

THE LETTER OF THE LAW

The Klan wants to hold a rally here, and I work for the department that issues the permits. I hate to say this, but I've never met a more polite group of people. They know the constitution by heart, and they quote all the parts they know I won't know. They seem fascinated by everything in my office, even the little machine that makes my cigarette smoke disappear. Their spokesman has a kind, soft voice, and he uses it to say some of the cruelest things I've ever heard. He points to the picture of my wife and children and says surely I'm interested in protecting them from big black apes and money-grubbing jews. I light a cigarette and switch off the little machine. It's beginning to bother me. They know exactly where to sign the permit when I hand it over. They have their own pens. Reagan's regulation portrait smiles on the wall behind me. A mandatory stars and stripes, tassel-tied, in the corner. These are the only visual clues they need to conclude their America is the same as mine.

A MARK ON THE WORLD

You could dust the world for fingerprints and not find many of mine. Almost none on blunt instruments or hand-guns, and not many on church pews either. I go around saying I want to leave a mark on the world, but maybe enough marks have been left on it already. Enough vaccines. Enough masterpieces. Maybe I don't want to leave another smudge on history's windshield.

Is there a clean surface anywhere that hasn't been blurred by thousands of other people's marks? Yesterday I rested my hand on the side of a skyscraper, and it felt like the skin of Frank Lloyd Wright, stinging me. No surprise there. Think of all the people who deface his buildings, or will, when they grow up anonymous, and can't deal with their anonymity any better than I can.