like an ordinary suburban office building, with ordinary cars clustered in the parking spaces nearest the front door. Ellis had arrived early. He sat in his car, looking at his résumé. It seemed a document built from scant and shabby materials.

*'He is in the old labyrinth,'* said a deep voice. *'It is the story of his gambling in another guise.'*

A shining green Volkswagen convertible had come into the parking lot, top down though the weather was cool. *'He gambles because God does not speak. He gambles to make God speak.'* It took Ellis a second to connect the voice to the convertible and its stereo. *'But to make God speak in the turn of a card is blasphemy. Only when God is silent does God –'* A large, bearded man in a dark blue overcoat stood out of the Volkswagen and stalked toward the office door. His sand-coloured hair held itself out from his head

like frayed hemp rope, and he carried a bright orange bag stuffed to overflowing with papers and binders. Ellis felt pretty sure it was the same man he had seen in Heather's driveway.

A few minutes later, as Ellis stared again at his résumé, he was startled by a knock on his window. The man from the Volkswagen peered down. 'Ellis Barstow?'

'Yes, sir.'

'You're early. I'm Boggs.' He appeared to be in his middle thirties, with crow's feet beginning at the corners of vivid blue eyes. Ellis stood out of his car, and Boggs shook his hand and grinned. If he recognised Ellis or his car from the drive-by half a year ago, he offered no sign of it. He only tilted his head. 'Come on.'

He led Ellis to the battered aqua-blue SUV and nodded at it. 'What do you suppose happened?'

'Hit by an avalanche.'

Ellis meant it as a joke, but Boggs only shook his head, as if he had encountered avalanche-struck vehicles from time to time, but this was not one. Looking at the vehicle again - the terrible dents and tears and missing windows and lamps - Ellis didn't know how to begin to make an intelligent guess. He said, 'Um -'

'Rollover damage,' Boggs said, 'at highway speeds. Happens every day, more or less. The left rear tyre blew out, and the causes of that are being argued, but whatever the reason, it blew out and induced a leftward drift. The driver attempted to steer back to the right but over-corrected, and very quickly the vehicle had turned almost sideways. The left-side wheel rims bit into the roadway, the right-side wheels lifted, and the whole thing vaulted. After that, it spun and bounced along like a punted football.'

'How many people were inside?'

'Five occupants. Two fully ejected, three partially ejected. Five fatalities.'

'All of them?'

'Dead before the vehicle stopped moving. A matter of seconds.'

'That's horrible.'

'It is. It really is. And now it's part of a very expensive lawsuit.' He put a hand back through his hair, and it stood out yet more from his head. 'So. Let's say that you are a reconstructionist. You've been asked by an attorney involved in a very expensive lawsuit to examine this vehicle. Could you tell him how many times it rolled over?' After a second he amended, 'At least how many times.'

Ellis touched a scarred door, the metal cold and abrasive. He stepped back and examined the forms of the damage, the denting, scraping and tearing. It looked as if it might have been spun inside a concrete mixer. He admitted, 'I really have no idea.'

'Look at the scratch patterns,' Boggs said.

Ellis wasn't sure what he meant by patterns. Random scratches seemed to be everywhere - single long scratches, scratches in pairs and threesomes, groups of light scratches and areas that looked as if they had been attacked with a power sander. Boggs pointed to a location on the passenger-side fender. 'Like these.'

Here was some scratching of the power-sander variety, gouged deep into the sheet metal, while above and coming down into the deeper ones at a slight angle ran a second set of scratches, longer, less deep. Ellis moved a finger over them. He crouched to get out of the sun's glare and saw that almost perpendicular to the longer scratches lay yet a third set, very light, little more than minor disruptions in the paint.

'Three?' he said.

'Three?' echoed Boggs.

'Three rolls?'

'Three rolls? Why three?'

Three sets of scratches. Could that mean three rolls? Why?

‘Think about it,’ Boggs said. ‘Let me know.’

Stacks of cardboard banker’s boxes filled the corners of Boggs’s office and paperwork sprawled over the desk. Littered among the papers, as if stranded in snow banks, were toy cars – a Ferrari, a Land Rover, a GTO, a milk truck. Beside the banker’s boxes stood a shelf lined with textbooks, technical manuals, collections of conference papers. They talked through Ellis’s résumé in about fifteen minutes – college engineering classes and projects, and the supervisory job at the axle plant, which Ellis tried to gloss. He ticked through other jobs: a lawn service, a coffee shop, running deliveries, selling appliances. The conversation began to wallow, Boggs seemed subdued, and Ellis grew embarrassed. He had an engineering degree that he’d hardly applied and no useful skills. He sat here only because years ago his now-dead half-brother had been the boyfriend of a girl who was now this man’s wife. Absurd.

Yet he wanted this job. He saw an opportunity to set his life on a new path. He felt he badly needed a new path.

From the clutter on the desk he picked out the toy Land Rover and turned it. Like a bouncing football. A thought came. ‘At least three times,’ he said. He moved the Land Rover slowly over the desk, as if rolling. ‘Each time this corner hits the ground, it picks up new scratches.’ Growing excited, he elaborated: a vehicle couldn’t slide in two directions at once, so each set of overlapping scratches indicated a different time that that part of the vehicle had been on the ground. He had seen three separate sets of scratches in the area Boggs had pointed out, so that fender had hit the ground at least three times.

Boggs smiled. He took the toy and illustrated some other aspects – that the orientation of a set of scratches indicated the direction the vehicle had been travelling as it struck the ground; the deeper scratches were made when the vehicle hit asphalt while the lighter ones came as it hit softer soil off the roadway; looking closely, one could see the

sequence in which the scratches were made, because the cutting of a new scratch pushed paint into the existing scratches that it crossed.

'We do lots of reports for our clients,' Boggs said. 'Can you write?'

'I won a prize for something I wrote in college.'

'Really? Why isn't that on your résumé?'

'Well, it was fiction. And it wasn't really so much an award as an honourable mention. And, in retrospect, it sucked.'

'You like to read? Have you read Coetzee? I've been listening to him on tape.'

'In your car.'

'Yes.' Boggs grinned. He talked happily for a few minutes about books, of Dostoevsky, of *War and Peace*, which he loved and which Ellis had to admit he had never read. 'I like the Russians,' Boggs said. 'Do you know this one?' he turned to his computer and clicked and a voice began -

*'... why, where in the world has his character gone to? The stead-fast man of action is totally at a loss and has turned out to be a pitiful little poltroon, an insignificant, puny babe, or simply, as Nozdrev puts it, a horse's twat ...'*

'Poltroon!' Boggs laughed happily and turned it off. '*Dead Souls*. Did you know that Gogol could pull his lower lip up over his nose?' He grew distracted in straightening the vehicles on his desk. 'This job,' he said, 'is emotionally odd. Are you ready for that? It's analytic, and you sometimes have to remind yourself: people died.'

'I don't know if -' Ellis stalled and let the sentence lapse.

'Well, there is no way to know. I'm just warning you, it's odd. You look at terrible events and analyse them minutely. It's not normal. It's strange. Then, after you've done it for a while, what's also strange is how you get used to it, and even how much you forget. It seems a little indecent to forget. That's what bothers me, now. It's as if, if I were a