

# KEYHOLE MYSTERY

## *Magazine*

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# NIGHT RIDE

by THEODORE STURGEON

*The runaway bus was carrying a strange group on its one-way*

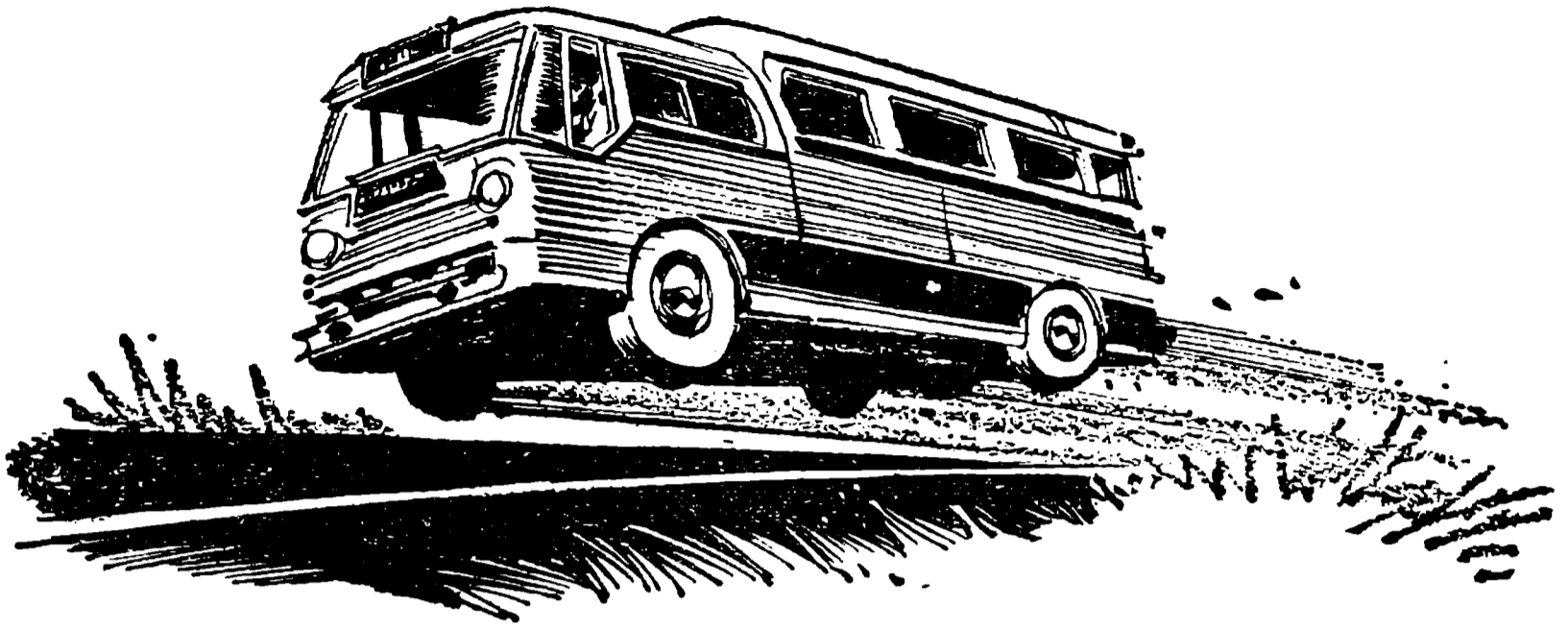
**N**INETY-FOUR MILES AN HOUR. IN the back of the bus somebody was dead. In the front of the bus, a scared little guy with thick wrists was going to be dead.

Ninety-six miles an hour. He had a choice to make, he realized as he manhandled the twelve-ton monster through a rocky gap and down around a turn so sharp that loose material from the shoulder sprayed out into space. He had this choice (at a hundred and two miles per hour): He could die alone, blindfolded and strapped to a chair, while a prison chaplain made things easy as he could; or

he could just forget to turn the wheel at the next curve, or the one after, and die that way.

Along with thirty-two other guys. Thirty-two innocent guys and a murderer. That, thought little Paul Cahill, half out of his seat to whip the wheel around, that might be worth the price. A good clean finish to the dirty story of Romeo.

The name really was Romeo . . . Charley Romeo. Only nobody kidded Romeo about it. That could be because he was just under six five and stood about *this* wide. Or it could be because he was



*plunge to doom. There were 32 live passengers—and one corpse!*

proud of it. He acted the part, Charley Romeo did, hollering *Watch Me, World* the whole time. He played basketball, and girls. When he made a pass, it stayed made. From any corner—*anybody's* corner—he sank his shots whenever he felt like it. And if he had to stand taller to do it he'd just as soon stand on somebody's face.

Even Paul Cahill would admit that Charley Romeo was a great basketball player. There was only one thing in all the world that

meant more to Paul Cahill than basketball—especially Hill City basketball. He drove the bus at the little mountain school, but he never missed a home game either. The one thing in all his world was Jenny Cahill, his brand new, late-model wife. Some model. They still make that kind, but not often. Jenny Cahill worked in the school office.

Ever since Charley Romeo came to Hill City, his idea of top comedy was to ride the little bus-driver. But when Charley Romeo got a look at Jenny Cahill, and when his first easy hook-shot her

way not only missed the hoop but the backboard as well, why, the wisecracks got a little rougher than funny. Romeo never let up on Paul Cahill, nor Jenny either.

Paul Cahill was a little guy, but he was a gutsy little guy, and he wouldn't have held still for much of this if it had not been for "Turk" McGurk, the coach; for the school; for basketball itself. Paul felt deep loyalties to all these, and there was no arguing the fact that in his big fast hands Charley Romeo held the Conference win and the Invitation—things that the little school wanted and needed, things that Paul Cahill wanted for the school almost as much as Coach McGurk. And as for Coach McGurk, if he ever felt anything or thought anything but basketball, he fought it down till it didn't show. That meant that if, to win, Charley Romeo had to pull the wings off flies, Coach McGurk would go catch flies for him.

All this had been going on for too long a time the afternoon the bus started out for Johnson Mesa and the most important game of the year. Win this one, and the Invitation would be a cinch.

Everyone felt good at first, excited and happy. The big new bus was full—all the second-string players were along to see what they could learn, and a couple of guys to report for the school paper, and that weird-o they called

Big Dome Craig. (Wherever you found Charley Romeo, you also found Big Dome—nobody knew why. Except it was Romeo's idea. Maybe he thought some of Big Dome's brains would rub off on him.) And of course, Turk McGurk the coach. It was a fine day, and there was some grand country to climb. But really climb—the road wound up and up for eleven and a half miles to a mountain pass nearly seven thousand feet above sea level.

Paul Cahill kept the giant diesel humming along in third and fourth gears in the low range. At first even Paul felt good, in spite of the trouble he knew would come from the big center and his big mouth. He knew it would come, because it always did on these long hauls. Charley Romeo could look at just so much scenery, and then he'd get bored, and that was when he'd stir up what he called a little fun.

And sure enough, when they were within four miles of the pass, Paul Cahill saw, in the big inside mirror, Romeo suddenly loom up out of his seat. He sat side-saddle on the arm of the seat, about halfway down the aisle, and all the faces from there on back swung toward him.

"Once upon a time—" he belted; and all the faces ahead of him swung around to look back.

"Siddown, Romeo," Paul called out peaceably. "You're blocking

my view."

"Little man," said Romeo, "drive your bus. *I* am goin' to tell a story. A real old bed-time story."

From the corner of his eye Paul Cahill saw the coach, McGurk, sight down the aisle, look back up at the mirror, and then subside with that give-him-his-head expression. Romeo went on with his yarn, about how "this guy I know"—he meant himself—drew a bead on "a certain chick"—for a bad moment Paul thought he meant...never mind: he wouldn't even think it... anyway, the story went on and on. The usual proportion of boneheads who always seem ready to encourage a fool egged Romeo on.

Paul Cahill lost track of the story for a while; he had a job to do. The road was none too wide. Sometimes there were wide flat shoulders, then in a few yards they'd be in a cut with jagged rock walls just far enough apart for two squashed lances of traffic; then again there would be that queasy feeling that if you hung your chin on the right front fender you could look a blue mile straight down.

But at last he reached that long straight slope that approaches the pass, and happened to glance in the mirror. Romeo was still at it, but what jolted Paul Cahill's at-

tention was the face of young Curtis, white, strained, twisted up on itself with a mixture of held-in anger and disgust; he looked as if he might burst into tears, or throw up, or maybe both. Paul Cahill, driving intently, let himself listen again:

"...but I mean, she had a bedbug on her, but it was pink. Yeah, a pink bedbug, right *here*." Romeo demonstrated, and the boneheads roared. The reporter, Curtis, bent way down as if he had a shoe to fix or wanted to hide his face.

Suddenly Paul Cahill understood. He'd seen Romeo giving the quick casual rush to Curtis' girlfriend Beth, a squeak-sized up-country kid who'd be no more able to handle the likes of Romeo than a rock slide. So she happened to have a pink mole some place. And now if Curtis made one move to shut him up, the whole bus would suddenly know just who Romeo was talking about; the whole school would know about her "pink bedbug", yes, and about her and Romeo to boot. Paul Cahill could see Charley Romeo's quick glances down at Curtis. The big fellow was enjoying himself.

Paul Cahill suddenly bellowed, "Now dammit, Romeo, I said get in your seat. I can't see out the back."

Romeo looked around him in stage amazement.

"Any of you fellers hear something?" he said. He made no move to get off his perch. He looked forward, into the big mirror, and that way right into Paul's face. "You mean to say you don't know what goes on behind your back, little man?"

Paul Cahill knotted his jaw and drove his bus. He flicked a glance off the road and saw Romeo's face happy, tense, the flick of his tongue as he wet his lips. He saw McGurk, the coach, looking troubled.

Romeo said, "Tell me something, Shorty, you haul the baseball teams too, don't you?"

Paul Cahill, seeing the coach's face, forcing himself to think of the big game, of the tricky road, did not answer.

"You know what I'm goin' to do," chuckled Romeo, "I'm goin' to stay off the ball team next term. Long as you don't know what goes on behind you, why, every time we have an 'away' game, I'll just stick right around home and—"

Tires crunched heavily, air shrilled as Paul Cahill tramped on the brake, pulled over to the side, set the emergency. All the passengers, but one, sat in surprised silence in the sudden hush. Coach McGurk, however, was on his feet, leaning close over Paul Cahill's shoulder—so close, the little driver could not rise.

McGurk said, pretending to

point at the dashboard, "Getting hot?"

Paul Cahill nodded curtly. "A little."

"Listen, boy," said Coach McGurk. "We don't want that."

"Okay, okay," Paul Cahill muttered, and he really meant to stay in line; but then Romeo spoke up, just as Paul Cahill was about to start the bus again.

"Now don't that make y'all go pitty-pat!" Romeo drawled. "Just a mention of her, and he gets all warm."

Paul Cahill was out of his seat and down the aisle before the coach knew he was gone. He stalked up to Charley Romeo, sitting on the arm of his seat in the center of the bus, and looked him in the eye.

"Who's this 'her' you're talking about?" Paul Cahill demanded.

"Your wife I'm talking about. Jenny, I'm talking about. Why?"

Paul Cahill started his swing with the first spoken syllable of his wife's name. Romeo caught his wrist with one easy motion and pulled it past him, fast, snatching Cahill right off his feet. He fell heavily, face down in the aisle, and Romeo slid off the arm of the seat and sat down on him.

"I tell you what I'm goin' to do," Romeo said. "Tonight I'm gonna run up some points, and just so you'll enjoy your favorite

game even more, for every one I sink I'm goin' to holler *Hey Jenny!* and since I plan to sink about thirty, that'll give you lots of chances to do something about it."

"Get off him," said Coach McGurk.

"Oh by all means," said Romeo, getting up, laughing. "Time to get up, little man. Get this show on the road."

Wheezing, white with fury, Paul Cahill managed to get back on his feet. Coach McGurk put a hand on his arm but he shook it off.

"Romeo," Paul Cahill said clearly, "I'm going to kill you."

It was a lousy couple of minutes, and even then, some of the boneheads managed to laugh. Paul Cahill, hurt, angry, and humiliated, let in his clutch, kicked off the emergency, and started uphill again. He drove with especial care all the rest of the way.

One of the first-string forwards gaped at the new sign as they rolled into the Mesa.

"*Science* building? What they done with the casaba pavilion?" he asked.

"There's enough hardwood left to choke a hoop," Coach McGurk told him. "Schools all over are making new science buildings out of gyms. Here, they turned the whole north wing over to the science department. But there's still a court."

"Education got a way of creeping up on you in this business," said Romeo. He liked it. He said it three more times.

Paul Cahill shouldered the big bus through the crowded parking lot, and pulled up by the side entrance. The boys bounded out, heading for the dressing rooms, or for the best seats. Paul Cahill stayed a while, gunned his motor once, watching his gauges. He let her idle, switched on the body lights, walked through the bus, sniffed for monoxide around the back, picked up some scraps of paper. In the luggage rack, here and there, were lunch boxes, coffee flasks. He knew them all, who they belonged to; he knew all these guys, what they wanted out of life. He stood a moment, confused by his vague rush of thoughts.

One of the lunches, battered, bright blue, with brass corners, caught his eye. He frowned, picked it up. It was Romeo's. He knew, just as everyone else knew, that the coffee in it was heavily laced with vodka, which doesn't smell on the breath. Coach McGurk alone didn't know it, probably because he didn't want to. Romeo trained carefully, but on the way back from one of those forty-pointers of his, he just had to celebrate.

Paul Cahill sighed, put the box back, and yanking the keys on the way, hopped out of the bus, closed

and locked the doors. Somebody was waiting for him out there. Coach McGurk.

"Don't go in there, Paul."

"Don't what?"

Coach McGurk looked, sounded, very tired. "Stay out of the hall," he said wearily. "You know that damn fool Romeo will do what he said. Why get yourself all worked up?"

"Oh," said Paul Cahill, remembering. Romeo was going to yell *Hey Jenny!* every time he hit the bucket. He said coldly, "And you wouldn't want me maybe to mess up your ball game."

"It isn't that, Paul—"

"It is that. And . . . for that I got to miss the best game of the year."

"You said it yourself. It's the best game of the year. It's important to all of us. Stay away from it, Paul."

Paul Cahill stood by the bus and watched the coach shamle inside. Then he opened up the bus, flipped up his seat, and fumbled through the tools. After a while he got out again and entered the building. Once inside, he remembered he had not locked up this time. He shrugged and sidled into the noisy gym. No matter what the coach said, this was a game he did not intend to miss.

At the tapoff, Romeo coiled down like a huge steel spring—and then didn't jump. The oppos-

ing center, caught by surprise, barely tipped the ball. Romeo's long arms snapped up like the business end of a rat trap; he double-palmed the ball and snapped his wrists. The ball took off like a flying saucer, seemingly self-propelled, and flew by itself to the Johnson hoop, where it swished through without touching iron at all. First blood in the first second of play, and Romeo hadn't even moved his feet.

"*Hey Jenny!*" he roared. Blind rage came and went in Paul Cahill. The second time it happened he clenched his fists and turned to go. Then it happened a third time, the roar *Hey Jenny!* and this time Paul Cahill roared with it, a sound without words in it. He rushed forward, a ten-inch box wrench flailing the air. Then something like a railway mail-hook caught his left arm and spun him around, and the wrench disappeared out of his right hand, and he was being hustled in the opposite direction, Coach McGurk on one side of him, young Curtis on the other.

A door opened for them; Big Dome Craig opened it, from inside.

"Sorry, son, but you got to stay in there," said the coach, and they shoved him into a room and the door closed. Through the frosted glass, Paul Cahill could see one of them take up what looked like sentry duty. It had all happened



so fast he had stopped thinking.

*Hey Jenny!* He heard Romeo clearly, and a huge noise from the crowd. He scurried all around the room. There was another door, locked. The windows were hinged vents, high up in a glass ceiling. It had once been part of the gym, he recalled. He saw—now that he looked—that it was a chem lab.

He stood by the glass door after that, listening to the biggest game of the year. *Hey, Jenny!* He thought he would go out of his head. Maybe he did, a little. He heard his wife's name again. He heard the crowd pick it up. He heard that almost thirty times. It was Charley Romeo's big night.

After some hours—months—of this, the door opened and Coach McGurk came in. He spent a moment looking carefully at Paul Cahill's face.

"We won it," he said at last.

Paul Cahill didn't say anything. After a long silence he moved his head tiredly and said, "Let's go."

On the way back, the team was boisterous. Well, they'd won it; that was what they'd come for. Everybody kept patting Romeo on the back. As soon as they were on the road and the lights out, Paul Cahill dimly saw, in his mirror, Romeo's long arm snake up and get his lunch box.

Paul Cahill settled down to his work, and let everything else

trickle into a place inside him that had a one-way cork on it.

Therefore he heard the noise a little later than anyone else. It had to filter through to him—a steamboat-whistle kind of *Hoo! Hoo!*

Romeo, of course. Paul Cahill ground his teeth. Then the *Hoo Hoo!* noise turned into a gibbering burble, and a sort of scream so alarming that the boys began to make worried noises. Someone yelled for light and the coach went back. Immediately he called out:

"Stop when you can, Paul." Coach McGurk said it in such a strange tense tone that all Paul Cahill's anger evaporated.

Paul Cahill had to drive nearly half a mile before he could stop, for they were in the pass, still climbing, and they had to get through to the wider road on the other side. But at last he could pull over and stop. He turned on the inside dome lights, and saw his passengers pressing forward from behind, drawing back from around the long figure of Romeo, stretched out in the aisle.

Without the motor, the silence was like a crash.

Then Coach McGurk said, in a weary, puzzled voice:

"Romeo is dead."

"Dead?" they asked each other. "Dead," they kept answering; the word flicked and frothed over them like whitecaps, while they moved under it like waves, cran-

ing to look, pressing away.

Somebody said something about getting the police. The remark just lay there.

"Well, what happened to him?" Paul Cahill suddenly barked.

Coach McGurk extended something—a flask—toward him. Paul Cahill started to take it but the coach used it to push his hand away and put it up to his face instead.

Paul Cahill smelled it: sweet bitter coffee smell, and the odor of something else, like . . . coffee cake? Sugar buns, the kind with . . .

"Almonds," Paul Cahill said.

"Almonds hell, that's arsenic," Coach McGurk said positively.

Paul Cahill made as if to take the flask to sniff, unbelievably again, but the coach moved it out of his reach, picked up the cover from Romeo's seat, and screwed it down tight. And all the while the Coach kept looking and looking at Paul Cahill out of his tired eyes.

Abruptly Paul Cahill realized what was going through Coach McGurk's mind. He looked at all the other faces and saw the same idea percolate through the crowd.

*Who had threatened to kill Romeo?*

*Who had, with the box-wrench, actually tried?*

*Who had the best chance, alone in the bus, to put the fatal dose of poison into Romeo's flask?*

Paul Cahill said "I—" and again; "I—" and then could only shake his head; and if there were any faces left in the crowd that the idea hadn't reached by then, they got it.

"We can't just sit here . . . put Romeo on the long seat at the back," said Coach McGurk.

Nobody wanted to. Finally Paul Cahill and Coach McGurk had to do it. Romeo's eyes were open and he was kind of snarling, all his front teeth bared. No matter what, Paul Cahill was never going to forget that.

Paul Cahill went back to the driver's seat and switched out the domes. Everyone settled down. He started the motor and released the brake. The bus nosed downhill, began to roll immediately. In thirty seconds it was going fifty. In another ten, Coach McGurk sat bolt upright and shouted at him:

"Hey! Take it easy. *Hey!*"

Paul Cahill did not answer. He was too busy picking out the details of the curve ahead, and its one high wall of cliff. Coach McGurk got up and was thrown right down again as Cahill wheeled around the turn.

"Paul! Paul!" the coach shouted.

Hand over hand in the lurching bus, Coach McGurk got up behind Paul Cahill and clutched at his arm. Paul Cahill removed one hand to throw him off, and the back of the bus slewed and nipped

the rock wall on the left. At the crash and tearing sound of aluminum skin, one of the boys screamed.

The speedometer needle hit ninety-four. One dead, more dead coming. He could be dead strapped in a chair, with a prison chaplain making it as easy as he could. Or he could be dead much quicker than that, just by not taking the next turn, or the one after.

Evidence or not, no matter what anyone had heard him say or seen him do, there was one thing Paul Cahill knew for sure:

*He hadn't killed Charley Romeo.*

Which meant that someone else had. Someone right here in this bus.

He bellowed, then, at the top of his voice:

*"Listen. I don't touch the brake until I know who killed Romeo."*

"You're crazy!" yelled the coach. "Stop this bus, Paul!"

Paul Cahill yelled back. "Look out!"

Twelve tons of bus entered a turn, sliding, sliding, crossing the pavement to the far side. At the last possible split second the wheels seemed to be taking hold, but there was nothing, nothing at all under the left front—just black dark and distant downward lights. And as the bus plunged over the

edge, the road shook itself and moved under the wheels again, and they went howling down the road again.

"One more like that and we've had it!" Paul Cahill bellowed. "Well?"

The speedometer needle lurched upward.

One hundred and twelve... fourteen.

"Stop! Stop!" yelled Coach McGurk.

"*Shaddup!*" Paul Cahill roared at him. "Look!"

Somebody back there began shrieking over and over. The turn beginning to take shape before their headlights was impossible. The shrieking went on and on—more boys started to yell.

Coach McGurk yelled, "For God's sake, Paul. This is murder!"

Paul Cahill didn't answer. He couldn't take his attention for an instant from the approaching turn—a narrow cut, a sharp left with a wall on one side and a precipice on the other, then a right bend to a second cut.

"We'll all die!" wailed a voice that Paul Cahill dimly recognized as belonging to Big Dome Craig.

Then they were into the turn, and were never coming out of it. Coach McGurk got the idea that saved them, temporarily. He put cupped hands around his mouth and shouted:

"Right side, everybody! Get

over to the right side! *Jump!*"

As the bus shuddered into the turn, yawing away toward the sharp drop to eternity, thirty-two healthy youngsters—somewhere close to two tons of flesh—flung hard to the right side of the bus.

That did it. The two tons turned the trick, by the narrowest of margins. A giant tire spun on emptiness for a second, but the other tires held the road.

Paul Cahill fought the wheel like a bucking bronc.

Behind him someone started to scream.

"Stop him, somebody! *Stop him!*"

That was Big Dome Craig again. He was cracking. But nobody made a move to interfere with Paul Cahill at the wheel. They all knew that would speed the moment of annihilation.

Paul Cahill heard, somewhere at his back, a shrieking, sobbing breath, a scuffle. Big Dome Craig had tried to get at him, but the others were holding him back.

Then Big Dome Craig was yelling, "I did it! I DID IT!"

Coach McGurk stumbled up behind Paul Cahill.

"It's Craig, Paul. He says he killed Romeo. For God's sake, hit the brakes! *Paul!*"

That's when Paul Cahill told him. Even as he swung the wheel as far as it would go and held on, he gritted:

"Brakes gone, coach. Air . . . out.

Can't . . . even shift gears . . . air powered."

Coach McGurk wasted no time on a reply. He barked to the others:

"Left, now. Left. *Jump!*"

The two tons dove across to the other seats. That helped—but not enough. In the split second before he swung the wheel, Paul Cahill shifted his grip. There was the tortured rending of aluminum sheathing as the bus slid along the rock wall—enough to slow it. Then the tires kicked gravel out and down into the empty night, and again found the road.

They shot through the cut and, blessedly, ahead of them the road turned up for a half mile before entering the last plunge to the valley. Paul Cahill rode the uphill stretch with the right hand wheels at the very edge of the ditch and, as the bus started to lean, Coach McGurk and the boys shifted again and she settled and ran, and slowed, and not fifty yards from the top of the rise, she stopped.

"Paul," said Coach McGurk. That single word was the finest compliment the little man had ever heard.

Some of the boys began crying, with released tension, crying like the youngsters they were.

Big Dome Craig was crying too, his hands over his face, crying and talking at the same time as the truth poured out of him.

Paul Cahill stood by Coach

McGurk and listened. Once, during a break in the confessional, the coach muttered to Paul Cahill:

"I couldn't believe you were doing it on purpose, Paul. Not even when it was happening."

"Thanks," Paul Cahill said. "Just a coincidence, the brakes going when they did. But I guess I made the most of it." He grinned.

Big Dome Craig was telling now about Romeo and his sister—a long story and a sad one—and how after she had been in that trouble and gone to the doctor, she had still wanted to go live with the big fellow, and the only way Big Dome could stop it was by becoming Romeo's personal valet, doing his school work for him, taking his unending abuse. He had thought of killing Romeo for a long time but he might never have done it, if he hadn't found out about the weekend a

month ago, when Romeo went to meet his sister. He only found out about it after his sister had taken the overdose of sleeping pills and had died, and the weekend was the reason. It seems Romeo had waited until the weekend was over before he told her that he didn't intend to see her again. That was Romeo, all right. Take your cake and hand it back, too.

Finally Big Dome Craig ran down and just sat there, strangely relieved.

It was a long time later, after they'd flagged a passing car and were waiting for the tow truck, that Coach McGurk said to Paul Cahill:

"Sorry you had to miss the game, Paul. It was great."

"That's okay," Paul said thoughtfully. "Anyway, we won." They sat quietly, then, thinking about winning. ■ ■

