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BASED ON THE TERRIFYING STORY BY STEPHEN KING

Some rooms are locked
for a reason.



1408

JOHN
CUSACK

SAMUEL L.
JACKSON

ENJOY YOUR STAY.
DOLBY DIGITAL

1408

Stephen King

As well as the ever-popular premature burial, every writer of shock/suspense tales should write at least one story about the Ghostly Room At The Inn. This is my version of that story. The only unusual thing about it is that I never intended to finish it. I wrote the first three or four pages as part of an appendix for my On Writing book, wanting to show readers how a story evolves from first draft to second. Most of all, I wanted to provide concrete examples of the principles I'd been blathering about in the text. But something nice happened: the story seduced me, and I ended up writing all of it. I think that what scares us varies widely from one individual to the next (I've never been able to understand why Peruvian boomslangs give some people the creeps, for example), but this story scared me while I was working on it. It originally appeared as part of an audio compilation called Blood and Smoke, and the audio scared me even more. Scared the hell out of me. But hotel rooms are just naturally creepy places, don't you think? I mean, how many people have slept in that bed before you? How many of them were sick? How many were losing their minds? How many were perhaps thinking about reading a few final verses from the Bible in the drawer of the nightstand beside them and then hanging themselves in the closet beside the TV? Brrrr. In any case, let's check in, shall we? Here's your key ... and you might take time to notice what those four innocent numbers add up to.

It's just down the hall.

I

Mike Enslin was still in the revolving door when he saw Olin, the manager of the Hotel Dolphin, sitting in one of the overstuffed lobby chairs. Mike's heart sank. Maybe I should have brought the lawyer along again, after all, he thought. Well, too late now. And even if Olin had decided to throw up another roadblock or two between Mike and room 1408, that wasn't all bad; there were compensations.

Olin was crossing the room with one pudgy hand held out as Mike left the revolving door. The Dolphin was on Sixty-first Street, around the corner from Fifth Avenue, small but smart. A man and a woman dressed in evening clothes passed Mike as he reached for Olin's hand, switching his small overnight case to his left hand in order to do it. The woman was blond, dressed in black, of course, and the light, flowery smell of her perfume seemed to summarize New York. On the mezzanine level, someone was playing "Night and Day" in the bar, as if to underline the summary.

"Mr. Enslin. Good evening."

"Mr. Olin. Is there a problem?"

Olin looked pained. For a moment he glanced around the small, smart lobby, as if for help. At the concierge's stand, a man was discussing theater tickets with his wife while the concierge himself watched them with a small, patient smile. At the front desk, a man with the rumpled look one only got after long hours in Business Class was discussing his reservation with a woman in a smart black suit that could itself have doubled for evening wear. It was business as usual at the Hotel Dolphin. There was help for everyone except poor Mr. Olin, who had fallen into the writer's clutches.

"Mr. Olin?" Mike repeated.

"Mr. Enslin ... could I speak to you for a moment in my office?"

Well, and why not? It would help the section on room 1408, add to the ominous tone the readers of his books seemed to crave, and that wasn't all. Mike Enslin hadn't been sure until now, in spite of all the backing and filling; now he was. Olin was really afraid of room 1408, and of what might happen to Mike there tonight.

"Of course, Mr. Olin."

Olin, the good host, reached for Mike's bag. "Allow me."

"I'm fine with it," Mike said. "Nothing but a change of clothes and a toothbrush."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes," Mike said. "I'm already wearing my lucky Hawaiian shirt." He smiled. "It's the one with the ghost repellent."

Olin didn't smile back. He sighed instead, a little round man in a dark cutaway coat and a neatly knotted tie. "Very good, Mr. Enslin. Follow me."

*

The hotel manager had seemed tentative in the lobby, almost beaten. In his oak-paneled office, with the pictures of the hotel on the walls (the Dolphin had opened in 1910—Mike might publish without the benefit of reviews in the journals or the big-city papers, but he did his research), Olin seemed to gain assurance again. There was a Persian carpet on the floor. Two standing lamps cast a mild yellow light. A desk-lamp with a green lozenge-shaped shade stood on the desk, next to a humidifier. And next to the humidifier were Mike Enslin's last three books. Paperback editions, of course; there had been no hardbacks. Mike's host has been doing a little research of his own, Mike thought.

Mike sat down in front of the desk. He expected Olin to sit behind the desk, but Olin surprised him. He took the chair beside Mike's,

crossed his legs, then leaned forward over his tidy little belly to touch the humidor.

“Cigar, Mr. Enslin?”

“No, thank you. I don’t smoke.”

Olin’s eyes shifted to the cigarette behind Mike’s right ear—parked on a jaunty jut the way an old-time wisecracking reporter might have parked his next smoke just below the PRESS tag stuck in the band of his fedora. The cigarette had become so much a part of him that for a moment Mike honestly didn’t know what Olin was looking at. Then he laughed, took it down, looked at it himself, and looked back at Olin.

“Haven’t had a one in nine years,” he said. “Had an older brother who died of lung cancer. I quit after he died. The cigarette behind the ear ...” He shrugged. “Part affectation, part superstition, I guess. Like the Hawaiian shirt. Or the cigarettes you sometimes see on people’s desks or walls, mounted in a little box with a sign saying BREAK GLASS IN CASE OF EMERGENCY. Is 1408 a smoking room, Mr. Olin? Just in case nuclear war breaks out?”

“As a matter of fact, it is.”

“Well,” Mike said heartily, “that’s one less worry in the watches of the night.”

Mr. Olin sighed again, but this sigh didn’t have the disconsolate quality of his lobby-sigh. Yes, it was the office, Mike reckoned. Olin’s office, his special place. Even this afternoon, when Mike had come accompanied by Robertson, the lawyer, Olin had seemed less flustered once they were in here. And why not? Where else could you feel in charge, if not in your special place? Olin’s office was a room with good pictures on the walls, a good rug on the floor, and good cigars in the humidor. A lot of managers had no doubt conducted a lot of business in here since 1910; in its own way it was as New York as the blond in her black off-the-shoulder dress, her

smell of perfume, and her unarticulated promise of sleek New York sex in the small hours of the morning.

“You still don’t think I can talk you out of this idea of yours, do you?” Olin asked.

“I know you can’t,” Mike said, replacing the cigarette behind his ear. He didn’t slick his hair back with Vitalis or Wildroot Cream Oil, as those colorful fedora-wearing scribblers of yore had, but he still changed the cigarette every day, just as he changed his underwear. You sweat back there behind your ears; if he examined the cigarette at the end of the day before throwing its unsmoked deadly length into the toilet, Mike could see the faint yellow-orange residue of that sweat on the thin white paper. It did not increase the temptation to light up. How he had smoked for almost twenty years—thirty butts a day, sometimes forty—was now beyond him. Why he had done it was an even better question.

Olin picked up the little stack of paperbacks from the blotter. “I sincerely hope you’re wrong.”

Mike ran open the zipper on the side pocket of his overnight bag. He brought out a Sony minicorder. “Would you mind if I taped our conversation, Mr. Olin?”

Olin waved a hand. Mike pushed RECORD and the little red light came on. The reels began to turn.

Olin, meanwhile, was shuffling slowly through the stack of books, reading the titles. As always when he saw his books in someone else’s hands, Mike Enslin felt the oddest mix of emotions: pride, unease, amusement, defiance, and shame. He had no business feeling ashamed of them, they had kept him nicely over these last five years, and he didn’t have to share any of the profits with a packager (“book-whores” was what his agent called them, perhaps partly in envy), because he had come up with the concept himself. Although after the first book had sold so well, only a moron could

have missed the concept. What was there to do after Frankenstein but Bride of Frankenstein?

Still, he had gone to Iowa. He had studied with Jane Smiley. He had once been on a panel with Stanley Elkin. He had once aspired (absolutely no one in his current circle of friends and acquaintances had any least inkling of this) to be published as a Yale Younger Poet. And, when the hotel manager began speaking the titles aloud, Mike found himself wishing he hadn't challenged Olin with the recorder. Later he would listen to Olin's measured tones and imagine he heard contempt in them. He touched the cigarette behind his ear without being aware of it.

"Ten Nights in Ten Haunted Houses," Olin read. "Ten Nights in Ten Haunted Graveyards. Ten Nights in Ten Haunted Castles." He looked up at Mike with a faint smile at the corners of his mouth. "Got to Scotland on that one. Not to mention the Vienna Woods. And all tax-deductible, correct? Hauntings are, after all, your business."

"Do you have a point?"

"You're sensitive about these, aren't you?" Olin asked.

"Sensitive, yes. Vulnerable, no. If you're hoping to persuade me out of your hotel by critiquing my books—"

"No, not at all. I was curious, that's all. I sent Marcel—he's the concierge on days—out to get them two days ago, when you first appeared with your ... request."

"It was a demand, not a request. Still is. You heard Mr. Robertson; New York State law—not to mention two federal civil rights laws— forbids you to deny me a specific room, if I request that specific room and the room is vacant. And 1408 is vacant. 1408 is always vacant these days."

But Mr. Olin was not to be diverted from the subject of Mike's last three books—New York Times best-sellers, all—just yet. He simply

shuffled through them a third time. The mellow lamplight reflected off their shiny covers. There was a lot of purple on the covers. Purple sold scary books better than any other color, Mike had been told.

“I didn’t get a chance to dip into these until earlier this evening,” Olin said. “I’ve been quite busy. I usually am. The Dolphin is small by New York standards, but we run at ninety per cent occupancy and usually a problem comes through the front door with every guest.”

“Like me.”

Olin smiled a little. “I’d say you’re a bit of a special problem, Mr. Enslin. You and your Mr. Robertson and all your threats.”

Mike felt nettled all over again. He had made no threats, unless Robertson himself was a threat. And he had been forced to use the lawyer, as a man might be forced to use a crowbar on a rusty lockbox which would no longer accept the key.

The lockbox isn’t yours, a voice inside told him, but the laws of the state and the country said differently. The laws said that room 1408 in the Hotel Dolphin was his if he wanted it, and as long as no one else had it first.

He became aware that Olin was watching him, still with that faint smile. As if he had been following Mike’s interior dialogue almost word for word. It was an uncomfortable feeling, and Mike was finding this an unexpectedly uncomfortable meeting. It felt as if he had been on the defensive ever since he’d taken out the minicorder (which was usually intimidating) and turned it on.

“If any of this has a point, Mr. Olin, I’m afraid I lost sight of it a turn or two back. And I’ve had a long day. If our wrangle over room 1408 is really over, I’d like to go on upstairs and—”

“I read one ... uh, what would you call them? Essays? Tales?”

Bill-payers was what Mike called them, but he didn't intend to say that with the tape running. Not even though it was his tape.

"Story," Olin decided. "I read one story from each book. The one about the Rilsby house in Kansas from your Haunted Houses book —"

"Ah, yes. The axe murders." The fellow who had chopped up all six members of the Eugene Rilsby family had never been caught.

"Exactly so. And the one about the night you spent camped out on the graves of the lovers in Alaska who committed suicide—the ones people keep claiming to see around Sitka—and the account of your night in Gartsby Castle. That was actually quite amusing. I was surprised."

Mike's ear was carefully tuned to catch the undernotes of contempt in even the blindest comments about his Ten Nights books, and he had no doubt that he sometimes heard contempt that wasn't there—few creatures on earth are so paranoid as the writer who believes, deep in his heart, that he is slumming, Mike had discovered—but he didn't believe there was any contempt here.

"Thank you," he said. "I guess." He glanced down at his minicorder. Usually its little red eye seemed to be watching the other guy, daring him to say the wrong thing. This evening it seemed to be looking at Mike himself.

"Oh yes, I meant it as a compliment." Olin tapped the books. "I expect to finish these ... but for the writing. It's the writing I like. I was surprised to find myself laughing at your quite unsupernatural adventures in Gartsby Castle, and I was surprised to find you as good as you are. As subtle as you are. I expected more hack and slash."

Mike steeled himself for what would almost certainly come next, Olin's variation of What's a nice girl like you doing in a place like this. Olin the urbane hotelier, host to blond women who wore black

dresses out into the night, hirer of weedy, retiring men who wore tuxes and tinkled old standards like “Night and Day” in the hotel bar. Olin who probably read Proust on his nights off.

“But they are disturbing, too, these books. If I hadn’t looked at them, I don’t think I would have bothered waiting for you this evening. Once I saw that lawyer with his briefcase, I knew you meant to stay in that goddamned room, and that nothing I could say was apt to dissuade you. But the books ...”

Mike reached out and snapped off the minicorder—that little red staring eye was starting to give him the willies. “Do you want to know why I’m bottom-feeding? Is that it?”

“I assume you do it for the money,” Olin said mildly. “And you’re feeding a long way from the bottom, at least in my estimation ... although it’s interesting that you would jump so nimbly to such a conclusion.”

Mike felt warmth rising in his cheeks. No, this wasn’t going the way he had expected at all; he had never snapped his recorder off in the middle of a conversation. But Olin wasn’t what he had seemed. I was led astray by his hands, Mike thought. Those pudgy little hotel manager’s hands with their neat white crescents of manicured nail.

“What concerned me—what frightened me—is that I found myself reading the work of an intelligent, talented man who doesn’t believe one single thing he has written.”

That wasn’t exactly true, Mike thought. He’d written perhaps two dozen stories he believed in, had actually published a few. He’d written reams of poetry he believed in during his first eighteen months in New York, when he had starved on the payroll of The Village Voice. But did he believe that the headless ghost of Eugene Rilsby walked his deserted Kansas farmhouse by moonlight? No. He had spent the night in that farmhouse, camped out on the dirty linoleum hills of the kitchen floor, and had seen nothing scarier than two mice trundling along the baseboard. He had spent a hot summer

night in the ruins of the Transylvanian castle where Vlad Tepes supposedly still held court; the only vampires to actually show up had been a fog of European mosquitoes. During the night camped out by the grave of serial killer Jeffrey Dahmer, a white, blood-streaked figure waving a knife had come at him out of the two o'clock darkness, but the giggles of the apparition's friends had given him away, and Mike Enslin hadn't been terribly impressed, anyway; he knew a teenage ghost waving a rubber knife when he saw one. But he had no intention of telling any of this to Olin. He couldn't afford—

Except he could. The minicorder (a mistake from the getgo, he now understood) was stowed away again, and this meeting was about as off-the-record as you could get. Also, he had come to admire Olin in a weird way. And when you admired a man, you wanted to tell him the truth.

"No," he said, "I don't believe in ghoulies and ghosties and long-legged beasties. I think it's good there are no such things, because I don't believe there's any good Lord that can protect us from them, either. That's what I believe, but I've kept an open mind from the very start. I may never win the Pulitzer Prize for investigating The Barking Ghost in Mount Hope Cemetery, but I would have written fairly about him if he had shown up."

Olin said something, only a single word, but too low for Mike to make it out.

"I beg pardon?"

"I said no." Olin looked at him almost apologetically.

Mike sighed. Olin thought he was a liar. When you got to that point, the only choices were to put up your dukes or disengage totally from the discussion. "Why don't we leave this for another day, Mr. Olin? I'll just go on upstairs and brush my teeth. Perhaps I'll see Kevin O'Malley materialize behind me in the bathroom mirror."

Mike started to get out of his chair, and Olin put out one of his pudgy, carefully manicured hands to stop him. “I’m not calling you a liar,” he said, “but, Mr. Enslin, you don’t believe. Ghosts rarely appear to those who don’t believe in them, and when they do, they are rarely seen. Why, Eugene Rilsby could have bowled his severed head all the way down the front hall of his home, and you wouldn’t have heard a thing!”

Mike stood up, then bent to grab his overnight case. “If that’s so, I won’t have anything to worry about in room 1408, will I?”

“But you will,” Olin said. “You will. Because there are no ghosts in room 1408 and never have been. There’s something in there—I’ve felt it myself—but it’s not a spirit presence. In an abandoned house or an old castle keep, your unbelief may serve you as protection. In room 1408, it will only render you more vulnerable. Don’t do it, Mr. Enslin. That’s why I waited for you tonight, to ask you, beg you, not to do it. Of all the people on earth who don’t belong in that room, the man who wrote those cheerful, exploitative true-ghost books leads the list.”

Mike heard this and didn’t hear it at the same time. And you turned off your tape recorder! he was raving. He embarrasses me into turning off my tape recorder and then he turns into Boris Karloff hosting The All-Star Spook Weekend! Fuck it. I’ll quote him anyway. If he doesn’t like it, let him sue me.

All at once he was burning to get upstairs, not just so he could start getting his long night in a corner hotel room over with, but because he wanted to transcribe what Olin had just said while it was still fresh in his mind.

“Have a drink, Mr. Enslin.”

“No, I really—”

Mr. Olin reached into his coat pocket and brought out a key on a long brass paddle. The brass looked old and scratched and tarnished.

Embossed on it were the numbers 1408. “Please,” Olin said. “Humor me. You give me ten more minutes of your time—long enough to consume a short Scotch—and I’ll hand you this key. I would give almost anything to be able to change your mind, but I like to think I can recognize the inevitable when I see it.”

“You still use actual keys here?” Mike asked. “That’s sort of a nice touch. Antiquey.”

“The Dolphin went to a MagCard system in 1979, Mr. Enslin, the year I took the job as manager. 1408 is the only room in the house that still opens with a key. There was no need to put a MagCard lock on its door, because there’s never anyone inside; the room was last occupied by a paying guest in 1978.”

“You’re shitting me!” Mike sat down again, and unlimbered his minicorder again. He pushed the RECORD button and said, “House manager Olin claims 1408 not rented to a paying guest in over twenty years.”

“It is just as well that 1408 has never needed a MagCard lock on its door, because I am completely positive the device wouldn’t work. Digital wristwatches don’t work in room 1408. Sometimes they run backward, sometimes they simply go out, but you can’t tell time with one. Not in room 1408, you can’t. The same is true of pocket calculators and cell-phones. If you’re wearing a beeper, Mr. Enslin, I advise you to turn it off, because once you’re in room 1408, it will start beeping at will.” He paused. “And turning it off isn’t guaranteed to work, either; it may turn itself back on. The only sure cure is to pull the batteries.” He pushed the STOP button on the minicorder without examining the buttons; Mike supposed he used a similar model for dictating memos. “Actually, Mr. Enslin, the only sure cure is to stay the hell out of that room.”

“I can’t do that,” Mike said, taking his minicorder back and stowing it once more, “but I think I can take time for that drink.”

*

While Olin poured from the fumed-oak bar beneath an oil painting of Fifth Avenue at the turn of the century, Mike asked him how, if the room had been continuously unoccupied since 1978, Olin knew that high-tech gadgets didn't work inside.

"I didn't intend to give you the impression that no one had set foot through the door since 1978," Olin replied. "For one thing, there are maids in once a month to give the place a light turn. That means—"

Mike, who had been working on Ten Haunted Hotel Rooms for about four months at that point, said: "I know what it means." A light turn in an unoccupied room would include opening the windows to change the air, dusting, enough Ty-D-Bowl in the can to turn the water briefly blue, a change of the towels. Probably not the bed-linen, not on a light turn. He wondered if he should have brought his sleeping-bag.

Crossing the Persian from the bar with their drinks in his hands, Olin seemed to read Mike's thought on his face. "The sheets were changed this very afternoon, Mr. Enslin."

"Why don't you drop that? Call me Mike."

"I don't think I'd be comfortable with that," Olin said, handing Mike his drink. "Here's to you."

"And you." Mike lifted his glass, meaning to clink it against Olin's, but Olin pulled his back.

"No, to you, Mr. Enslin. I insist. Tonight we should both drink to you. You'll need it."

Mike sighed, clinked the rim of his glass against the rim of Olin's, and said: "To me. You would have been right at home in a horror movie, Mr. Olin. You could have played the gloomy old butler who tries to warn the young married couple away from Castle Doom."

Olin sat down. "It's a part I haven't had to play often, thank God. Room 1408 isn't listed on any of the websites dealing with

paranormal locations or psychic hotspots—”

That’ll change after my book, Mike thought, sipping his drink.”

“—and there are no ghost-tours with stops at the Hotel Dolphin, although they do tour through the Sherry-Netherland, the Plaza, and the Park Lane. We have kept 1408 as quiet as possible ... although, of course, the history has always been there for a researcher who is both lucky and tenacious.”

Mike allowed himself a small smile.

“Veronique changed the sheets,” Olin said. “I accompanied her. You should feel flattered, Mr. Enslin; it’s almost like having your night’s linen put on by royalty. Veronique and her sister came to the Dolphin as chambermaids in 1971 or ‘72. Vee, as we call her, is the Hotel Dolphin’s longest-running employee, with at least six years’ seniority over me. She has since risen to head housekeeper. I’d guess she hadn’t changed a sheet in six years before today, but she used to do all the turns in 1408—she and her sister—until about 1992. Veronique and Celeste were twins, and the bond between them seemed to make them ... how shall I put it? Not immune to 1408, but its equal ... at least for the short periods of time needed to give a room a light turn.”

“You’re not going to tell me this Veronique’s sister died in the room, are you?”

“No, not at all,” Olin said. “She left service here around 1988, suffering from ill health. But I don’t rule out the idea that 1408 may have played a part in her worsening mental and physical condition.”

“We seem to have built a rapport here, Mr. Olin. I hope I don’t snap it by telling you I find that ridiculous.”

Olin laughed. “So hardheaded for a student of the airy world.”

“I owe it to my readers,” Mike said blandly.

“I suppose I simply could have left 1408 as it is anyway during most of its days and nights,” the hotel manager mused. “Door locked, lights off, shades drawn to keep the sun from fading the carpet, coverlet pulled up, doorknob breakfast menu on the bed ... but I can’t bear to think of the air getting stuffy and old, like the air in an attic. Can’t bear to think of the dust piling up until it’s thick and fluffy. What does that make me, persnickety or downright obsessive?”

“It makes you a hotel manager.”

“I suppose. In any case, Vee and Cee turned that room—very quick, just in and out—until Cee retired and Vee got her first big promotion. After that, I got other maids to do it in pairs, always picking ones who got on well with each other—”

“Hoping for that bond to withstand the bogies?”

“Hoping for that bond, yes. And you can make fun of the room 1408 bogies as much as you want, Mr. Enslin, but you’ll feel them almost at once, of that I’m confident. Whatever there is in that room, it’s not shy.

“On many occasions—all that I could manage—I went with the maids, to supervise them.” He paused, then added, almost reluctantly, “To pull them out, I suppose, if anything really awful started to happen. Nothing ever did. There were several who had weeping fits, one who had a laughing fit—I don’t know why someone laughing out of control should be more frightening than someone sobbing, but it is—and a number who fainted. Nothing too terrible, however. I had time enough over the years to make a few primitive experiments—beepers and cell-phones and such—but nothing too terrible. Thank God.” He paused again, then added in a queer, flat tone: “One of them went blind.”

“What?”

“She went blind. Rommie Van Gelder, that was. She was dusting the top of the television, and all at once she began to scream. I asked

her what was wrong. She dropped her dustring and put her hands over her eyes and screamed that she was blind ... but that she could see the most awful colors. They went away almost as soon as I got her out through the door, and by the time I got her down the hallway to the elevator, her sight had begun to come back.”

“You’re telling me all this just to scare me, Mr. Olin, aren’t you? To scare me off.”

“Indeed I am not. You know the history of the room, beginning with the suicide of its first occupant.”

Mike did. Kevin O’Malley, a sewing machine salesman, had taken his life on October 13, 1910, a leaper who had left a wife and seven children behind.

“Five men and one woman have jumped from that room’s single window, Mr. Enslin. Three women and one man have overdosed with pills in that room, two found in bed, two found in the bathroom, one in the tub and one sitting slumped on the toilet. A man hanged himself in the closet in 1970—”

“Henry Storkin,” Mike said. “That one was probably accidental ... erotic asphyxia.”

“Perhaps. There was also Randolph Hyde, who slit his wrists, and then cut off his genitals for good measure while he was bleeding to death. That one wasn’t erotic asphyxiation. The point is, Mr. Enslin, that if you can’t be swayed from your intention by a record of twelve suicides in sixty-eight years, I doubt if the gasps and fibrillations of a few chambermaids will stop you.”

Gasps and fibrillations, that’s nice, Mike thought, and wondered if he could steal it for the book.

“Few of the pairs who have turned 1408 over the years care to go back more than a few times,” Olin said, and finished his drink in a tidy little gulp.

“Except for the French twins.”

“Vee and Cee, that’s true.” Olin nodded.

Mike didn’t care much about the maids and their ... what had Olin called them? Their gasps and fibrillations. He did feel mildly rankled by Olin’s enumeration of the suicides ... as if Mike was so thick he had missed, not the fact of them, but their import. Except, really, there was no import. Both Abraham Lincoln and John Kennedy had vice presidents named Johnson; the names Lincoln and Kennedy had seven letters; both Lincoln and Kennedy had been elected in years ending in 60. What did all of these coincidences prove? Not a damned thing.

“The suicides will make a wonderful segment for my book,” Mike said, “but since the tape recorder is off, I can tell you they amount to what a statistician resource of mine calls ‘the cluster effect.’”

“Charles Dickens called it ‘the potato effect,’” Olin said.

“I beg your pardon?”

“When Jacob Marley’s ghost first speaks to Scrooge, Scrooge tells him he could be nothing but a blob of mustard or a bit of underdone potato.”

“Is that supposed to be funny?” Mike asked, a trifle coldly.

“Nothing about this strikes me as funny, Mr. Enslin. Nothing at all. Listen very closely, please. Vee’s sister, Celeste, died of a heart attack. At that point, she was suffering mid-stage Alzheimer’s, a disease which struck her very early in life.”

“Yet her sister is fine and well, according to what you said earlier. An American success story, in fact. As you are yourself, Mr. Olin, from the look of you. Yet you’ve been in and out of room 1408 how many times? A hundred? Two hundred?”

“For very short periods of time,” Olin said. “It’s perhaps like entering a room filled with poison gas. If one holds one’s breath, one may be all right. I see you don’t like that comparison. You no doubt find it overwrought, perhaps ridiculous. Yet I believe it’s a good one.”

He steeped his fingers beneath his chin.

“It’s also possible that some people react more quickly and more violently to whatever lives in that room, just as some people who go scuba-diving are more prone to the bends than others. Over the Dolphin’s near-century of operation, the hotel staff has grown ever more aware that 1408 is a poisoned room. It has become part of the house history, Mr. Enslin. No one talks about it, just as no one mentions the fact that here, as in most hotels, the fourteenth floor is actually the thirteenth ... but they know it. If all the facts and records pertaining to that room were available, they would tell an amazing story ... one more uncomfortable than your readers might enjoy.

“I should guess, for example, that every hotel in New York has had its suicides, but I would be willing to wager my life that only in the Dolphin have there been a dozen of them in a single room. And leaving Celeste Romandeu aside, what about the natural deaths in 1408? The so-called natural deaths?”

“How many have there been?” The idea of so-called natural deaths in 1408 had never occurred to him.

“Thirty,” Olin replied. “Thirty, at least. Thirty that I know of.”

“You’re lying!” The words were out of his mouth before he could call them back.

“No, Mr. Enslin, I assure you I’m not. Did you really think that we keep that room empty just out of some vapid old wives’ superstition or ridiculous New York tradition ... the idea, maybe, that every fine old hotel should have at least one unquiet spirit, clanking around in the Suite of Invisible Chains?”

Mike Enslin realized that just such an idea—not articulated but there, just the same—had indeed been hanging around his new Ten Nights book. To hear Olin scoff at it in the irritated tones of a scientist scoffing at a bruja-waving native did nothing to soothe his chagrin.

“We have our superstitions and traditions in the hotel trade, but we don’t let them get in the way of our business, Mr. Enslin. There’s an old saying in the Midwest, where I broke into the business: ‘There are no drafty rooms when the cattlemen are in town.’ If we have empties, we fill them. The only exception to that rule I have ever made—and the only talk like this I have ever had—is on account of room 1408, a room on the thirteenth floor whose very numerals add up to thirteen.”

Olin looked levelly at Mike Enslin.

“It is a room not only of suicides but of strokes and heart attacks and epileptic seizures. One man who stayed in that room—this was in 1973—apparently drowned in a bowl of soup. You would undoubtedly call that ridiculous, but I spoke to the man who was head of hotel security at that time, and he saw the death certificate. The power of whatever inhabits the room seems to be less around midday, which is when the room-turns always occur, and yet I know of several maids who have turned that room who now suffer from heart problems, emphysema, diabetes. There was a heating problem on that floor three years ago, and Mr. Neal, the head maintenance engineer at that time, had to go into several of the rooms to check the heating units. 1408 was one of them. He seemed fine then—both in the room and later on—but he died the following afternoon of a massive cerebral hemorrhage.”

“Coincidence,” Mike said. Yet he could not deny that Olin was good. Had the man been a camp counselor, he would have scared ninety per cent of the kiddies back home after the first round of campfire ghost stories.

“Coincidence,” Olin repeated softly, not quite contemptuously. He held out the old-fashioned key on its old-fashioned brass paddle.

“How is your own heart, Mr. Enslin? Not to mention your blood-pressure and psychological condition?”

Mike found it took an actual, conscious effort to lift his hand ... but once he got it moving, it was fine. It rose to the key without even the minutest trembling at the fingertips, so far as he could see.

“All fine,” he said, grasping the worn brass paddle. “Besides, I’m wearing my lucky Hawaiian shirt.”

*

Olin insisted on accompanying Mike to the fourteenth floor in the elevator, and Mike did not demur. He was interested to see that, once they were out of the manager’s office and walking down the hall which led to the elevators, the man reverted to his less consequential self; he became once again poor Mr. Olin, the flunky who had fallen into the writer’s clutches.

A man in a tux—Mike guessed he was either the restaurant manager or the maitre d’—stopped them, offered Olin a thin sheaf of papers, and murmured to him in French. Olin murmured back, nodding, and quickly scribbled his signature on the sheets. The fellow in the bar was now playing “Autumn in New York.” From this distance, it had an echoey sound, like music heard in a dream.

The man in the tuxedo said “Merci bien” and went on his way. Mike and the hotel manager went on theirs. Olin again asked if he could carry Mike’s little valise, and Mike again refused. In the elevator, Mike found his eyes drawn to the neat triple row of buttons. Everything was where it should have been, there were no gaps ... and yet, if you looked more closely, you saw that there was. The button marked 12 was followed by one marked 14. As if, Mike thought, they could make the number nonexistent by omitting it from the control-panel of an elevator. Foolishness ... and yet Olin was right; it was done all over the world.

As the car rose, Mike said, “I’m curious about something. Why didn’t you simply create a fictional resident for room 1408, if it scares you all as badly as you say it does? For that matter, Mr. Olin, why not declare it as your own residence?”

“I suppose I was afraid I would be accused of fraud, if not by the people responsible for enforcing state and federal civil rights statutes—hotel people feel about civil rights laws as many of your readers probably feel about clanking chains in the night—then by my bosses, if they got wind of it. If I couldn’t persuade you to stay out of 1408, I doubt that I would have had much more luck in convincing the Stanley Corporation’s board of directors that I took a perfectly good room off the market because I was afraid that spooks cause the occasional travelling salesman to jump out the window and splatter himself all over Sixty-first Street.”

Mike found this the most disturbing thing Olin had said yet. Because he’s not trying to convince me anymore, he thought. Whatever salesmanship powers he had in his office—maybe it’s some vibe that comes up from the Persian rug—he loses it out here. Competency, yes, you could see that when he was signing the maitre d’s chits, but not salesmanship. Not personal magnetism. Not out here. But he believes it. He believes it all.

Above the door, the illuminated 12 went out and the 14 came on. The elevator stopped. The door slid open to reveal a perfectly ordinary hotel corridor with a red-and-gold carpet (most definitely not a Persian) and electric fixtures that looked like nineteenth-century gaslights.

“Here we are,” Olin said. “Your floor. You’ll pardon me if I leave you here. 1408 is to your left, at the end of the hall. Unless I absolutely have to, I don’t go any closer than this.”

Mike Enslin stepped out of the elevator on legs that seemed heavier than they should have. He turned back to Olin, a pudgy little man in a black coat and a carefully knotted wine-colored tie. Olin’s manicured hands were clasped behind him now, and Mike saw that

the little man's face was as pale as cream. On his high, lineless forehead, drops of perspiration stood out.

"There's a telephone in the room, of course," Olin said. "You could try it, if you find yourself in trouble ... but I doubt that it will work. Not if the room doesn't want it to."

Mike thought of a light reply, something about how that would save him a room-service charge at least, but all at once his tongue seemed as heavy as his legs. It just lay there on the floor of his mouth.

Olin brought one hand out from behind his back, and Mike saw it was trembling. "Mr. Enslin," he said. "Mike. Don't do this. For God's sake—"

Before he could finish, the elevator door slid shut, cutting him off. Mike stood where he was for a moment, in the perfect New York hotel silence of what no one on the staff would admit was the thirteenth floor of the Hotel Dolphin, and thought of reaching out and pushing the elevator's call-button.

Except if he did that, Olin would win. And there would be a large, gaping hole where the best chapter of his new book should have been. The readers might not know that, his editor and his agent might not know it, Robertson the lawyer might not ... but he would.

Instead of pushing the call-button, he reached up and touched the cigarette behind his ear—that old, distracted gesture he no longer knew he was making—and flicked the collar of his lucky shirt. Then he started down the hallway toward 1408, swinging his overnight case by his side.

II

The most interesting artifact left in the wake of Michael Enslin's brief stay (it lasted about seventy minutes) in room 1408 was the eleven minutes of recorded tape in his minicorder, which was charred a bit but not even close to destroyed. The fascinating thing about the narration was how little narration there was. And how odd it became.

The minicorder had been a present from his ex-wife, with whom he had remained friendly, five years before. On his first "case expedition" (the Rilsby farm in Kansas) he had taken it almost as an afterthought, along with five yellow legal pads and a leather case filled with sharpened pencils. By the time he reached the door of room 1408 in the Hotel Dolphin three books later, he came with a single pen and notebook, plus five fresh ninety-minute cassettes in addition to the one he had loaded into the machine before leaving his apartment.

He had discovered that narration served him better than note-taking; he was able to catch anecdotes, some of them pretty damned great, as they happened—the bats that had dive-bombed him in the supposedly haunted tower of Gartsby Castle, for instance. He had shrieked like a girl on her first trip through a carny haunted house. Friends hearing this were invariably amused.

The little tape recorder was more practical than written notes, too, especially when you were in a chilly New Brunswick graveyard and a squall of rain and wind collapsed your tent at three in the morning. You couldn't take very successful notes in such circumstances, but you could talk ... which was what Mike had done, gone on talking as he struggled out of the wet, flapping canvas of his tent, never losing sight of the minicorder's comforting red eye. Over the years and the "case expeditions," the Sony minicorder had become his friend. He had never recorded a first-hand account of a true supernatural event on the filament-thin ribbon of tape running between its reels, and that included the broken comments he made while in 1408, but it was

probably not surprising that he had arrived at such feelings of affection for the gadget. Long-haul truckers come to love their Kenworths and Jimmy-Petes; writers treasure a certain pen or battered old typewriter; professional cleaning ladies are loath to give up the old Electrolux. Mike had never had to stand up to an actual ghost or psychokinetic event with only the minicorder—his version of a cross and a bunch of garlic—to protect him, but it had been there on plenty of cold, uncomfortable nights. He was hardheaded, but that didn't make him inhuman.

His problems with 1408 started even before he got into the room.

The door was crooked.

Not by a lot, but it was crooked, all right, canted just the tiniest bit to the left. It made him think first of scary movies where the director tried to indicate mental distress in one of the characters by tipping the camera on the point-of-view shots. This association was followed by another one—the way doors looked when you were on a boat and the weather was a little heavy. Back and forth they went, right and left they went, tick and tock they went, until you started to feel a bit woozy in your head and stomach. Not that he felt that way himself, not at all, but—

Yes, I do. Just a little.

And he would say so, too, if only because of Olin's insinuation that his attitude made it impossible for him to be fair in the undoubtedly subjective field of spook journalism.

He bent over (aware that the slightly woozy feeling in his stomach left as soon as he was no longer looking at that subtly off-kilter door), unzipped the pocket on his overnighter, and took out his minicorder. He pushed RECORD as he straightened up, saw the little red eye go on, and opened his mouth to say, "The door of room 1408 offers its own unique greeting; it appears to have been set crooked, tipped slightly to the left."

He said The door, and that's all. If you listen to the tape, you can hear both words clearly, The door and then the click of the STOP button. Because the door wasn't crooked. It was perfectly straight. Mike turned, looked at the door of 1409 across the hall, then back at the door of 1408. Both doors were the same, white with gold number-plaques and gold doorknobs. Both perfectly straight.

Mike bent, picked up his overnight case with the hand holding the minicorder, moved the key in his other hand toward the lock, then stopped again.

The door was crooked again.

This time it tilted slightly to the right.

"This is ridiculous," Mike murmured, but that woozy feeling had already started in his stomach again. It wasn't just like seasickness; it was seasickness. He had crossed to England on the QE2 a couple of years ago, and one night had been extremely rough. What Mike remembered most clearly was lying on the bed in his stateroom, always on the verge of throwing up but never quite able to do it. And how the feeling of nauseated vertigo got worse if you looked at a doorway ... or a table ... or a chair ... at how they would go back and forth ... right and left ... tick and tock ...

This is Olin's fault, he thought. Exactly what he wants. He built you up for it, buddy. He set you up for it. Man, how he'd laugh if he could see you. How—

His thoughts broke off as he realized Olin very likely could see him. Mike looked back down the corridor toward the elevator, barely noticing that the slightly whoopsy feeling in his stomach left the moment he stopped staring at the door. Above and to the left of the elevators, he saw what he had expected: a closed-circuit camera. One of the house dicks might be looking at it this very moment, and Mike was willing to bet that Olin was right there with him, both of them grinning like apes. Teach him to come in here and start throwing his weight and his lawyer around, Olin says. Lookit him! the

security man replies, grinning more widely than ever. White as a ghost himself, and he hasn't even touched the key to the lock yet. You got him, boss! Got him hook, line, and sinker!

Damned if you do, Mike thought. I stayed in the Rilsby house, slept in the room where at least two of them were killed—and I did sleep, whether you believed it or not. I spent a night right next to Jeffrey Dahmer's grave and another two stones over from H. P. Lovecraft's; I brushed my teeth next to the tub where Sir David Smythe supposedly drowned both of his wives. I stopped being scared of campfire stories a long time ago. I'll be damned if you do!

He looked back at the door and the door was straight. He grunted, pushed the key into the lock, and turned it. The door opened. Mike stepped in. The door did not swing slowly shut behind him as he felt for the light switch, leaving him in total darkness (besides, the lights of the apartment building next door shone through the window). He found the switch. When he flicked it, the overhead light, enclosed in a collection of dangling crystal ornaments, came on. So did the standing lamp by the desk on the far side of the room.

The window was above this desk, so someone sitting there writing could pause in his work and look out on Sixty-first Street ... or jump out on Sixty-first, if the urge so took him. Except—

Mike set down his bag just inside the door, closed the door, and pushed RECORD again. The little red light went on.

“According to Olin, six people have jumped from the window I'm looking at,” he said, “but I won't be taking any dives from the fourteenth—excuse me, the thirteenth—floor of the Hotel Dolphin tonight. There's an iron or steel mesh grille over the outside. Better safe than sorry. 1408 is what you'd call a junior suite, I guess. The room I'm in has two chairs, a sofa, a writing desk, a cabinet that probably contains the TV and maybe a minibar. Carpet on the floor is unremarkable—not a patch on Olin's, believe me. Wallpaper, ditto. It ... wait ...”

At this point the listener hears another click on the tape as Mike hits the STOP button again. All the scant narration on the tape has that same fragmentary quality, which is utterly unlike the other hundred and fifty or so tapes in his literary agent's possession. In addition, his voice grows steadily more distracted; it is not the voice of a man at work, but of a perplexed individual who has begun talking to himself without realizing it. The elliptical nature of the tapes and that growing verbal distraction combine to give most listeners a distinct feeling of unease. Many ask that the tape be turned off long before the end is reached. Mere words on a page cannot adequately convey a listener's growing conviction that he is hearing a man lose, if not his mind, then his hold on conventional reality, but even the flat words themselves suggest that something was happening.

What Mike had noticed at that point were the pictures on the walls. There were three of them: a lady in twenties-style evening dress standing on a staircase, a sailing ship done in the fashion of Currier & Ives, and a still life of fruit, the latter painted with an unpleasant yellow-orange cast to the apples as well as the oranges and bananas. All three pictures were in glass frames and all three were crooked. He had been about to mention the crookedness on tape, but what was so unusual, so worthy of comment, about three off-kilter pictures? That a door should be crooked ... well, that had a little of that old Cabinet of Dr. Caligari charm. But the door hadn't been crooked; his eyes had tricked him for a moment, that was all.

The lady on the stairs tilted left. So did the sailing ship, which showed bell-bottomed British tars lining the rail to watch a school of flying fish. The yellowish-orange fruit—to Mike it looked like a bowl of fruit painted by the light of a suffocating equatorial sun, a Paul Bowles desert sun—tilted to the right. Although he was not ordinarily a fussy man, he circled the room, setting them straight. Looking at them crooked like that was making him feel a touch nauseated again. He wasn't entirely surprised, either. One grew susceptible to the feeling; he had discovered that on the QE 2. He had been told that if one persevered through that period of increased susceptibility, one usually adapted ... "got your sealegs," some of the old hands

still said. Mike hadn't done enough sailing to get his sealegs, nor cared to. These days he stuck with his land legs, and if straightening the three pictures in the unremarkable sitting room of 1408 would settle his midsection, good for him.

There was dust on the glass covering the pictures. He trailed his fingers across the still life and left two parallel streaks. The dust had a greasy, slippery feel. Like silk just before it rots was what came into his mind, but he was damned if he was going to put that on tape, either. How was he supposed to know what silk felt like just before it rotted? It was a drunk's thought.

When the pictures were set to rights, he stepped back and surveyed them in turn: the evening-dressed lady by the door leading into the bedroom, the ship plying one of the seven seas to the left of the writing desk, and finally the nasty (and quite badly painted) fruit by the TV cabinet. Part of him expected that they would be crooked again, or fall crooked as he looked at them—that was the way things happened in movies like *House on Haunted Hill* and in old episodes of *The Twilight Zone*—but the pictures remained perfectly straight, as he had fixed them. Not, he told himself, that he would have found anything supernatural or paranormal in a return to their former crooked state; in his experience, reversion was the nature of things—people who had given up smoking (he touched the cigarette cocked behind his ear without being aware of it) wanted to go on smoking, and pictures that had been hanging crooked since Nixon was President wanted to go on hanging crooked. And they've been here a long time, no doubt about that, Mike thought. If I lifted them away from the walls, I'd see lighter patches on the wallpaper. Or bugs squirming out, the way they do when you turn over a rock.

There was something both shocking and nasty about this idea; it came with a vivid image of blind white bugs oozing out of the pale and formerly protected wallpaper like living pus.

Mike raised the minicorder, pushed RECORD, and said: "Olin has certainly started a train of thought in my head. Or a chain of thought, which is it? He set out to give me the heebie-jeebies, and he

certainly succeeded. I don't mean ..." Didn't mean what? To be racist? Was "heebie-jeebies" short for Hebrew jeebies? But that was ridiculous. That would be "Hebrew-jeebrews," a phrase which was meaningless. It—

On the tape at this point, flat and perfectly articulated, Mike Enslin says: "I've got to get hold of myself. Right now." This is followed by another click as he shuts the tape off again.

He closed his eyes and took four long, measured breaths, holding each one in to a five-count before letting it out again. Nothing like this had ever happened to him—not in the supposedly haunted houses, the supposedly haunted graveyards, or the supposedly haunted castles. This wasn't like being haunted, or what he imagined being haunted would be like; this was like being stoned on bad, cheap dope.

Olin did this. Olin hypnotized you, but you're going to break out of it. You're going to spend the goddamned night in this room, and not just because it's the best location you've ever been in—leave out Olin and you've got damned near enough for the ghost-story of the decade already—but because Olin doesn't get to win. Him and his bullshit story about how thirty people have died in here, they don't get to win. I'm the one in charge of bullshit around here, so just breathe in ... and out. Breathe in ... and out. In ... and out ...

He went on like that for nearly ninety seconds, and when he opened his eyes again, he felt normal. The pictures on the wall? Still straight. Fruit in the bowl? Still yellow-orange and uglier than ever. Desert fruit for sure. Eat one piece of that and you'd shit until it hurt.

He pushed RECORD. The red eye went on. "I had a little vertigo for a minute or two," he said, crossing the room to the writing desk and the window with its protective mesh outside. "It might have been a hangover from Olin's yarning, but I could believe I feel a genuine presence here." He felt no such thing, of course, but once that was on tape he could write almost anything he pleased. "The air is stale. Not musty or foul-smelling, Olin said the place gets aired every time

it gets turned, but the turns are quick and ... yeah ... it's stale. Hey, look at this."

There was an ashtray on the writing desk, one of those little ones made of thick glass that you used to see in hotels everywhere, and in it was a book of matches. On the front was the Hotel Dolphin. In front of the hotel stood a smiling doorman in a very old-fashioned uniform, the kind with shoulder-boards, gold frogging, and a cap that looked as if it belonged in a gay bar, perched on the head of a motorcycle ramrod wearing nothing else but a few silver body-rings. Going back and forth on Fifth Avenue in front of the hotel were cars from another era—Packards and Hudsons, Studebakers and finny Chrysler New Yorkers.

"The matchbook in the ashtray looks like it comes from about 1955," Mike said, and slipped it into the pocket of his lucky Hawaiian shirt. "I'm keeping it as a souvenir. Now it's time for a little fresh air."

There is a clunk as he sets the minicorder down, presumably on the writing desk. There is a pause followed by vague sounds and a couple of effortful grunts. After these come a second pause and then a squeaking sound. "Success!" he says. This is a little off-mike, but the follow-up is closer.

"Success!" Mike repeated, picking the minicorder up off the desk. "The bottom half wouldn't budge ... it's like it's nailed shut ... but the top half came down all right. I can hear the traffic on Fifth Avenue, and all the beeping horns have a comforting quality. Someone is playing a saxophone, perhaps in front of the Plaza, which is across the street and two blocks down. It reminds me of my brother."

Mike stopped abruptly, looking at the little red eye. It seemed to accuse him. Brother? His brother was dead, another fallen soldier in the tobacco wars. Then he relaxed. What of it? These were the spook wars, where Michael Enslin had always come off the winner. As for Donald Enslin ...

“My brother was actually eaten by wolves one winter on the Connecticut Turnpike,” he said, then laughed and pushed STOP. There is more on the tape—a little more—but that is the final statement of any coherence ... the final statement, that is, to which a clear meaning can be ascribed.

Mike turned on his heels and looked at the pictures. Still hanging perfectly straight, good little pictures that they were. That still life, though—what an ugly fucking thing that was!

He pushed RECORD and spoke two words—fuming oranges—into the minicorder. Then he turned it off again and walked across the room to the door leading into the bedroom. He paused by the evening-dressed lady and reached into the darkness, feeling for the light switch. He had just one moment to register

(it feels like skin like old dead skin)

something wrong with the wallpaper under his sliding palm, and then his fingers found the switch. The bedroom was flooded with yellow light from another of those ceiling fixtures buried in hanging glass baubles. The bed was a double hiding under a yellow-orange coverlet.

“Why say hiding?” Mike asked the minicorder, then pushed the STOP button again. He stepped in, fascinated by the fuming desert of the coverlet, by the tumorous bulges of the pillows beneath it. Sleep there? Not at all, sir! It would be like sleeping inside that goddam still life, sleeping in that horrible hot Paul Bowles room you couldn’t quite see, a room for lunatic expatriate Englishmen who were blind from syphilis caught while fucking their mothers, the film version starring either Laurence Harvey or Jeremy Irons, one of those actors you just naturally associated with unnatural acts—

Mike pushed RECORD, the little red eye came on, he said “Orpheus on the Orpheum Circuit!” into the mike, then pushed STOP again. He approached the bed. The coverlet gleamed yellow-orange. The wallpaper, perhaps cream-colored by daylight, had picked up the

yellow-orange glow of the coverlet. There was a little night-table to either side of the bed. On one was a telephone—black and large and equipped with a dial. The finger-holes in the dial looked like surprised white eyes. On the other table was a dish with a plum on it. Mike pushed RECORD and said: “That isn’t a real plum. That’s a plastic plum.” He pushed STOP again.

On the bed itself was a doorknob menu. Mike sidled up one side of the bed, being quite careful to touch neither the bed nor the wall, and picked the menu up. He tried not to touch the coverlet, either, but the tips of his fingers brushed it and he moaned. It was soft in some terrible wrong way. Nevertheless, he picked the menu up. It was in French, and although it had been years since he had taken the language, one of the breakfast items appeared to be birds roasted in shit. That at least sounds like something the French might eat, he thought, and uttered a wild, distracted laugh.

He closed his eyes and opened them.

The menu was in Russian.

He closed his eyes and opened them.

The menu was in Italian.

Closed his eyes, opened them.

There was no menu. There was a picture of a screaming little woodcut boy looking back over his shoulder at the woodcut wolf which had swallowed his left leg up to the knee. The wolf’s ears were laid back and he looked like a terrier with its favorite toy.

I don’t see that, Mike thought, and of course he didn’t. Without closing his eyes he saw neat lines of English, each line listing a different breakfast temptation. Eggs, waffles, fresh berries; no birds roasted in shit. Still—

He turned around and very slowly edged himself out of the little space between the wall and the bed, a space that now felt as narrow as a grave. His heart was beating so hard that he could feel it in his neck and wrists as well as in his chest. His eyes were throbbing in their sockets. 1408 was wrong, yes indeed, 1408 was very wrong. Olin had said something about poison gas, and that was what Mike felt like: someone who has been gassed or forced to smoke strong hashish laced with insect poison. Olin had done this, of course, probably with the active laughing connivance of the security people. Pumped his special poison gas up through the vents. Just because he could see no vents didn't mean the vents weren't there.

Mike looked around the bedroom with wide, frightened eyes. There was no plum on the endtable to the left of the bed. No plate, either. The table was bare. He turned, started for the door leading back to the sitting room, and stopped. There was a picture on the wall. He couldn't be absolutely sure—in his present state he couldn't be absolutely sure of his own name—but he was fairly sure that there had been no picture there when he first came in. It was a still life. A single plum sat on a tin plate in the middle of an old plank table. The light falling across the plum and the plate was a feverish yellow-orange.

Tango-light, he thought. The kind of light that makes the dead get up out of their graves and tango. The kind of light—

“I have to get out of here,” he whispered, and blundered back into the sitting room. He became aware that his shoes had begun to make odd smooching sounds, as if the floor beneath them were growing soft.

The pictures on the living room wall were crooked again, and there were other changes, as well. The lady on the stairs had pulled down the top of her gown, baring her breasts. She held one in each hand. A drop of blood hung from each nipple. She was staring directly into Mike's eyes and grinning ferociously. Her teeth were filed to cannibal points. At the rail of the sailing ship, the tars had been replaced by a line of pallid men and women. The man on the far left, nearest the

ship's bow, wore a brown wool suit and held a derby hat in one hand. His hair was slicked to his brow and parted in the middle. His face was shocked and vacant. Mike knew his name: Kevin O'Malley, this room's first occupant, a sewing machine salesman who had jumped from this room in October of 1910. To O'Malley's left were the others who had died here, all with that same vacant, shocked expression. It made them look related, all members of the same inbred and cataclysmically retarded family.

In the picture where the fruit had been, there was now a severed human head. Yellow-orange light swam off the sunken cheeks, the sagging lips, the upturned, glazing eyes, the cigarette parked behind the right ear.

Mike blundered toward the door, his feet smooching and now actually seeming to stick a little at each step. The door wouldn't open, of course. The chain hung unengaged, the thumbbolt stood straight up like clock hands pointing to six o'clock, but the door wouldn't open.

Breathing rapidly, Mike turned from it and waded—that was what it felt like—across the room to the writing desk. He could see the curtains beside the window he had cracked open waving desultorily, but he could feel no fresh air against his face. It was as though the room were swallowing it. He could still hear horns on Fifth, but they were now very distant. Did he still hear the saxophone? If so, the room had stolen its sweetness and melody and left only an atonal reedy drone, like the wind blowing across a hole in a dead man's neck or a pop bottle filled with severed fingers or—

Stop it, he tried to say, but he could no longer speak. His heart was hammering at a terrible pace; if it went much faster, it would explode. His minicorder, faithful companion of many "case expeditions," was no longer in his hand. He had left it somewhere. In the bedroom? If it was in the bedroom, it was probably gone by now, swallowed by the room; when it was digested, it would be excreted into one of the pictures.

Gasping for breath like a runner nearing the end of a long race, Mike put a hand to his chest, as if to soothe his heart. What he felt in the left breast pocket of his gaudy shirt was the small square shape of the minicorder. The feel of it, so solid and known, steadied him a little—brought him back a little. He became aware that he was humming ... and that the room seemed to be humming back at him, as if myriad mouths were concealed beneath its smoothly nasty wallpaper. He was aware that his stomach was now so nauseated that it seemed to be swinging in its own greasy hammock. He could feel the air crowding against his ears in soft, coagulating clots, and it made him think of how fudge was when it reached the soft-ball stage.

But he was back a little, enough to be positive of one thing: he had to call for help while there was still time. The thought of Olin smirking (in his deferential New York hotel manager way) and saying I told you so didn't bother him, and the idea that Olin had somehow induced these strange perceptions and horrible fear by chemical means had entirely left his mind. It was the room. It was the goddamned room.

He meant to jab out a hand to the old-fashioned telephone—the twin of the one in the bedroom—and snatch it up. Instead he watched his arm descend to the table in a kind of delirious slow motion, so like the arm of a diver he almost expected to see bubbles rising from it.

He closed his fingers around the handset and picked it up. His other hand dove, as deliberate as the first, and dialed 0. As he put the handset of the phone against his ear, he heard a series of clicks as the dial spun back to its original position. It sounded like the wheel on *Wheel of Fortune*, do you want to spin or do you want to solve the puzzle? Remember that if you try to solve the puzzle and fail, you will be put out into the snow beside the Connecticut Turnpike and the wolves will eat you.

There was no ring in his ear. Instead, a harsh voice simply began speaking. "This is nine! Nine! This is nine! Nine! This is ten! Ten! We have killed your friends! Every friend is now dead! This is six! Six!"

Mike listened with growing horror, not at what the voice was saying but at its rasping emptiness. It was not a machine-generated voice, but it wasn't a human voice, either. It was the voice of the room. The presence pouring out of the walls and the floor, the presence speaking to him from the telephone, had nothing in common with any haunting or paranormal event he had ever read about. There was something alien here.

No, not here yet ... but coming. It's hungry, and you're dinner.

The phone fell from his relaxing fingers and he turned around. It swung at the end of its cord the way his stomach was swinging back and forth inside him, and he could still hear that voice rasping out of the black: "Eighteen! This is now eighteen! Take cover when the siren sounds! This is four! Four!"

He was not aware of taking the cigarette from behind his ear and putting it in his mouth, or of fumbling the book of matches with the old-fashioned gold-frogged doorman on it out of his bright shirt's right breast pocket, not aware that, after nine years, he had finally decided to have a smoke.

Before him, the room had begun to melt.

It was sagging out of its right angles and straight lines, not into curves but into strange Moorish arcs that hurt his eyes. The glass chandelier in the center of the ceiling began to sag like a thick glob of spit. The pictures began to bend, turning into shapes like the windshields of old cars. From behind the glass of the picture by the door leading into the bedroom, the twenties woman with the bleeding nipples and grinning cannibal-teeth whirled around and ran back up the stairs, going with the jerky delirious high knee-pistoning of a vamp in a silent movie. The telephone continued to grind and spit, the voice coming from it now the voice of an electric hair-clipper that has learned how to talk: "Five! This is five! Ignore the siren! Even if you leave this room, you can never leave this room! Eight! This is eight!"

The door to the bedroom and the door to the hall had begun to collapse downward, widening in the middle and becoming doorways for beings possessed of unhallowed shapes. The light began to grow bright and hot, filling the room with that yellow-orange glow. Now he could see rips in the wallpaper, black pores that quickly grew to become mouths. The floor sank into a concave arc and now he could hear it coming, the dweller in the room behind the room, the thing in the walls, the owner of the buzzing voice. "Six!" the phone screamed. "Six, this is six, this is goddam fucking SIX!"

He looked down at the matchbook in his hand, the one he had plucked out of the bedroom ashtray. Funny old doorman, funny old cars with their big chrome grilles ... and words running across the bottom that he hadn't seen in a long time, because now the strip of abrasive stuff was always on the back.

CLOSE COVER BEFORE STRIKING.

Without thinking about it—he no longer could think—Mike Enslin tore out a single match, allowing the cigarette to drop out of his mouth at the same time. He struck the match and immediately touched it to the others in the book. There was a ffffhut! sound, a strong whiff of burning sulfur that went into his head like a whiff of smelling salts, and a bright flare of matchheads. And again, without so much as a single thought, Mike held the flaring bouquet of fire against the front of his shirt. It was a cheap thing made in Korea or Cambodia or Borneo, old now; it caught fire at once. Before the flames could blaze up in front of his eyes, rendering the room once more unstable, Mike saw it clearly, like a man who has awakened from a nightmare only to find the nightmare all around him.

His head was clear—the strong whiff of sulfur and the sudden rising heat from his shirt had done that much—but the room maintained its insanely Moorish aspect. Moorish was wrong, not even very close, but it was the only word that seemed even to reach toward what had happened here ... what was still happening. He was in a melting, rotting cave full of swoops and mad tilts. The door to the bedroom had become the door to some sarcophagal inner chamber. And to

his left, where the picture of the fruit had been, the wall was bulging outward toward him, splitting open in those long cracks that gaped like mouths, opening on a world from which something was now approaching. Mike Enslin could hear its slobbering, avid breath, and smell something alive and dangerous. It smelled a little like the lion-house in the—

Then flames scorched the undershelf of his chin, banishing thought. The heat rising from his blazing shirt put that waver back into the world, and as he began to smell the crispy aroma of his chest-hair starting to fry, Mike again bolted across the sagging rug to the hall door. An insectile buzzing sound had begun to sweat out of the walls. The yellow-orange light was steadily brightening, as if a hand were turning up an invisible rheostat. But this time when he reached the door and turned the knob, the door opened. It was as if the thing behind the bulging wall had no use for a burning man; did not, perhaps, relish cooked meat.

III

A popular song from the fifties suggests that love makes the world go 'round, but coincidence would probably be a better bet. Rufus Dearborn, who was staying that night in room 1414, up near the elevators, was a salesman for the Singer Sewing Machine Company, in town from Texas to talk about moving up to an executive position. And so it happened that, ninety or so years after room 1408's first occupant jumped to his death, another sewing machine salesman saved the life of the man who had come to write about the purportedly haunted room. Or perhaps that is an exaggeration; Mike Enslin might have lived even if no one—especially a fellow on his way back from a visit to the ice machine—had been in the hallway at that moment. Having your shirt catch fire is no joke, though, and he certainly would have been burned much more severely and extensively if not for Dearborn, who thought fast and moved even faster.

Not that Dearborn ever remembered exactly what happened. He constructed a coherent enough story for the newspapers and TV cameras (he liked the idea of being a hero very much, and it certainly did no harm to his executive aspirations), and he clearly remembered seeing the man on fire lunge out into the hall, but after that everything was a blur. Thinking about it was like trying to reconstruct the things you had done during the vilest, deepest drunk of your life.

One thing he was sure of but didn't tell any of the reporters, because it made no sense: the burning man's scream seemed to grow in volume, as if he were a stereo that was being turned up. He was right there in front of Dearborn, and the pitch of the scream never changed, but the volume most certainly did. It was as if the man were some incredibly loud object that was just arriving here.

Dearborn ran down the hall with the full ice-bucket in his hand. The burning man—"It was just his shirt on fire, I saw that right away," he

told the reporters—struck the door opposite the room he had come out of, rebounded, staggered, and fell to his knees. That was when Dearborn reached him. He put his foot on the burning shoulder of the screaming man's shirt and pushed him over onto the hall carpet. Then he dumped the contents of the ice-bucket onto him.

These things were blurred in his memory, but accessible. He was aware that the burning shirt seemed to be casting far too much light—a sweltering yellow-orange light that made him think of a trip he and his brother had made to Australia two years before. They had rented an all-wheel drive and had taken off across the Great Australian Desert (the few natives called it the Great Australian Bugger-All, the Dearborn brothers discovered), a hell of a trip, great, but spooky. Especially the big rock in the middle, Ayers Rock. They had reached it right around sunset and the light on its man faces was like this ... hot and strange ... not really what you thought of as earth-light at all ...

He dropped beside the burning man who was now only the smoldering man, the covered-with-ice-cubes man, and rolled him over to stifle the flames reaching around to the back of the shirt. When he did, he saw the skin on the left side of the man's neck had gone a smoky, bubbly red, and the lobe of his ear on that side had melted a little, but otherwise ... otherwise ...

Dearborn looked up, and it seemed—this was crazy, but it seemed the door to the room the man had come out of was filled with the burning light of an Australian sundown, the hot light of an empty place where things no man had ever seen might live. It was terrible, that light (and the low buzzing, like an electric clipper that was trying desperately to speak), but it was fascinating, too. He wanted to go into it. He wanted to see what was behind it.

Perhaps Mike saved Dearborn's life, as well. He was certainly aware that Dearborn was getting up—as if Mike no longer held any interest for him—and that his face was filled with the blazing, pulsing light coming out of 1408. He remembered this better than Dearborn later

did himself, but of course Rufe Dearborn had not been reduced to setting himself on fire in order to survive.

Mike grabbed the cuff of Dearborn's slacks. "Don't go in there," he said in a cracked, smoky voice. "You'll never come out."

Dearborn stopped, looking down at the reddening, blistering face of the man on the carpet.

"It's haunted," Mike said, and as if the words had been a talisman, the door of room 1408 slammed furiously shut, cutting off the light, cutting off the terrible buzz that was almost words.

Rufus Dearborn, one of Singer Sewing Machine's finest, ran down to the elevators and pulled the fire alarm.

IV

There's an interesting picture of Mike Enslin in *Treating the Burn Victim: A Diagnostic Approach*, the sixteenth edition of which appeared about sixteen months after Mike's short stay in room 1408 of the Hotel Dolphin. The photo shows just his torso, but it's Mike, all right. One can tell by the white square on the left side of his chest. The flesh all around it is an angry red, actually blistered into second-degree burns in some places. The white square marks the left breast pocket of the shirt he was wearing that night, the lucky shirt with his minicorder in the pocket.

The minicorder itself melted around the corners, but it still works, and the tape inside it was fine. It's the things on it which are not fine. After listening to it three or four times, Mike's agent, Sam Farrell, tossed it into his wall-safe, refusing to acknowledge the gooseflesh all over his tanned, scrawny arms. In that wall-safe the tape has stayed ever since. Farrell has no urge to take it out and play it again, not for himself, not for his curious friends, some of whom would cheerfully kill to hear it; New York publishing is a small community, and word gets around.

He doesn't like Mike's voice on the tape, he doesn't like the stuff that voice is saying (My brother was actually eaten by wolves one winter on the Connecticut Turnpike ... what in God's name is that supposed to mean?), and most of all he doesn't like the background sounds on the tape, a kind of liquid smooching that sometimes sounds like clothes churning around in an oversudsed washer, sometimes like one of those old electric hair-clippers ... and sometimes weirdly like a voice.

While Mike was still in the hospital, a man named Olin—the manager of the goddamned hotel, if you please—came and asked Sam Farrell if he could listen to that tape. Farrell said no, he couldn't; what Olin could do was take himself on out of the agent's office at a rapid hike and thank God all the way back to the fleabag where he worked that

Mike Enslin had decided not to sue either the hotel or Olin for negligence.

“I tried to persuade him not to go in,” Olin said quietly. A man who spent most of his working days listening to tired travellers and petulant guests bitch about everything from their rooms to the magazine selection in the newsstand, he wasn’t much perturbed by Farrell’s rancor. “I tried everything in my power. If anyone was negligent that night, Mr. Farrell, it was your client. He believed too much in nothing. Very unwise behavior. Very unsafe behavior. I would guess he has changed somewhat in that regard.”

In spite of Farrell’s distaste for the tape, he would like Mike to listen to it, acknowledge it, perhaps use it as a pad from which to launch a new book. There is a book in what happened to Mike, Farrell knows it—not just a chapter, a forty-page case history, but an entire book. One that might outsell all three of the Ten Nights books combined. And of course he doesn’t believe Mike’s assertion that he has finished not only with ghost-tales but with all writing. Writers say that from time to time, that’s all. The occasional prima donna outburst is part of what makes writers in the first place.

As for Mike Enslin himself, he got off lucky, all things considered. And he knows it. He could have been burned much more badly than he actually was; if not for Mr. Dearborn and his bucket of ice, he might have had twenty or even thirty different skin-graft procedures to suffer through instead of only four. His neck is scarred on the left side in spite of the grafts, but the doctors at the Boston Burn Institute tell him the scars will fade on their own. He also knows that the burns, painful as they were in the weeks and months after that night, were necessary. If not for the matches with **CLOSE COVER BEFORE STRIKING** written on the front, he would have died in 1408, and his end would have been unspeakable. To a coroner it might have looked like a stroke or a heart attack, but the actual cause of death would have been much nastier.

Much nastier.

He was also lucky in having produced three popular books on ghosts and hauntings before actually running afoul of a place that is haunted—this he also knows. Sam Farrell may not believe Mike's life as a writer is over, but Sam doesn't need to; Mike knows it for both of them. He cannot so much as write a postcard without feeling cold all over his skin and being nauseated deep in the pit of his belly. Sometimes just looking at a pen (or a tape recorder) will make him think: The pictures were crooked. I tried to straighten the pictures. He doesn't know what this means. He can't remember the pictures or anything else from room 1408, and he is glad. That is a mercy. His blood-pressure isn't so good these days (his doctor told him that burn victims often develop problems with their blood-pressure and put him on medication), his eyes trouble him (his ophthalmologist told him to start taking Ocuvites), he has consistent back problems, his prostate has gotten too large ... but he can deal with these things. He knows he isn't the first person to escape 1408 without really escaping—Olin tried to tell him—but it isn't all bad. At least he doesn't remember. Sometimes he has nightmares, quite often, in fact (almost every goddam night, in fact), but he rarely remembers them when he wakes up. A sense that things are rounding off at the corners, mostly—melting the way the corners of his minicorder melted. He lives on Long Island these days, and when the weather is good he takes long walks on the beach. The closest he has ever come to articulating what he does remember about his seventy-odd (very odd) minutes in 1408 was on one of those walks. "It was never human," he told the incoming waves in a choked, halting voice. "Ghosts ... at least ghosts were once human. The thing in the wall, though ... that thing ..."

Time may improve it, he can and does hope for that. Time may fade it, as it will fade the scars on his neck. In the meantime, though, he sleeps with the lights on in his bedroom, so he will know at once where he is when he wakes up from the bad dreams. He has had all the phones taken out of the house; at some point just below the place where his conscious mind seems able to go, he is afraid of picking the phone up and hearing a buzzing, inhuman voice spit,

“This is nine! Nine! We have killed your friends! Every friend is now dead!”

And when the sun goes down on clear evenings, he pulls every shade and blind and drape in the house. He sits like a man in a darkroom until his watch tells him the light—even the last fading glow along the horizon—must be gone.

He can't stand the light that comes at sunset.

That yellow deepening to orange, like light in the Australian desert.

Joe Bob Briggs
Harvey Pekar

all
that
you love
will
be
carried
away

Based on the short story by
Stephen King



A film by James Renner

WRITTEN BY JOE BOB BRIGGS AND HARVEY PEKAR. A JAMES RENNER FILM. JOE BOB BRIGGS HARVEY PEKAR. ALL THAT YOU LOVE WILL BE CARRIED AWAY
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ALL THAT YOU LOVE WILL BE CARRIED AWAY

Stephen King

It was a Motel 6 on I-80 just west of Lincoln, Nebraska. The snow that began at midafternoon had faded the sign's virulent yellow to a kinder pastel shade as the light ran out of the January dusk. The wind was closing in on that quality of empty amplification one encounters only in the country's flat midsection, usually in wintertime. That meant nothing but discomfort now, but if big snow came tonight—the weather forecasters couldn't seem to make up their minds—then the interstate would be shut down by morning. That was nothing to Alfie Zimmer.

He got his key from a man in a red vest and drove down to the end of the long cinderblock building. He had been selling in the Midwest for twenty years, and had formulated four basic rules about securing his night's rest. First, always reserve ahead. Second, reserve at a franchise motel if possible—your Holiday Inn, your Ramada Inn, your Comfort Inn, your Motel 6. Third, always ask for a room on the end. That way, the worst you could have was one set of noisy neighbors. Last, ask for a room that begins with a one. Alfie was forty-four, too old to be fucking truck-stop whores, eating chicken-fried steak, or hauling his luggage upstairs. These days, the rooms on the first floor were usually reserved for non-smokers. Alfie rented them and smoked anyway.

Someone had taken the space in front of Room 190. All the spaces along the building were taken. Alfie wasn't surprised. You could make a reservation, guarantee it, but if you arrived late (late on a day like this was after 4 P.M.), you had to park and walk. The cars belonging to the early birds were nestled up to the gray cinder block and the bright-yellow doors in a long line, their windows already covered with a scrim of light snow.

Alfie drove around the corner and parked with the nose of his Chevrolet pointed at the white expanse of some farmer's field, swimming deep into the gray of day's end. At the farthest limit of vision he could see the spark lights of a farm. In there, they would be hunkered down. Out here, the wind blew hard enough to rock the

car. Snow skated past, obliterating the farm lights for a few moments.

Alfie was a big man with a florid face and a smoker's noisy respiration. He was wearing a topcoat, because when you were selling that was what people liked to see. Not a jacket. Storekeepers sold to people wearing jackets and John Deere caps, they didn't buy from them. The room key lay on the seat beside him. It was attached to a diamond of green plastic. The key was a real key, not a MagCard. On the radio Clint Black was singing "Nothin' but the Tail Lights." It was a country song. Lincoln had an FM rocker now, but rock-and-roll music didn't seem right to Alfie. Not out here, where if you switched over to AM you could still hear angry old men calling down hellfire.

He shut off the engine, put the key to 190 in his pocket, and checked to make sure he still had his notebook in there, too. His old pal. "Save Russian Jews," he said, reminding himself. "Collect valuable prizes."

He got out of the car and a gust of wind hit him hard, rocking him back on his heels, flapping his pants around his legs, making him laugh a smoker's surprised rattlebox laugh.

His samples were in the trunk, but he wouldn't need them tonight. No, not tonight, not at all. He took his suitcase and his briefcase out of the backseat, shut the door, then pushed the black button on his key fob. That one locked all the doors. The red one set off an alarm, what you were supposed to use if you were going to get mugged. Alfie had never been mugged. He guessed that few salesmen of gourmet foods were, especially in this part of the country. There was a market for gourmet foods in Nebraska, Iowa, Oklahoma, and Kansas; even in the Dakotas, although many might not believe it. Alfie had done quite well, especially over the last two years as he got to know the market's deeper creases—but it was never going to equal the market for, let's say, fertilizer. Which he could smell even now on the winter wind that was freezing his cheeks and turning them an even darker shade of red.

He stood where he was a moment longer, waiting for the wind to drop. It did, and he could see the spark lights again. The farmhouse. And was it possible that behind those lights, some farmer's wife was even now heating up a pot of Cottager Split Pea Soup or perhaps microwaving a Cottager Shepherd's Pie or Chicken Francais? It was. It was as possible as hell. While her husband watched the early news with his shoes off and his sock feet on a hassock, and overhead their son played a video game on his GameCube and their daughter sat in the tub, chin-deep in fragrant bubbles, her hair tied up with a ribbon, reading *The Golden Compass*, by Philip Pullman, or perhaps one of the Harry Potter books, which were favorites of Alfie's daughter, Carlene. All that going on behind the spark lights, some family's universal joint turning smoothly in its socket, but between them and the edge of this parking lot was a mile and a half of flat field, white in the running-away light of a low sky, comatose with the season. Alfie briefly imagined himself walking into that field in his city shoes, his briefcase in one hand and his suitcase in the other, working his way across the frozen furrows, finally arriving, knocking; the door would be opened and he would smell pea soup, that good hearty smell, and hear the KETV meteorologist in the other room saying, "But now look at this low-pressure system just coming over the Rockies."

And what would Alfie say to the farmer's wife? That he just dropped by for dinner? Would he advise her to save Russian Jews, collect valuable prizes? Would he begin by saying, "Ma'am, according to at least one source I've read recently, all that you love will be carried away"? That would be a good conversation opener, sure to interest the farmer's wife in the wayfaring stranger who had just walked across her husband's east field to knock on her door. And when she invited him to step in, to tell her more, he could open his briefcase and give her a couple of his sample books, tell her that once she discovered the Cottager brand of quick-serve gourmet delicacies she would almost certainly want to move on to the more sophisticated pleasures of Ma Mere. And, by the way, did she have a taste for caviar? Many did. Even in Nebraska.

Freezing. Standing here and freezing.

He turned from the field and the spark lights at the far end of it and walked to the motel, moving in careful duck steps so he wouldn't go ass over teakettle. He had done it before, God knew. Whoops-a-daisy in half a hundred motel parking lots. He had done most of it before, actually, and supposed that was at least part of the problem.

There was an overhang, so he was able to get out of the snow. There was a Coke machine with a sign saying, USE CORRECT CHANGE. There was an ice machine and a Snax machine with candy bars and various kinds of potato chips behind curls of metal like bedsprings. There was no USE CORRECT CHANGE sign on the Snax machine. From the room to the left of the one where he intended to kill himself, Alfie could hear the early news, but it would sound better in that farmhouse over yonder, he was sure of that. The wind boomed. Snow swirled around his city shoes, and then Alfie let himself into his room. The light switch was to the left. He turned it on and shut the door.

He knew the room; it was the room of his dreams. It was square. The walls were white. On one was a picture of a small boy in a straw hat, asleep with a fishing pole in his hand. There was a green rug on the floor, a quarter-inch of some nubby synthetic stuff. It was cold in here right now, but when he pushed the Hi Heat button on the control panel of the Climatron beneath the window the place would warm up fast. Would probably become hot. A counter ran the length of one wall. There was a TV on it. On top of the TV was a piece of cardboard with ONE-TOUCH MOVIES! printed on it.

There were twin double beds, each covered with bright-gold spreads that had been tucked under the pillows and then pulled over them, so the pillows looked like the corpses of infants. There was a table between the beds with a Gideon Bible, a TV-channel guide, and a flesh-colored phone on it. Beyond the second bed was the door to the bathroom. When you turned on the light in there, the fan would go on, too. If you wanted the light, you got the fan, too. There was no way around it. The light itself would be fluorescent, with the ghosts of

dead flies inside. On the counter beside the sink there would be a hot plate and a Proctor-Silex electric kettle and little packets of instant coffee. There was a smell in here, the mingling of some harsh cleaning fluid and mildew on the shower curtain. Alfie knew it all. He had dreamed it right down to the green rug, but that was no accomplishment, it was an easy dream. He thought about turning on the heater, but that would rattle, too, and, besides, what was the point?

Alfie unbuttoned his topcoat and put his suitcase on the floor at the foot of the bed closest to the bathroom. He put his briefcase on the gold coverlet. He sat down, the sides of his coat spreading out like the skirt of a dress. He opened his briefcase, thumbed through the various brochures, catalogues, and order forms; finally he found the gun. It was a Smith & Wesson revolver, .38 caliber. He put it on the pillows at the head of the bed.

He lit a cigarette, reached for the telephone, then remembered his notebook. He reached into his right coat pocket and pulled it out. It was an old Spiral, bought for a buck forty-nine in the stationery department of some forgotten five-and-dime in Omaha or Sioux City or maybe Jubilee, Kansas. The cover was creased and almost completely innocent of any printing it might once have borne. Some of the pages had pulled partially free of the metal coil that served as the notebook's binding, but all of them were still there. Alfie had been carrying this notebook for almost seven years, ever since his days selling Universal Product Code readers for Simonex.

There was an ashtray on the shelf under the phone. Out here, some of the motel rooms still came with ashtrays, even on the first floor. Alfie fished for it, put his cigarette on the groove, and opened his notebook. He flipped through pages written with a hundred different pens (and a few pencils), pausing to read a couple of entries. One read: "I suckt Jim Morrison's cock w/my poutie boy mouth (LAWRENCE KS)." Restrooms were filled with homosexual graffiti, most of it tiresome and repetitive, but "poutie boy mouth" was pretty

good. Another was “Albert Gore is my favorite whore (MURDO S DAK).”

The last page, three-quarters of the way through the book, had just two entries. “Dont chew the Trojan Gum it taste’s just like rubber (AVOCA IA).” And: “Poopie doopie you so loopy (PAPILLION NEB).” Alfie was crazy about that one. Something about the “-ie, -ie,” and then, boom, you got “-y.” It could have been no more than an illiterate’s mistake (he was sure that would have been Maura’s take on it) but why think like that? What fun was that? No, Alfie preferred (even now) to believe that “-ie, -ie,” ... wait for it ... “-y” was an intended construction. Something sneaky but playful, with the feel of an e. e. cummings poem.

He rummaged through the stuff in his inside coat pocket, feeling papers, an old toll-ticket, a bottle of pills—stuff he had quit taking—and at last finding the pen that always hid in the litter. Time to record today’s finds. Two good ones, both from the same rest area, one over the urinal he had used, the other written with a Sharpie on the map case beside the Hav-A-Bite machine. (Snax, which in Alfie’s opinion vended a superior product line, had for some reason been disenfranchised in the I-80 rest areas about four years ago.) These days Alfie sometimes went two weeks and three thousand miles without seeing anything new, or even a viable variation on something old. Now, two in one day. Two on the last day. Like some sort of omen.

His pen had COTTAGER FOODS THE GOOD STUFF! written in gold along the barrel, next to the logo, a thatched hut with smoke coming out of the quaintly crooked chimney.

Sitting there on the bed, still in his topcoat, Alfie bent studiously over his old notebook so that his shadow fell on the page. Below “Dont chew the Trojan Gum” and “Poopie doopie you so loopy,” Alfie added “Save Russian Jews, collect valuable prizes (WALTON NEB)” and “All that you love will be carried away (WALTON NEB).” He hesitated. He rarely added notes, liking his finds to stand alone. Explanation rendered the exotic mundane (or so he had come to

believe; in the early years he had annotated much more freely), but from time to time a footnote still seemed to be more illuminating than demystifying.

He starred the second entry—"All that you love will be carried away (WALTON NEB)"—and drew a line two inches above the bottom of the page, and wrote. 1

He put the pen back in his pocket, wondering why he or anyone would continue anything this close to ending everything. He couldn't think of a single answer. But of course you went on breathing, too. You couldn't stop it without rough surgery.

The wind gusted outside. Alfie looked briefly toward the window, where the curtain (also green, but a different shade from the rug) had been drawn. If he pulled it back, he would be able to see chains of light on Interstate 80, each bright bead marking sentient beings running on the rod of the highway. Then he looked back down at his book. He meant to do it, all right. This was just ... well ...

"Breathing," he said, and smiled. He picked his cigarette out of the ashtray, smoked, returned it to the groove, and thumbed back through the book again. The entries recalled thousands of truck stops and roadside chicken shacks and highway rest areas the way certain songs on the radio can bring back specific memories of a place, a time, the person you were with, what you were drinking, what you were thinking.

"Here I sit, brokenhearted, tried to shit but only farted." Everyone knew that one, but here was an interesting variation from Double D Steaks in Hooker, Oklahoma: "Here I sit, I'm at a loss, trying to shit out taco sauce. I know I'm going to drop a load, only hope I don't explode." And from Casey, Iowa, where SR 25 crossed I-80: "My mother made me a whore." To which someone had added in very different penmanship: "If I supply the yarn will she make me one?"

He had started collecting when he was selling the UPCs, noting various bits of graffiti in the Spiral notebook without at first knowing

why he was doing it. They were just amusing, or disconcerting, or both at the same time. Yet little by little he had become fascinated with these messages from the interstate, where the only other communications seemed to be dipped headlights when you passed in the rain, or maybe somebody in a bad mood flipping you the bird when you went by in the passing lane pulling a rooster-tail of snow behind you. He came gradually to see—or perhaps only to hope—that something was going on here. The e. e. cummings lilt of “Poopie doopie you so loopy,” for instance, or the inarticulate rage of “1380 West Avenue kill my mother TAKE HER JEWELS.”

Or take this oldie: “Here I sit, cheeks a-flexin’, giving birth to another Texan.” The meter, when you considered it, was odd. Not iambs but some odd triplet formula with the stress on the third: “Here I sit, cheeks a-flexin’, giving birth to another Texan.” Okay, it broke down a little at the end, but that somehow added to its memorability, gave it that final mnemonic twist of the tail. He had thought on many occasions that he could go back to school, take some courses, get all that feet-and-meter stuff down pat. Know what he was talking about instead of running on a tightrope of intuition. All he really remembered clearly from school was iambic pentameter: “To be or not to be, that is the question.” He had seen that in a men’s room on I-70, actually, to which someone had added, “The real question is who your father was, dipstick.”

These triplets, now. What were they called? Was that trochaic? He didn’t know. The fact that he could find out no longer seemed important, but he could find out, yes. It was something people taught; it was no big secret.

Or take this variation, which Alfie had also seen all over the country: “Here I sit, on the pooper, giving birth to a Maine state trooper.” It was always Maine, no matter where you were it was always Maine State Trooper, and why? Because no other state would scan. Maine was the only one of the fifty whose name consisted of a single syllable. Yet again, it was in triplets: “Here I sit, on the pooper.”

He had thought of writing a book. Just a little one. The first title to occur to him had been “Don’t Look Up Here, You’re Pissing on Your Shoes,” but you couldn’t call a book that. Not and reasonably hope someone would put it out for sale in a store, anyway. And, besides, that was light. Frothy. He had become convinced over the years that something was going on here, and it wasn’t frothy. The title he had finally decided on was an adaptation of something he’d seen in a rest-area toilet stall outside Fort Scott, Kansas, on Highway 54. “I Killed Ted Bundy: The Secret Transit Code of America’s Highways.” By Alfred Zimmer. That sounded mysterious and ominous, almost scholarly. But he hadn’t done it. And although he had seen “If I supply the yarn, will she make me one” added to “My mother made me a whore” all over the country, he had never expounded (at least in writing) on the startling lack of sympathy, the “just deal with it” sensibility, of the response. Or what about “Mammon is the King of New Jersey”? How did one explain why New Jersey made it funny and the name of some other state probably wouldn’t? Even to try seemed almost arrogant. He was just a little man, after all, with a little man’s job. He sold things. A line of frozen dinners, currently.

And now, of course ... now ...

Alfie took another deep drag on his cigarette, mashed it out, and called home. He didn’t expect to get Maura and didn’t. It was his own recorded voice that answered him, ending with the number of his cellphone. A lot of good that would do; the cellphone was in the trunk of the Chevrolet, broken. He had never had good luck with gadgets.

After the beep he said, “Hi, it’s me. I’m in Lincoln. It’s snowing. Remember the casserole you were going to take over to my mother. She’ll be expecting it. And she asked for the Red Ball coupons. I know you think she’s crazy on that subject, but humor her, okay? She’s old. Tell Carlene Daddy says hi.” He paused, then for the first time in about five years added, “I love you.”

He hung up, thought about another cigarette—no worries about lung cancer, not now—and decided against it. He put the notebook, open to the last page, beside the telephone. He picked up the gun and

rolled out the cylinder. Fully loaded. He snapped the cylinder back in with a flick of his wrist, then slipped the short barrel into his mouth. It tasted of oil and metal. He thought, Here I SIT, about to COOL it, my plan to EAT a fuckin' BOOL-it. He grinned around the barrel. That was terrible. He never would have written that down in his book.

Then another thought occurred to him and he put the gun back in its trench on the pillow, drew the phone to him again, and once more dialled home. He waited for his voice to recite the useless cellphone number, then said, "Me again. Don't forget Rambo's appointment at the vet day after tomorrow, okay? Also the sea-jerky strips at night. They really do help his hips. Bye."

He hung up and raised the gun again. Before he could put the barrel in his mouth, his eye fell on the notebook. He frowned and put the gun down. The book was open to the last four entries. The first thing anyone responding to the shot would see would be his dead body, sprawled across the bed closest to the bathroom, his head hanging down and bleeding on the nubby green rug. The second thing, however, would be the Spiral notebook, open to the final written page.

Alfie imagined some cop, some Nebraska state trooper who would never be written about on any bathroom wall due to the disciplines of scansion, reading those final entries, perhaps turning the battered old notebook toward him with the tip of his own pen. He would read the first three entries—"Trojan Gum," "Poopie doopie," "Save Russian Jews"—and dismiss them as insanity. He would read the last line, "All that you love will be carried away," and decide that the dead guy had regained a little rationality at the end, just enough to write a halfway sensible suicide note.

Alfie didn't like the idea of people thinking he was crazy (further examination of the book, which contained such information as "Medger Evers is alive and well in Disneyland," would only confirm that impression). He was not crazy, and the things he had written here over the years weren't crazy, either. He was convinced of it. And if he was wrong, if these were the rantings of lunatics, they

needed to be examined even more closely. That thing about don't look up here, you're pissing on your shoes, for instance, was that humor? Or a growl of rage?

He considered using the john to get rid of the notebook, then shook his head. He'd end up on his knees with his shirtsleeves rolled back, fishing around in there, trying to get the damn thing back out. While the fan rattled and the fluorescent buzzed. And although immersion might blur some of the ink, it wouldn't blur all of it. Not enough. Besides, the notebook had been with him so long, riding in his pocket across so many flat and empty Midwest miles. He hated the idea of just flushing it away.

The last page, then? Surely one page, balled up, would go down. But that would leave the rest for them (there was always a them) to discover, all that clear evidence of an unsound mind. They'd say, "Lucky he didn't decide to visit a schoolyard with an AK-47. Take a bunch of little kids with him." And it would follow Maura like a tin can tied to a dog's tail. "Did you hear about her husband?" they'd ask each other in the supermarket. "Killed himself in a motel. Left a book full of crazy stuff. Lucky he didn't kill her." Well, he could afford to be a little hard about that. Maura was an adult, after all. Carlene, on the other hand ... Carlene was ...

Alfie looked at his watch. At her j.-v. basketball game, that's where Carlene was right now. Her teammates would say most of the same things the supermarket ladies would say, only within earshot and accompanied by those chilling seventh-grade giggles. Eyes full of glee and horror. Was that fair? No, of course not, but there was nothing fair about what had happened to him, either. Sometimes when you were cruising along the highway, you saw big curls of rubber that had unwound from the recap tires some of the independent truckers used. That was what he felt like now: thrown tread. The pills made it worse. They cleared your mind just enough for you to see what a colossal jam you were in.

"But I'm not crazy," he said. "That doesn't make me crazy." No. Crazy might actually be better.

Alfie picked up the notebook, flipped it closed much as he had flipped the cylinder back into the .38, and sat there tapping it against his leg. This was ludicrous.

Ludicrous or not, it nagged him. The way thinking a stove burner might still be on sometimes nagged him when he was home, nagged until he finally got up and checked and found it cold. Only this was worse. Because he loved the stuff in the notebook. Amassing graffiti—thinking about graffiti—had been his real work these last years, not selling price-code readers or frozen dinners that were really not much more than Swansons or Freezer Queens in fancy microwavable dishes. The daffy exuberance of “Helen Keller fucked her feller!” for instance. Yet the notebook might be a real embarrassment once he was dead. It would be like accidentally hanging yourself in the closet because you were experimenting with a new way of jacking off and got found that way with your shorts under your feet and shit on your ankles. Some of the stuff in his notebook might show up in the newspaper, along with his picture. Once upon a time he would have scoffed at the idea, but in these days, when even Bible Belt newspapers routinely speculated about a mole on the President’s penis, the notion was hard to dismiss.

Burn it, then? No, he’d set off the goddamned smoke detector.

Put it behind the picture on the wall? The picture of the little boy with the fishing pole and the straw hat?

Alfie considered this, then nodded slowly. Not a bad idea at all. The Spiral notebook might stay there for years. Then, someday in the distant future, it would drop out. Someone—perhaps a lodger, more likely a maid—would pick it up, curious. Would flip through it. What would that person’s reaction be? Shock? Amusement? Plain old head-scratching puzzlement? Alfie rather hoped for this last. Because things in the notebook were puzzling. “Elvis killed Big Pussy,” someone in Hackberry, Texas, had written. “Serenity is being square,” someone in Rapid City, South Dakota, had opined. And below that, someone had written, “No, stupid, $\text{serenity} = (\text{va})^2 + b$, if $v = \text{serenity}$, $a = \text{satisfaction}$, and $b = \text{sexual compatibility}$.”

Behind the picture, then.

Alfie was halfway across the room when he remembered the pills in his coat pocket. And there were more in the glove compartment of the car, different kinds but for the same thing. They were prescription drugs, but not the sort the doctor gave you if you were feeling ... well ... sunny. So the cops would search this room thoroughly for other kinds of drugs and when they lifted the picture away from the wall the notebook would drop out onto the green rug. The things in it would look even worse, even crazier, because of the pains he had taken to hide it.

And they'd read the last thing as a suicide note, simply because it was the last thing. No matter where he left the book, that would happen. Sure as shit sticks to the ass of America, as some East Texas turnpike poet had once written.

"If they find it," he said, and just like that the answer came to him.

*

The snow had thickened, the wind had grown even stronger, and the spark lights across the field were gone. Alfie stood beside his snow-covered car at the edge of the parking lot with his coat billowing out in front of him. At the farm, they'd all be watching TV by now. The whole fam' damly. Assuming the satellite dish hadn't blown off the barn roof, that was. Back at his place, his wife and daughter would be arriving home from Carlene's basketball game. Maura and Carlene lived in a world that had little to do with the interstates, or fast-food boxes blowing down the breakdown lanes and the sound of semis passing you at seventy and eighty and even ninety miles an hour like a Doppler whine. He wasn't complaining about it (or hoped he wasn't); he was just pointing it out. "Nobody here even if there is," someone in Chalk Level, Missouri, had written on a shithouse wall, and sometimes in those rest-area bathrooms there was blood, mostly just a little, but once he had seen a grimy basin under a scratched steel mirror half filled with it. Did anyone notice? Did anyone report such things?

In some rest areas the weather report fell constantly from overhead speakers, and to Alfie the voice giving it sounded haunted, the voice of a ghost running through the vocal cords of a corpse. In Candy, Kansas, on Route 283, in Ness County, someone had written, "Behold, I stand at the door and knock," to which someone else had added, "If your not from Pudlishers Cleering House go away you Bad Boy."

Alfie stood at the edge of the pavement, gasping a little because the air was so cold and full of snow. In his left hand he held the Spiral notebook, bent almost double. There was no need to destroy it, after all. He would simply throw it into Farmer John's east field, here on the west side of Lincoln. The wind would help him. The notebook might carry twenty feet on the fly, and the wind could tumble it even farther before it finally fetched up against the side of the furrow and was covered. It would lie there buried all winter, long after his body had been shipped home. In the spring, Farmer John would come out this way on his tractor, the cab filled with the music of Patty Loveless or George Jones or maybe even Clint Black, and he would plow the Spiral notebook under without seeing it and it would disappear into the scheme of things. Always supposing there was one. "Relax, it's all just the rinse cycle," someone had written beside a pay phone on I-35 not far from Cameron, Missouri.

Alfie drew the book back to throw it, then lowered his arm. He hated to let it go, that was the truth of it. That was the bottom line everyone was always talking about. But things were bad, now. He raised his arm again and then lowered it again. In his distress and indecision he began to cry without being aware of it. The wind rushed around him, on its way to wherever. He couldn't go on living the way he had been living, he knew that much. Not one more day. And a shot in the mouth would be easier than any living change, he knew that, too. Far easier than struggling to write a book few people (if any at all) were likely to read. He raised his arm again, cocked the hand with the notebook in it back to his ear like a pitcher preparing to throw a fastball, then stood like that. An idea had occurred to him. He would

count to sixty. If the spark lights of the farmhouse reappeared at any time during that count, he would try to write the book.

To write a book like that, he thought, you'd have to begin by talking about how it was to measure distance in green mile markers, and the very width of the land, and how the wind sounded when you got out of your car at one of those rest areas in Oklahoma or North Dakota. How it sounded almost like words. You'd have to explicate the silence, and how the bathrooms always smelled of piss and the great hollow farts of departed travellers, and how in that silence the voices on the walls began to speak. The voices of those who had written and then moved on. The telling would hurt, but if the wind dropped and the spark lights of the farm came back, he'd do it anyway.

If they didn't he'd throw the notebook into the field, go back into Room 190 (just hang a left at the Snax machine), and shoot himself, as planned.

Either way. Either way.

Alfie stood there counting to sixty inside his head, waiting to see if the wind would drop.

*

I like to drive, and I'm particularly addicted to those long interstate barrels where you see nothing but prairies to either side and a cinderblock rest area every forty miles or so. Rest-area bathrooms are always full of graffiti, some of it extremely weird. I started to collect these dispatches from nowhere, keeping them in a pocket notebook, got others off the Internet (there are two or three websites dedicated to them), and finally found the story in which they belonged. This is it. I don't know if it's good or not, but I cared very much for the lonely man at its center and really hope things turned out okay for him. In the first draft things did, but Bill Buford of The New Yorker suggested a more ambiguous ending. He was probably right, but we could all say a prayer for the Alfie Zimmers of the world.

*

1. "To read this you must also look at the exit ramp from the Walton Rest Area back to highway, *i.e.* at departing transients."

AUTOPSY ROOM FOUR



IT'S SO DARK IN HERE...

LUCKY SUN ENTERTAINMENT GROUP PRESENTS A HAVEN FILMS PRODUCTION

"AUTOPSY ROOM FOUR" A FILM BY STEPHEN M. ZAKMAN

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Lucky Sun Entertainment Group, Inc.

BASED ON A SHORT STORY BY STEPHEN KING DIRECTED BY STEPHEN M. ZAKMAN



AUTOPSY ROOM FOUR

Stephen King

It's so dark that for awhile—just how long I don't know—I think I'm still unconscious. Then, slowly, it comes to me that unconscious people don't have a sensation of movement through the dark, accompanied by a faint, rhythmic sound that can only be a squeaky wheel. And I can feel contact, from the top of my head to the balls of my heels. I can smell something that might be rubber or vinyl. This is not unconsciousness, and there is something too ... too what? Too rational about these sensations for it to be a dream.

Then what is it?

Who am I?

And what's happening to me?

The squeaky wheel quits its stupid rhythm and I stop moving. There is a crackle around me from the rubber-smelling stuff.

A voice: "Which one did they say?"

A pause.

Second voice: "Four, I think. Yeah, four."

We start to move again, but more slowly. I can hear the faint scuff of feet now, probably in soft-soled shoes, maybe sneakers. The owners of the voices are the owners of the shoes. They stop me again. There's a thump followed by a faint whoosh. It is, I think, the sound of a door with a pneumatic hinge being opened.

What's going on here? I yell, but the yell is only in my head. My lips don't move. I can feel them—and my tongue, lying on the floor of my mouth like a stunned mole—but I can't move them.

The thing I'm on starts rolling again. A moving bed? Yes. A gurney, in other words. I've had some experience with them, a long time ago, in Lyndon Johnson's shitty little Asian adventure. It comes to me that I'm in a hospital, that something bad has happened to me, something like the explosion that almost neutered me twenty-three years before, and that I'm going to be operated on. There are a lot of answers in that idea, sensible ones, for the most part, but I don't hurt anywhere. Except for the minor matter of being scared out of my wits, I feel fine. And if these are orderlies wheeling me into an operating room, why can't I see? Why can't I talk?

A third voice: "Over here, boys."

My rolling bed is pushed in a new direction, and the question drumming in my head is What kind of a mess have I gotten myself into?

Doesn't that depend on who you are? I ask myself, but that's one thing, at least, I find I do know. I'm Howard Cottrell. I'm a stock broker known to some of my colleagues as Howard the Conqueror.

Second voice (from just above my head): "You're looking very pretty today, doc."

Fourth voice (female, and cool): "It's always nice to be validated by you, Rusty. Could you hurry up a little? The babysitter expects me back by seven. She's committed to dinner with her parents."

Back by seven, back by seven. It's still the afternoon, maybe, or early evening, but black in here, black as your hat, black as a wood-chuck's asshole, black as midnight in Persia, and what's going on? Where have I been? What have I been doing? Why haven't I been manning the phones?

Because it's Saturday, a voice from far down murmurs. You were ... were ...

A sound: WHOCK! A sound I love. A sound I more or less live for. The sound of ... what? The head of a golf-club, of course. Hitting a ball off the tee. I stand, watching it fly off into the blue ...

I'm grabbed, shoulders and calves, and lifted. It startles me terribly, and I try to scream. No sound comes out ... or perhaps one does, a tiny squeak, much tinier than the one produced by the wheel below me. Probably not even that. Probably it's just my imagination.

I'm swung through the air in an envelope of blackness—Hey, don't drop me, I've got a bad back! I try to say, and again there's no movement of the lips or teeth; my tongue goes on lying on the floor of my mouth, the mole maybe not just stunned but dead, and now I have a terrible thought, one which spikes fright a degree closer to panic: what if they put me down the wrong way and my tongue slides backward and blocks my windpipe? I won't be able to breathe! That's what people mean when they say someone "swallowed his tongue," isn't it?

Second voice (Rusty): "You'll like this one, doc, he looks like Michael Bolton."

Female doc: "Who's that?"

Third voice—sounds like a young man, not much more than a teenager: "He's this white lounge-singer who wants to be black. I don't think this is him."

There's laughter at that, the female voice joining in (a little doubtfully), and as I am set down on what feels like a padded table, Rusty starts some new crack—he's got a whole standup routine, it seems. I lose this bit of hilarity in a burst of sudden horror. I won't be able to breathe if my tongue blocks my windpipe, that's the thought which has just gone through my mind, but what if I'm not breathing now?

What if I'm dead? What if this is what death is like?

It fits. It fits everything with a horrid prophylactic snugness. The dark. The rubbery smell. Nowadays I am Howard the Conqueror, stock broker extraordinaire, terror of Derry Municipal Country Club, frequent habitue of what is known at golf courses all over the world as The Nineteenth Hole, but in '71 I was part of a Medical Assistance Team in the Mekong Delta, a scared kid who sometimes woke up wet-eyed from dreams of the family dog, and all at once I know this feel, this smell.

Dear God, I'm in a bodybag.

First voice: "Want to sign this, doc? Remember to bear down hard—it's three copies."

Sound of a pen, scraping away on paper. I imagine the owner of the first voice holding out a clipboard to the woman doctor.

Oh dear Jesus let me not be dead! I try to scream, and nothing comes out.

I'm breathing though ... aren't I? I mean, I can't feel myself doing it, but my lungs seem okay, they're not throbbing or yelling for air the way they do when you've swum too far underwater, so I must be okay, right?

Except if you're dead, the deep voice murmurs, they wouldn't be crying out for air, would they? No—because dead lungs don't need to breathe. Dead lungs can just kind of ... take it easy.

Rusty: "What are you doing next Saturday night, doc?"

But if I'm dead, how can I feel? How can I smell the bag I'm in? How can I hear these voices, the doc now saying that next Saturday night she's going to be shampooing her dog which is named Rusty, what a coincidence, and all of them laughing? If I'm dead, why aren't I either gone or in the white light they're always talking about on Oprah?

There's a harsh ripping sound and all at once I am in white light; it is blinding, like the sun breaking through a scrim of clouds on a winter day. I try to squint my eyes shut against it, but nothing happens. My eyelids are like blinds on broken rollers.

A face bends over me, blocking off part of the glare, which comes not from some dazzling astral plane but from a bank of overhead fluorescents. The face belongs to a young, conventionally handsome man of about twenty-five; he looks like one of those beach beefcakes on Baywatch or Melrose Place. Marginally smarter, though. He's got a lot of dark black hair under a carelessly worn surgical-greens cap. He's wearing the tunic, too. His eyes are cobalt blue, the sort of eyes girls reputedly die for. There are dusty arcs of freckles high up on his cheekbones.

"Hey, gosh," he says. It's the third voice. "This guy does look like Michael Bolton! A little long in the old tootharoo; maybe ..." He leans closer. One of the flat tie-ribbons at the neck of his greens tunic tickles against my forehead. "... but yeah. I see it. Hey, Michael, sing something."

Help me! is what I'm trying to sing, but I can only look up into his dark blue eyes with my frozen dead man's stare; I can only wonder if I am a dead man, if this is how it happens, if this is what everyone goes through after the pump quits. If I'm still alive, how come he hasn't seen my pupils contract when the light hit them? But I know the answer to that ... or I think I do. They didn't contract. That's why the glare from the fluorescents is so painful.

The tie, tickling across my forehead like a feather.

Help me! I scream up at the Baywatch beefcake, who is probably an intern or maybe just a med-school brat. Help me, please!

My lips don't even quiver.

The face moves back, the tie stops tickling, and all that white light streams through my helpless-to-look-away eyes and into my brain.

It's a hellish feeling, a kind of rape. I'll go blind if I have to stare into it for long, I think, and blindness will be a relief.

WHOCK! The sound of the driver hitting the ball, but a little flat this time, and the feeling in the hands is bad. The ball's up ... but veering ... veering off ... veering toward ...

Shit.

I'm in the rough.

Now another face bends into my field of vision. A white tunic instead of a green one below it, a great untidy mop of orange hair above it. Distress-sale IQ is my first impression. It can only be Rusty. He's wearing a big dumb grin that I think of as a high-school grin, the grin of a kid who should have a tattoo reading BORN TO SNAP BRA-STRAPS on one wasted bicep.

"Michael!" Rusty exclaims. "Jeez, ya lookin goood! This'z an honor! Sing for us, big boy! Sing your dead ass off!"

From somewhere behind me comes the doc's voice, cool, no longer even pretending to be amused by these antics. "Quit it, Rusty." Then, in a slightly new direction: "What's the story, Mike?"

Mike's voice is the first voice—Rusty's partner. He sounds slightly embarrassed to be working with a guy who wants to be Andrew Dice Clay when he grows up. "Found him on the fourteenth hole at Derry Muni. Off the course, actually, in the rough. If he hadn't just played through the foursome behind him, and if they hadn't seen one of his legs stickin out of the puckerbrush, he'd be an ant-farm by now."

I hear that sound in my head again—WHOCK!—only this time it is followed by another, far less pleasant sound: the rustle of underbrush as I sweep it with the head of my driver. It would have to be fourteen, where there is reputedly poison ivy. Poison ivy and ...

Rusty is still peering down at me, stupid and avid. It's not death that interests him; it's my resemblance to Michael Bolton. Oh yes, I know about it, have not been above using it with certain female clients. Otherwise, it gets old in a hurry. And in these circumstances ... God.

"Attending physician?" the lady doc asks. "Was it Kazalian?"

"No," Mike says, and for just a moment he looks down at me. Older than Rusty by at least ten years. Black hair with flecks of gray in it. Spectacles. How come none of these people can see that I am not dead? "There was a doc in the foursome that found him, actually. That's his signature on page one ... see?"

Riffle of paper, then: "Christ, Jennings. I know him. He gave Noah his physical after the ark grounded on Mount Ararat."

Rusty doesn't look as if he gets the joke, but he brays laughter into my face anyway. I can smell onions on his breath, a little leftover lunchstink, and if I can smell onions, I must be breathing. I must be, right? If only—

Before I can finish this thought, Rusty leans even closer and I feel a blast of hope. He's seen something! He's seen something and means to give me mouth-to-mouth. God bless you, Rusty! God bless you and your onion breath!

But the stupid grin doesn't change, and instead of putting his mouth on mine, his hand slips around my jaw. Now he's grasping one side with his thumb and the other side with his fingers.

"He's alive!" Rusty cries. "He's alive, and he's gonna sing for the Room Four Michael Bolton Fan Club!"

His fingers pinch tighter—it hurts in a distant coming-out-of-the-Novocain way—and begin to move my jaw up and down, clicking my teeth together. "If she's ba-aaad, he can't see it," Rusty sings in a hideous, atonal voice that would probably make Percy Sledge's head explode. "She can do no rrr-ongggg ..." My teeth open and close at

the rough urging of his hand; my tongue rises and falls like a dead dog riding the surface of an uneasy waterbed.

“Stop it!” the lady doc snaps at him. She sounds genuinely shocked. Rusty, perhaps sensing this, does not stop but goes gleefully on. His fingers are pinching into my cheeks now. My frozen eyes stare blindly upward.

“Turn his back on his best friend if she put him d—”

Then she’s there, a woman in a green-gown with her cap tied around her throat and hanging down her back like the Cisco Kid’s sombrero, short brown hair swept back from her brow, good-looking but severe—more handsome than pretty. She grabs Rusty with one short-nailed hand and pulls him back from me.

“Hey!” Rusty says, indignant. “Get your hands off me!”

“Then you keep your hands off him,” she says, and there is no mistaking the anger in her voice. “I’m tired of your Sophomore Class wit, Rusty, and the next time you start in, I’m going to report you.”

“Hey, let’s all calm down,” says the Baywatch hunk—doc’s assistant. He sounds alarmed, as if he expects Rusty and his boss to start duking it out right here. “Let’s just put a lid on it.”

“Why’s she bein such a bitch to me?” Rusty says. He’s still trying to sound indignant, but he’s actually whining now. Then, in a slightly different direction: “Why you being such a bitch? You on your period, is that it?”

Doc, sounding disgusted: “Get him out of here.”

Mike: “Come on, Rusty. Let’s go sign the log.”

Rusty: “Yeah. And get some fresh air.”

Me, listening to all this like it was on the radio.

Their feet, squeaking toward the door. Rusty now all huffy and offended, asking her why she doesn't just wear a mood-ring or something so people will know. Soft shoes squeaking on tile, and suddenly that sound is replaced by the sound of my driver, beating the bush for my goddam ball, where is it, it didn't go too far in, I'm sure of it, so where is it, Jesus, I hate fourteen, supposedly there's poison ivy, and with all this underbrush, there could easily be—

And then something bit me, didn't it? Yes, I'm almost sure it did. On the left calf, just above the top of my white athletic sock. A redhot darning needle of pain, perfectly concentrated at first, then spreading ...

... then darkness. Until the gurney, zipped up snug inside a bodybag and listening to Mike ("Which one did they say?") and Rusty ("Four, I think. Yeah, four").

I want to think it was some kind of snake, but maybe that's only because I was thinking about them while I hunted for my ball. It could have been an insect, I only recall the single line of pain, and after all, what does it matter? What matters here is that I'm alive and they don't know it. It's incredible, but they don't know it. Of course I had bad luck—I know Dr. Jennings, remember speaking to him as I played through his foursome on the eleventh hole. A nice enough guy, but vague, an antique. The antique had pronounced me dead. Then Rusty, with his dopey green eyes and his detention-hall grin, had pronounced me dead. The lady doc, Ms. Cisco Kid, hadn't even looked at me yet, not really. When she did, maybe—

"I hate that jerk," she says when the door is closed. Now it's just the three of us, only of course Ms. Cisco Kid thinks it's just the two of them. "Why do I always get the jerks, Peter?"

"I don't know," Mr. Melrose Place says, "but Rusty's a special case, even in the annals of famous jerks. Walking brain death."

She laughs, and something clanks. The clank is followed by a sound that scares me badly: steel instruments clicking together. They are

off to the left of me, and although I can't see them, I know what they're getting ready to do: the autopsy. They are getting ready to cut into me. They intend to remove Howard Cottrell's heart and see if it blew a piston or threw a rod.

My leg! I scream inside my head. Look at my left leg! That's the trouble, not my heart!

Perhaps my eyes have adjusted a little, after all. Now I can see, at the very top of my vision, a stainless steel armature. It looks like a giant piece of dental equipment, except that thing at the end isn't a drill. It's a saw. From someplace deep inside, where the brain stores the sort of trivia you only need if you happen to be playing Jeopardy! on TV, I even come up with the name. It's a Gigli saw. They use it to cut off the top of your skull. This is after they've pulled your face off like a kid's Halloween mask, of course, hair and all.

Then they take out your brain.

Clink. Clink. Clunk. A pause. Then a CLANK! so loud I'd jump if I were capable of jumping.

"Do you want to do the pericardial cut?" she asks.

Pete, cautious: "Do you want me to?"

Dr. Cisco, sounding pleasant, sounding like someone who is conferring a favor and a responsibility: "Yes, I think so."

"All right," he says. "You'll assist?"

"Your trusty co-pilot," she says, and laughs. She punctuates her laughter with a snick-snick sound. It's the sound of scissors cutting the air.

Now panic beats and flutters inside my skull like a flock of starlings locked in an attic. The Nam was a long time ago, but I saw half a dozen field autopsies there—what the doctors used to call "tentshow

postmortems”—and I know what Cisco and Pancho mean to do. The scissors have long, sharp blades, very sharp blades, and fat finger-holes. Still, you have to be strong to use them. The lower blade slides into the gut like butter. Then, snip, up through the bundle of nerves at the solar plexus and into the beef-jerky weave of muscle and tendon above it. Then into the sternum. When the blades come together this time, they do so with a heavy crunch as the bone parts and the rib cage pops apart like a couple of barrels which have been lashed together with twine. Then on up with those scissors that look like nothing so much as the poultry shears supermarket butchers use—snip-CRUNCH, snip-CRUNCH, snip-CRUNCH, splitting bone and shearing muscle, freeing the lungs, heading for the trachea, turning Howard the Conqueror into a Thanksgiving dinner no one will eat.

A thin, nagging whine—this does sound like a dentist’s drill.

Pete: “Can I—”

Dr. Cisco, actually sounding a bit maternal: “No. These.” Snicksnick. Demonstrating for him.

They can’t do this, I think. They can’t cut me up ... I can FEEL!

“Why?” he asks.

“Because that’s the way I want it,” she says, sounding a lot less maternal. “When you’re on your own, Petie-boy, you can do what you want. But in Katie Arlen’s autopsy room, you start off with the pericardial shears.”

Autopsy room. There. It’s out. I want to be all over goose-bumps, but of course, nothing happens; my flesh remains smooth.

“Remember,” Dr. Arlen says (but now she’s actually lecturing), “any fool can learn how to use a milking machine ... but the hands-on procedure is always best.” There is something vaguely suggestive in her tone. “Okay?”

“Okay,” he says.

They’re going to do it. I have to make some kind of noise or movement, or they’re really doing to do it. If blood flows or jets up from the first punch of the scissors they’ll know something’s wrong, but by then it will be too late, very likely; that first snip-CRUNCH will have happened, and my ribs will be lying against my upper arms, my heart pulsing frantically away under the fluorescents in its blood-glossy sac—

I concentrate everything on my chest. I push, or try to ... and something happens.

A sound!

I make a sound!

It’s mostly inside my closed mouth, but I can also hear and feel it in my nose—a low hum.

Concentrating, summoning every bit of effort, I do it again, and this time the sound is a little stronger, leaking out of my nostrils like cigarette smoke: Nnnnnnn—It makes me think of an old Alfred Hitchcock TV program I saw a long, long time ago, where Joseph Cotten was paralyzed in a car crash and was finally able to let them know he was still alive by crying a single tear.

And if nothing else, that minuscule mosquito-whine of a sound has proved to myself that I’m alive, that I’m not just a spirit lingering inside the clay effigy of my own dead body.

Focusing all my concentration, I can feel breath slipping through my nose and down my throat, replacing the breath I have now expended, and then I send it out again, working harder than I ever worked summers for the Lane Construction Company when I was a teenager, working harder than I have ever worked in my life, because now I’m working for my life and they must hear me, dear Jesus, they must.

Nnnnnnnn—

“You want some music?” the woman doctor asks. “I’ve got Marty Stuart, Tony Bennett—”

He makes a despairing sound. I barely hear it, and take no immediate meaning from what she’s saying ... which is probably a mercy.

“All right,” she says, laughing. “I’ve also got the Rolling Stones.”

“You?”

“Me. I’m not quite as square as I look, Peter.”

“I didn’t mean ...” He sounds flustered.

Listen to me! I scream inside my head as my frozen eyes stare up into the icy-white light. Stop chattering like magpies and listen to me!

I can feel more air trickling down my throat and the idea occurs that whatever has happened to me may be starting to wear off ... but it’s only a faint blip on the screen of my thoughts. Maybe it is wearing off, but very soon now recovery will cease to be an option for me. All my energy is bent toward making them hear me, and this time they will hear me, I know it.

“Stones, then,” she says. “Unless you want me to run out and get a Michael Bolton CD in honor of your first pericardial.”

“Please, no!” he cries, and they both laugh.

The sound starts to come out, and it is louder this time. Not as loud as I’d hoped, but loud enough. Surely loud enough. They’ll hear, they must.

Then, just as I begin to force the sound out of my nose like some rapidly solidifying liquid, the room is filled with a blare of fuzztone

guitar and Mick Jagger's voice bashing off the walls: "Awww, no, it's only rock and roll, but I LIYYYYYKE IT ..."

"Turn it down!" Dr. Cisco yells, comically overshouting, and amid these noises my own nasal sound, a desperate little humming through my nostrils, is no more audible than a whisper in a foundry.

Now her face bends over me again and I feel fresh horror as I see that she's wearing a Plexi eyeshield and a gauze mask over her mouth. She glances back over her shoulder.

"I'll strip him for you," she tells Pete, and bends toward me with a scalpel glittering in one gloved hand, bends toward me through the guitar-thunder of the Rolling Stones.

I hum desperately, but it's no good. I can't even hear myself.

The scalpel hovers, then cuts.

I shriek inside my own head, but there is no pain, only my polo shirt falling in two pieces at my sides. Sliding apart as my rib cage will after Pete unknowingly makes his first pericardial cut on a living patient.

I am lifted. My head lolls back and for a moment I see Pete upside down, donning his own Plexi eyeshield as he stands by a steel counter, inventorying a horrifying array of tools. Chief among them are the oversized scissors. I get just a glimpse of them, of blades glittering like merciless satin. Then I am laid flat again and my shirt is gone. I'm now naked to the waist. It's cold in the room.

Look at my chest! I scream at her. You must see it rise and fall, no matter how shallow my respiration is! You're a goddam expert, for Christ's sake!

Instead, she looks across the room, raising her voice to be heard above the music. (I like it, like it, yes I do, the Stones sing, and I think

I will hear that nasal idiot chorus in the halls of hell through all eternity.) “What’s your pick? Boxers or Jockeys?”

With a mixture of horror and rage, I realize what they’re talking about.

“Boxers!” he calls back. “Of course! Just take a look at the guy!”

Asshole! I want to scream. You probably think everyone over forty wears boxer shorts! You probably think when you get to be forty, you’ll—

She unsnaps my Bermudas and pulls down the zipper. Under other circumstances, having a woman as pretty as this (a little severe, yes, but still pretty) do that would make me extremely happy. Today, however—

“You lose, Petie-boy,” she says. “Jockeys. Dollar in the kitty.”

“On payday,” he says, coming over. His face joins hers; they look down at me through their Plexi masks like a couple of space aliens looking down at an abductee. I try to make them see my eyes, to see me looking at them, but these two fools are looking at my under-shorts.

“Ooooh, and red,” Pete says. “A sha-vinguh!”

“I call them more of a wash pink,” she replies. “Hold him up for me, Peter, he weighs a ton. No wonder he had a heart attack. Let this be a lesson to you.”

I’m in shape! I yell at her. Probably in better shape than you, bitch!

My hips are suddenly jerked upward by strong hands. My back cracks; the sound makes my heart leap.

“Sorry, guy,” Pete says, and suddenly I’m colder than ever as my shorts and red underpants are pulled down.

“Upsa-daisy once,” she says, lifting one foot, “and upsa-daisy twice,” lifting the other foot, “off come the mocs, and off come the socks—”

She stops abruptly, and hope seizes me once more.

“Hey, Pete.”

“Yeah?”

“Do guys ordinarily wear Bermuda shorts and moccasins to play golf in?”

Behind her (except that’s only the source, actually it’s all around us) the Rolling Stones have moved on to “Emotional Rescue.” I will be your knight in shining ahh-mah, Mick Jagger sings, and I wonder how funky he’d dance with about three sticks of Hi-Core dynamite jammed up his skinny ass.

“If you ask me, this guy was just asking for trouble,” she goes on. “I thought they had these special shoes, very ugly, very golf-specific, with little knobs on the soles—”

“Yeah, but wearing them’s not the law,” Pete says. He holds his gloved hands out over my upturned face, slides them together, and bends the fingers back. As the knuckles crack, talcum powder sprinkles down like fine snow. “At least not yet. Not like bowling shoes. They catch you bowling without a pair of bowling shoes, they can send you to state prison.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes.”

“Do you want to handle temp and gross examination?”

No! I shriek. No, he’s a kid, what are you DOING?

He looks at her as if this same thought had crossed his own mind. “That’s ... um ... not strictly legal, is it, Katie? I mean ...”

She looks around as he speaks, giving the room a burlesque examination, and I'm starting to get a vibe that could be very bad news for me: severe or not, I think that Cisco—alias Dr. Katie Arlen—has got the hots for Petie with the dark blue eyes. Dear Christ, they have hauled me paralyzed off the golf course and into an episode of General Hospital, this week's subplot titled "Love Blooms in Autopsy Room Four."

"Gee," she says in a hoarse little stage-whisper. "I don't see anyone here but you and me."

"The tape—"

"Not rolling yet," she said. "And once it is, I'm right at your elbow every step of the way ... as far as anyone will ever know, anyway. And mostly I will be. I just want to put away those charts and slides. And if you really feel uncomfortable—"

Yes! I scream up at him out of my unmoving face. Feel uncomfortable! VERY uncomfortable! TOO uncomfortable!

But he's twenty-four at most and what's he going to say to this pretty, severe woman who's standing inside his space, invading it in a way that can really only mean one thing? No, Mommy, I'm scared? Besides, he wants to. I can see the wanting through the Plexi eyeshield, bopping around in there like a bunch of overage punk rockers pogoing to the Stones.

"Hey, as long as you'll cover for me if—"

"Sure," she says. "Got to get your feet wet sometime, Peter. And if you really need me to, I'll roll back the tape."

He looks startled. "You can do that?"

She smiles. "Ve haff many see-grets in Autopsy Room Four, mein Herr."

“I bet you do,” he says, smiling back, then reaches past my frozen field of vision. When his hand comes back, it’s wrapped around a microphone which hangs down from the ceiling on a black cord. The mike looks like a steel teardrop. Seeing it there makes this horror real in a way it wasn’t before. Surely they won’t really cut me up, will they? Pete is no veteran, but he has had training; surely he’ll see the marks of whatever bit me while I was looking for my ball in the rough, and then they’ll at least suspect. They’ll have to suspect.

Yet I keep seeing the scissors with their heartless satin shine—jumped-up poultry shears—and I keep wondering if I will still be alive when he takes my heart out of my chest cavity and holds it up, dripping, in front of my locked gaze for a moment before turning to plop it into the weighing pan. I could be, it seems to me; I really could be. Don’t they say the brain can remain conscious for up to three minutes after the heart stops?

“Ready, doctor,” Pete says, and now he sounds almost formal. Somewhere, tape is rolling.

The autopsy procedure has begun.

“Let’s flip this pancake,” she says cheerfully, and I am turned over just that efficiently. My right arm goes flying out to one side and then falls back against the side of the table, banging down with the raised metal lip digging into the bicep. It hurts a lot, the pain is just short of excruciating, but I don’t mind. I pray for the lip to bite through my skin, pray to bleed, something bona fide corpses don’t do.

“Whoops-a-daisy,” Dr. Arlen says. She lifts my arm up and plops it back down at my side.

Now it’s my nose I’m most aware of. It’s smashed against the table, and my lungs for the first time send out a distress message—a cottony, deprived feeling. My mouth is closed, my nose partially crushed shut (just how much I can’t tell; I can’t even feel myself breathing, not really). What if I suffocate like this?

Then something happens which takes my mind completely off my nose. A huge object—it feels like a glass baseball bat—is rammed rudely up my rectum. Once more I try to scream and can produce only the faint, wretched humming.

“Temp in,” Peter says. “I’ve put on the timer.”

“Good idea,” she says, moving away. Giving him room. Letting him test-drive this baby. Letting him test-drive me. The music is turned down slightly.

“Subject is a white Caucasian, age forty-four,” Pete says, speaking for the mike now, speaking for posterity. “His name is Howard Randolph Cottrell, residence is 1566 Laurel Crest Lane, here in Derry.”

Dr. Arlen, at some distance: “Mary Mead.”

A pause, then Pete again, sounding just a tiny bit flustered: “Dr. Arlen informs me that the subject actually lives in Mary Mead, which split off from Derry in—”

“Enough with the history lesson, Pete.”

Dear God, what have they stuck up my ass? Some sort of cattle thermometer? If it was a little longer, I think, I could taste the bulb at the end. And they didn’t exactly go crazy with the lubricant ... but then, why would they? I’m dead, after all.

Dead.

“Sorry, doctor,” Pete says. He fumbles mentally for his place, and eventually finds it. “This information is from the ambulance form. Originally taken from a Maine state driver’s license. Pronouncing doctor was, um, Frank Jennings. Subject was pronounced at the scene.”

Now it's my nose that I'm hoping will bleed. Please, I tell it, bleed. Only don't just bleed. GUSH.

It doesn't.

"Cause of death may be a heart attack," Peter says. A light hand brushes down my naked back to the crack of my ass. I pray it will remove the thermometer, but it doesn't. "Spine appears to be intact, no attractable phenomena."

Attractable phenomena? Attractable phenomena? What the fuck do they think I am, a buglight?

He lifts my head, the pads of his fingers on my cheekbones, and I hum desperately—Nnnnnnnnn—knowing that he can't possibly hear me over Keith Richards's screaming guitar but hoping he may feel the sound vibrating in my nasal passages.

He doesn't. Instead he turns my head from side to side.

"No neck injury apparent, no rigor," he says, and I hope he will just let my head go, let my face smack down onto the table—that'll make my nose bleed, unless I really am dead—but he lowers it gently, considerately, mashing the tip again and once more making suffocation seem a distinct possibility.

"No wounds visible on the back or buttocks," he says, "although there's an old scar on the upper right thigh that looks like some sort of wound, shrapnel, perhaps. It's an ugly one."

It was ugly, and it was shrapnel. The end of my war. A mortar shell lobbed into a supply area, two men killed, one man—me—lucky. It's a lot uglier around front, and in a more sensitive spot, but all the equipment works ... or did, up until today. A quarter of an inch to the left and they could have fixed me up with a hand-pump and a CO2 cartridge for those intimate moments.

He finally plucked the thermometer out—oh dear God, the relief—and on the wall I could see his shadow holding it up.

“94.2,” he said. “Gee, that ain’t too shabby. This guy could almost be alive, Katie ... Dr. Arlen.”

“Remember where they found him,” she said from across the room. The record they were listening to was between selections, and for a moment I could hear her lecturely tones clearly. “Golf course? Summer afternoon? If you’d gotten a reading of 98.6, I would not be surprised.”

“Right, right,” he said, sounding chastened. Then: “Is all this going to sound funny on the tape?” Translation: Will I sound stupid on the tape?

“It’ll sound like a teaching situation,” she said, “which is what it is.”

“Okay, good. Great.”

His rubber-tipped fingers spread my buttocks, then let them go and trail down the backs of my thighs. I would tense now, if I were capable of tensing.

Left leg, I send to him. Left leg, Petie-boy, left calf, see it?

He must see it, he must, because I can feel it, throbbing like a bee-sting or maybe a shot given by a clumsy nurse, one who infuses the injection into a muscle instead of hitting the vein.

“Subject is a really good example of what a really bad idea it is to play golf in shorts,” he says, and I find myself wishing he had been born blind. Hell, maybe he was born blind, he’s sure acting it. “I’m seeing all kinds of bug-bites, chigger-bites, scratches ...”

“Mike said they found him in the rough,” Arlen calls over. She’s making one hell of a clatter; it sounds like she’s doing dishes in a

cafeteria kitchen instead of filing stuff. "At a guess, he had a heart attack while he was looking for his ball."

"Uh-huh ..."

"Keep going, Peter, you're doing fine."

I find that an extremely debatable proposition.

"Okay."

More pokes and proddings. Gentle. Too gentle, maybe.

"There are mosquito-bites on the left calf that look infected," he says, and although his touch remains gentle, this time the pain is an enormous throb that would make me scream if I were capable of making any sound above the low-pitched hum. It occurs to me suddenly that my life may hang upon the length of the Rolling Stones tape they're listening to ... always assuming it is a tape and not a CD that plays straight through. If it finishes before they cut into me ... if I can hum loudly enough for them to hear before one of them turns it over to the other side ...

"I may want to look at the bug-bites after the gross autopsy," she says, "although if we're right about his heart, there'll be no need. Or ... do you want me to look now? They worrying you?"

"Nope, they're pretty clearly mosquito-bites," Gimpel the Fool says. "They grow em big over on the west side. He's got five ... seven ... eight ... jeez, almost a dozen on his left leg alone."

"He forgot his Deep Woods Off."

"Never mind the Off, he forgot his digitalin," he says, and they have a nice little yock together, autopsy room humor.

This time he flips me by himself, probably happy to use those gym-grown Mr. Strongboy muscles of his, hiding the snake-bites and the mosquito-bites all around them, camouflaging them. I'm staring up

into the bank of fluorescents again. Pete steps backward, out of my view. There's a humming noise. The table begins to slant, and I know why. When they cut me open, the fluids will run downhill to collection-points at its base. Plenty of samples for the state lab in Augusta, should there be any questions raised by the autopsy.

I focus all my will and effort on closing my eyes while he's looking down into my face, and cannot produce even a tic. All I wanted was eighteen holes of golf on Saturday afternoon, and instead I turned into Snow White with hair on my chest. And I can't stop wondering what it's going to feel like when those poultry shears go sliding into my midsection.

Pete has a clipboard in one hand. He consults it, sets it aside, then speaks into the mike. His voice is a lot less stilted now. He has just made the most hideous misdiagnosis of his life, but he doesn't know it, and so he's starting to warm up.

"I am commencing the autopsy at 5:49 P.M.," he says, "on Saturday, August 20th, 1994."

He lifts my lips, looks at my teeth like a man thinking about buying a horse, then pulls my jaw down. "Good color," he says, "and no petechiae on the cheeks." The current tune is fading out of the speakers and I hear a click as he steps on the footpedal which pauses the recording tape. "Man, this guy really could still be alive!"

I hum frantically, and at the same moment Dr. Arlen drops something that sounds like a bedpan. "Doesn't he wish," she says, laughing. He joins in and this time it's cancer I wish on them, some kind that is inoperable and lasts a long time.

He goes quickly down my body, feeling up my chest ("No bruising, swelling, or other exterior signs of cardiac arrest," he says, and what a big fucking surprise that is), then palpates my belly.

I burp.

He looks at me, eyes widening, mouth dropping open a little, and again I try desperately to hum, knowing he won't hear it over "Start Me Up" but thinking that maybe, along with the burp, he'll finally be ready to see what's right in front of him—

"Excuse yourself, Howie," Dr. Arlen, that bitch, says from behind me, and chuckles. "Better watch out, Pete—those postmortem belches are the worst."

He theatrically fans the air in front of his face, then goes back to what he's doing. He barely touches my groin, although he remarks that the scar on the back of my right leg continues around to the front.

Missed the big one, though, I think, maybe because it's a little higher than you're looking. No big deal, my little Baywatch buddy, but you also missed the fact that I'M STILL ALIVE, and that IS a big deal!

He goes on chanting into the microphone, sounding more and more at ease (sounding, in fact, a little like Jack Klugman on Quincy, M.E.), and I know his partner over there behind me, the Pollyanna of the medical community, isn't thinking she'll have to roll the tape back over this part of the exam. Other than missing the fact that his first pericardial is still alive, the kid's doing a great job.

At last he says, "I think I'm ready to go on, doctor." He sounds tentative, though.

She comes over, looks briefly down at me, then squeezes Pete's shoulder. "Okay," she says. "On-na wid-da show!"

Now I'm trying to stick my tongue out. Just that simple kid's gesture of impudence, but it would be enough ... and it seems to me I can feel a faint prickling sensation deep within my lips, the feeling you get when you're finally starting to come out of a heavy dose of Novocain. And I can feel a twitch? No, wishful thinking, just—

Yes! Yes! But a twitch is all, and the second time I try, nothing happens.

As Pete picks up the scissors, the Rolling Stones move on to “Hang Fire.”

Hold a mirror in front of my nose! I scream at them. Watch it fog up! Can't you at least do that?

Snick, snick, snickety-snick.

Pete turns the scissors at an angle so the light runs down the blade, and for the first time I'm certain, really certain, that this mad charade is going to go all the way through to the end. The director isn't going to freeze the frame. The ref isn't going to stop the fight in the tenth round. We're not going to pause for a word from our sponsors. Petie-Boy's going to slide those scissors into my gut while I lie here helpless, and then he's going to open me up like a mail-order package from the Horchow Collection.

He looks hesitantly at Dr. Arlen.

No! I howl, my voice reverberating off the dark walls of my skull but emerging from my mouth not at all. No, please no!

She nods. “Go ahead. You'll be fine.”

“Uh ... you want to turn off the music?”

Yes! Yes, turn it off!

“Is it bothering you?”

Yes! It's bothering him! It's fucked him up so completely he thinks his patient is dead!

“Well ...”

“Sure,” she says, and disappears from my field of vision. A moment later Mick and Keith are finally gone. I try to make the humming noise and discover a horrible thing: now I can’t even do that. I’m too scared. Fright has locked down my vocal cords. I can only stare up as she rejoins him, the two of them gazing down at me like pallbearers looking into an open grave.

“Thanks,” he says. Then he takes a deep breath and lifts the scissors. “Commencing pericardial cut.”

He slowly brings them down. I see them ... see them ... then they’re gone from my field of vision. A long moment later, I feel cold steel nestle against my naked upper belly.

He looks doubtfully at the doctor.

“Are you sure you don’t—”

“Do you want to make this your field or not, Peter?” she asks him with some asperity.

“You know I do, but—”

“Then cut.”

He nods, lips firming. I would close my eyes if I could, but of course I cannot even do that; I can only steel myself against the pain that’s only a second or two away now—steel myself for the steel.

“Cutting,” he says, bending forward.

“Wait a sec!” she cries.

The dimple of pressure just below my solar plexus eases a little. He looks around at her, surprised, upset, maybe relieved that the crucial moment has been put off—

I feel her rubber-gloved hand slide around my penis as if she meant to give me some bizarre handjob, Safe Sex with the Dead, and then

she says, “You missed this one, Pete.”

He leans over, looking at what she’s found—the scar in my groin, at the very top of my right thigh, a glassy, no-pore bowl in the flesh.

Her hand is still holding my cock, holding it out of the way, that’s all she’s doing; as far as she’s concerned she might as well be holding up a sofa cushion so someone else can see the treasure she’s found beneath it—coins, a lost wallet, maybe the catnip mouse you haven’t been able to find—but something is happening.

Dear wheelchair Jesus on a chariot-driven crutch, something is happening.

“And look,” she says. Her finger strokes a light, tickly line down the side of my right testicle. “Look at these hairline scars. His testes must have swollen up to damned near the size of grapefruits.”

“Lucky he didn’t lose one or both.”

“You bet your ... you bet your you-knows,” she says, and laughs that mildly suggestive laugh again. Her gloved hand loosens, moves, then pushes down firmly, trying to clear the viewing area. She is doing by accident what you might pay twenty-five or thirty bucks to have done on purpose ... under other circumstances, of course. “This is a war-wound, I think. Hand me that magnifier, Pete.”

“But shouldn’t I—”

“In a few seconds,” she says. “He’s not going anywhere.” She’s totally absorbed by what she’s found. Her hand is still on me, still pressing down, and what was happening feels like it’s still happening, but maybe I’m wrong. I must be wrong, or he would see it, she would feel it—

She bends down and now I can see only her green-clad back, with the ties from her cap trailing down it like odd pigtails. Now, oh my, I can feel her breath on me down there.

“Notice the outward radiation,” she says. “It was a blast-wound of some sort, probably ten years ago at least, we could check his military rec—”

The door bursts open. Pete cries out in surprise. Dr. Arlen doesn't, but her hand tightens involuntarily, she's gripping me again and it's all at once like a hellish variation of the old Naughty Nurse fantasy.

“Don't cut im up!” someone screams, and his voice is so high and wavery with fright that I barely recognize Rusty. “Don't cut im up, there was a snake in his golf-bag and it bit Mike!”

They turn to him, eyes wide, jaws dropped; her hand is still gripping me, but she's no more aware of that, at least for the time being, than Petie-Boy is aware that he's got one hand clutching the left breast of his scrub-gown. He looks like he's the one with the clapped-out fuel pump.

“What ... what are you ...” Pete begins.

“Knocked him flat!” Rusty was saying—babbling. “He's gonna be okay, I guess, but he can hardly talk! Little brown snake, I never saw one like it in my life, it went under the loadin bay, it's under there right now, but that's not the important part! I think it already bit that guy we brought in. I think ... holy shit, doc, whatja tryin to do? Stroke im back to life?”

She looks around, dazed, at first not sure of what he's talking about ... until she realizes that she's now holding a mostly erect penis. And as she screams—screams and snatches the shears out of Pete's limp gloved hand—I find myself thinking again of that old Alfred Hitchcock TV show.

Poor old Joseph Cotten, I think.

He only got to cry.

AFTERNOTE

It's been a year since my experience in Autopsy Room Four, and I have made a complete recovery, although the paralysis was both stubborn and scary; it was a full month before I began to get back the finer motions of my fingers and toes. I still can't play the piano, but then, of course, I never could. That is a joke, and I make no apologies for it. I think that in the first three months after my misadventure, my ability to joke provided a slim but vital margin between sanity and some sort of nervous breakdown. Unless you've actually felt the tip of a pair of postmortem shears poking into your stomach, you don't know what I mean.

Two weeks or so after my close call, a woman on Dupont Street called the Derry Police to complain of a "foul stink" coming from the house next door. That house belonged to a bachelor bank clerk named Walter Kerr. Police found the house empty ... of human life, that is. In the basement they found over sixty snakes of different varieties. About half of them were dead—starvation and dehydration—but many were extremely lively ... and extremely dangerous. Several were very rare, and one was of a species believed to have been extinct since midcentury, according to consulting herpetologists.

Kerr failed to show up for work at Derry Community Bank on August 22nd, two days after I was bitten, one day after the story (PARALYZED MAN ESCAPES DEADLY AUTOPSY, the headline read; at one point I was quoted as saying I had been "scared stiff") broke in the press.

There was a snake for every cage in Kerr's basement menagerie, except for one. The empty cage was unmarked, and the snake that popped out of my golf-bag (the ambulance orderlies had packed it in with my "corpse" and had been practicing chip-shots out in the ambulance parking area) was never found. The toxin in my bloodstream—the same toxin found to a far lesser degree in orderly

Mike Hopper's bloodstream—was documented but never identified. I have looked at a great many pictures of snakes in the last year, and have found at least one which has reportedly caused cases of full-body paralysis in humans. This is the Peruvian boomslang, a nasty viper which has supposedly been extinct since the 1920s. Dupont Street is less than half a mile from the Derry Municipal Golf Course. Most of the intervening land consists of scrub woods and vacant lots.

One final note. Katie Arlen and I dated for four months, November 1994 through February of 1995. We broke it off by mutual consent, due to sexual incompatibility.

I was impotent unless she was wearing rubber gloves.

—

At some point I think every writer of scary stories has to tackle the subject of premature burial, if only because it seems to be such a pervasive fear. When I was a kid of seven or so, the scariest TV program going was Alfred Hitchcock Presents, and the scariest AHP—my friends and I were in total agreement on this—was the one starring Joseph Cotten as a man who has been injured in a car accident. Injured so badly, in fact, that the doctors think he's dead. They can't even find a heartbeat. They are on the verge of doing a postmortem on him—cutting him up while he's still alive and screaming inside, in other words—when he produces one single tear to let them know he's still alive. That was touching, but touching isn't in my usual repertoire. When my own thoughts turned to this subject, a more—shall we say modern?—method of communicating liveliness occurred to me, and this story was the result. One final note, regarding the snake: I doubt like hell if there's any such reptile as a Peruvian boomslang, but in one of her Miss Marple capers, Dame Agatha Christie does mention an African boomslang. I just liked the word so much (boomslang, not African) I had to put it in this story.

AYANA

"Imagine if you had the ability to heal..."

"Why would anyone want to stop you?"

DREAMLIGHT PICTURES

AYANA

LEE DEBRIDGE KATHERINE DASHI GINA FIELDS DARRIN JAMES
SUZE Q. VICTOR WARREN KEVIN C. WEST
Music by CHRIS DUBROCK www.dubrock.com ERIC HUDSON
COSTUME DESIGNER FABRIZIO CERONI CAVIN JUNG ERIC HUDSON
PRODUCTION DESIGNER RICHARD BRADFORD FABRIZIO CERONI CAVIN JUNG CHRIS STEIN
EDITED BY STEPHEN KING WRITTEN BY FABRIZIO CERONI AND CAVIN JUNG

Directed by CAVIN JUNG and FABRIZIO CERONI

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AYANA

Stephen King

I didn't think I would ever tell this story. My wife told me not to; she said no one would believe it and I'd only embarrass myself. What she meant, of course, was that it would embarrass her. "What about Ralph and Trudy?" I asked her. "They were there. They saw it, too."

"Trudy will tell him to keep his mouth shut," Ruth said, "and your brother won't need much persuading."

This was probably true. Ralph was at that time superintendent of New Hampshire School Administrative Unit 43, and the last thing a Department of Education bureaucrat from a small state wants is to wind up on one of the cable news outlets, in the end-of-the-hour slot reserved for UFOs over Phoenix and coyotes that can count to ten. Besides, a miracle story isn't much good without a miracle worker, and Ayana was gone.

But now my wife is dead—she had a heart attack while flying to Colorado to help out with our first grandchild and died almost instantly. (Or so the airline people said, but you can't even trust them with your luggage these days.) My brother Ralph is also dead—a stroke while playing in a golden-ager golf tournament—and Trudy is gaga. My father is long gone; if he were still alive, he'd be a centenarian. I'm the last one standing, so I'll tell the story. It is unbelievable, Ruth was right about that, and it means nothing in any case—miracles never do, except to those lucky lunatics who see them everywhere. But it's interesting. And it is true. We all saw it.

*

My father was dying of pancreatic cancer. I think you can tell a lot about people by listening to how they speak about that sort of situation (and the fact that I describe cancer as "that sort of situation" probably tells you something about your narrator, who spent his life teaching English to boys and girls whose most serious health problems were acne and sports injuries).

Ralph said, "He's nearly finished his journey."

My sister-in-law Trudy said, “He’s rife with it.” At first I thought she said “He’s ripe with it,” which struck me as jarringly poetic. I knew it couldn’t be right, not from her, but I wanted it to be right.

Ruth said, “He’s down for the count.”

I didn’t say, “And may he stay down,” but I thought it. Because he suffered. This was twenty-five years ago—1982—and suffering was still an accepted part of end-stage cancer. I remember reading ten or twelve years later that most cancer patients go out silently only because they’re too weak to scream. That brought back memories of my father’s sickroom so strong that I went into the bathroom and knelt in front of the toilet bowl, sure I was going to vomit.

But my father actually died four years later, in 1986. He was in assisted living then, and it wasn’t pancreatic cancer that got him, after all. He choked to death on a piece of steak.

*

Don “Doc” Gentry and his wife, Bernadette—my mother and father—retired to a suburban home in Ford City, not too far from Pittsburgh. After his wife died, Doc considered moving to Florida, decided he couldn’t afford it, and stayed in Pennsylvania. When his cancer was diagnosed, he spent a brief time in the hospital, where he explained again and again that his nickname came from his years as a veterinarian. After he’d explained this to anyone who cared, they sent him home to die, and such family as he had left—Ralph, Trudy, Ruth, and me—came to Ford City to see him out.

I remember his back bedroom very well. On the wall was a picture of Christ suffering the little children to come unto him. On the floor was a rag rug my mother had made: shades of nauseous green, not one of her better ones. Beside the bed was an IV pole with a Pittsburgh Pirates decal on it. Each day I approached that room with increasing dread, and each day the hours I spent there stretched longer. I remembered Doc sitting on the porch glider when we were growing up in Derby, Connecticut—a can of beer in one hand, a cig in the

other, the sleeves of a blinding white T-shirt always turned up twice to reveal the smooth curve of his biceps and the rose tattoo just above his left elbow. He was of a generation that did not feel strange going about in dark blue unfaded jeans—and who called jeans “dungarees.” He combed his hair like Elvis and had a slightly dangerous look, like a sailor two drinks into a shore leave that will end badly. He was a tall man who walked like a cat. And I remember a summer street dance in Derby where he and my mother stopped the show, jitterbugging to “Rocket 88” by Ike Turner and the Kings of Rhythm. Ralph was sixteen then, I think, and I was eleven. We watched our parents with our mouths open, and for the first time I understood that they did it at night, did it with all their clothes off and never thought of us.

At eighty, turned loose from the hospital, my somehow dangerously graceful father had become just another skeleton in pajamas (his had the Pirates logo on them). His eyes lurked beneath wild and bushy brows. He sweated steadily in spite of two fans, and the smell that rose from his damp skin reminded me of old wallpaper in a deserted house. His breath was black with the perfume of decomposition.

Ralph and I were a long way from rich, but when we put a little of our money together with the remains of Doc’s own savings, we had enough to hire a part-time private nurse and a housekeeper who came in five days a week. They did well at keeping the old man clean and changed, but by the day my sister-in-law said that Doc was ripe with it (I still prefer to think that was what she said), the Battle of the Smells was almost over. That scarred old pro shit was rounds ahead of the newcomer Johnson’s baby powder; soon, I thought, the ref would stop the fight. Doc was no longer able to get to the toilet (which he invariably called “the can”), so he wore diapers and continence pants. He was still aware enough to know, and to be ashamed. Sometimes tears rolled from the corners of his eyes, and half-formed cries of desperate, disgusted amusement came from the throat that had once sent “Hey, Good Lookin’” out into the world.

The pain settled in, first in the midsection and then radiating outward until he would complain that even his eyelids and fingertips hurt. The painkillers stopped working. The nurse could have given him more, but that might have killed him and she refused. I wanted to give him more even if it did kill him. And I might have, with support from Ruth, but my wife wasn't the sort to provide that kind of prop.

"She'll know," Ruth said, meaning the nurse, "and then you'll be in trouble."

"He's my dad!"

"That won't stop her." Ruth had always been a glass-half-empty person. It wasn't the way she was raised; it was the way she was born. "She'll report it. You might go to jail."

So I didn't kill him. None of us killed him. What we did was mark time. We read to him, not knowing how much he understood. We changed him and kept the medication chart on the wall updated. The days were viciously hot and we periodically changed the location of the two fans, hoping to create a cross draft. We watched the Pirates games on a little color TV that made the grass look purple, and we told him that the Pirates looked great this year. We talked to each other above his ever-sharpening profile. We watched him suffer and waited for him to die. And one day while he was sleeping and rattling snores, I looked up from Best American Poets of the Twentieth Century and saw a tall, heavysset black woman and a black girl in dark glasses standing at the bedroom door.

That girl—I remember her as if it were this morning. I think she might have been seven, although extremely small for her age. Tiny, really. She was wearing a pink dress that stopped above her knobby knees. There was a Band-Aid printed with Warner Bros. cartoon characters on one equally knobby shin; I remember Yosemite Sam, with his long red mustache and a pistol in each hand. The dark glasses looked like a yard-sale consolation prize. They were far too big and had slid down to the end of the kid's snub nose, revealing eyes that were fixed, heavy-lidded, sheathed in blue-white film. Her hair was in

cornrows. Over one arm was a pink plastic child's purse split down the side. On her feet were dirty sneakers. Her skin wasn't really black at all but a soapy gray. She was on her feet, but otherwise looked almost as sick as my father.

The woman I remember less clearly, because the child so drew my attention. The woman could have been forty or sixty. She had a close-cropped afro and a serene aspect. Beyond that, I recall nothing—not even the color of her dress, if she was wearing a dress. I think she was, but it might have been slacks.

“Who are you?” I asked. I sounded stupid, as if awakened from a doze rather than reading—although there is a similarity.

Trudy appeared from behind them and said the same thing. She sounded wide awake. And from behind her, Ruth said in an oh-for-Pete's-sake voice: “The door must have come open, it won't ever stay on the latch. They must have walked right in.”

Ralph, standing beside Trudy, looked back over his shoulder. “It's shut now. They must have closed it behind them.” As if that were a mark in their favor.

“You can't come in here,” Trudy told the woman. “We're busy. There's sickness here. I don't know what you want, but you have to go.”

“You can't just walk into a place, you know,” Ralph added. The three of them were crowded together in the sickroom doorway.

Ruth tapped the woman on the shoulder, and not gently. “Unless you want us to call the police, you have to go. Do you want us to do that?”

The woman took no notice. She pushed the little girl forward and said, “Straight on. Four steps. There's a poley thing, mind you don't trip. Let me hear you count.”

The little girl counted like this: “One ... two ... free ... four.” She stepped over the metal feet of the IV pole on free without ever looking down—surely not looking at anything through the smeary lenses of her too-big yard-sale glasses. Not with those milky eyes. She passed close enough to me for the skirt of her dress to draw across my forearm like a thought. She smelled dirty and sweaty and—like Doc—sick. There were dark marks on both of her arms, not scabs but sores.

“Stop her!” my brother said to me, but I didn’t. All this happened very quickly. The little girl bent over the stubbly hollow of my father’s cheek and kissed it. A big kiss, not a little one. A smacky kiss.

Her little plastic purse swung lightly against the side of his head as she did it and my father opened his eyes. Later, both Trudy and Ruth said it was getting whacked with the purse that woke him. Ralph was less sure, and I didn’t believe it at all. It didn’t make a sound when it struck, not even a little one. There was nothing in that purse except maybe a Kleenex.

“Who are you, kiddo?” my father asked in his raspy fixing-to-die voice.

“Ayana,” the child said.

“I’m Doc.” He looked up at her from those dark caves where he now lived, but with more comprehension than I’d seen in the two weeks we’d been in Ford City. He’d reached a point where not even a ninth-inning walk-off home run could do much to crack his deepening glaze.

Trudy pushed past the woman and started to push past me, meaning to grab the child who had suddenly thrust herself into Doc’s dying regard. I grabbed her wrist and stopped her. “Wait.”

“What do you mean, wait? They’re trespassers!”

“I’m sick, I have to go,” the little girl said. Then she kissed him again and stepped back. This time she tripped over the feet of the IV pole, almost upending it and herself. Trudy grabbed the pole and I grabbed the child. There was nothing to her, only skin wrapped on a complex armature of bone. Her glasses fell off into my lap, and for a moment those milky eyes looked into mine.

“You be all right,” Ayana said, and touched my mouth with her tiny palm. It burned me like an ember, but I didn’t pull away. “You be all right.”

“Ayana, come,” the woman said. “We ought to leave these folks. Two steps. Let me hear you count.”

“One ... two,” Ayana said, putting her glasses on and then poking them up her nose, where they would not stay for long. The woman took her hand.

“You folks have a blessed day, now,” she said, and looked at me. “I’m sorry for you,” she said, “but this child’s dreams are over.”

They walked back across the living room, the woman holding the girl’s hand. Ralph trailed after them like a sheepdog, I think to make sure neither of them stole anything. Ruth and Trudy were bent over Doc, whose eyes were still open.

“Who was that child?” he asked.

“I don’t know, Dad,” Trudy said. “Don’t let it concern you.”

“I want her to come back,” he said. “I want another kiss.”

Ruth turned to me, her lips sucked into her mouth. This was an unlovely expression she had perfected over the years. “She pulled his IV line halfway out ... he’s bleeding ... and you just sat there.”

“I’ll put it back,” I said, and someone else seemed to be speaking. Inside myself was a man standing off to one side, silent and stunned.

I could still feel the warm pressure of her palm on my mouth.

“Oh, don’t bother! I already did.”

Ralph came back. “They’re gone,” he said. “Walking down the street toward the bus stop.” He turned to my wife. “Do you really want me to call the police, Ruth?”

“No. We’d just be all day filling out forms and answering questions.” She paused. “We might even have to testify in court.”

“Testify to what?” Ralph asked.

“I don’t know what, how should I know what? Will one of you get the adhesive tape so we can keep this christing needle still? It’s on the kitchen counter, I think.”

“I want another kiss,” my father said.

“I’ll go,” I said, but first I went to the front door—which Ralph had locked as well as closed—and looked out. The little green plastic bus shelter was only a block down, but no one was standing by the pole or under the shelter’s plastic roof. And the sidewalk was empty. Ayana and the woman—whether mother or minder—were gone. All I had was the kid’s touch on my mouth, still warm but starting to fade.

*

Now comes the miracle part. I’m not going to skimp it—if I’m going to tell this story, I’ll try to tell it right—but I’m not going to dwell on it either. Miracle stories are always satisfying but rarely interesting, because they’re all the same.

We were staying at one of the motels on Ford City’s main road, a Ramada Inn with thin walls. Ralph annoyed my wife by calling it the Rammit Inn. “If you keep doing that, you’ll eventually forget and say it in front of a stranger,” my wife said. “Then you’ll have a red face.”

The walls were so thin that it was possible for us to hear Ralph and Trudy arguing next door about how long they could afford to stay. “He’s my father,” Ralph said, to which Trudy replied: “Try telling that to Connecticut Light and Power when the bill comes due. Or the state commissioner when your sick days run out.”

It was a little past seven on a hot August evening. Soon Ralph would be leaving for my father’s, where the part-time nurse was on duty until eight P.M. I found the Pirates on TV and jacked the volume to drown out the depressing and predictable argument going on next door. Ruth was folding clothes and telling me the next time I bought cheap discount-store underwear, she was going to divorce me. Or shoot me for a stranger. The phone rang. It was Nurse Chloe. (This was what she called herself, as in “Drink a little more of this soup for Nurse Chloe.”)

She wasted no time on pleasantries. “I think you should come right away,” she said. “Not just Ralph for the night shift. All of you.”

“Is he going?” I asked. Ruth stopped folding things and came over. She put a hand on my shoulder. We had been expecting this—hoping for it, really—but now that it was here, it was too absurd to hurt. Doc had taught me how to use a Bolo-Bouncer when I was a kid no older than that day’s little blind intruder. He had caught me smoking under the grape arbor and had told me—not angrily but kindly—that it was a stupid habit, and I’d do well not to let it get a hold on me. The idea that he might not be alive when tomorrow’s paper came? Absurd.

“I don’t think so,” Nurse Chloe said. “He seems better.” She paused. “I’ve never seen anything like it in my life.”

*

He was better. When we got there fifteen minutes later, he was sitting on the living-room sofa and watching the Pirates on the house’s larger TV—no technological marvel, but at least colorfast. He was sipping a protein shake through a straw. He had some color.

His cheeks seemed plumper, perhaps because he was freshly shaved. He had regained himself. That was what I thought then; the impression has only grown stronger with the passage of time. And one other thing, which we all agreed on—even the doubting Thomasina to whom I was married: the yellow smell that had hung around him like ether ever since the doctors sent him home to die was gone.

He greeted us all by name, and told us that Willie Stargell had just hit a home run for the Buckos. Ralph and I looked at each other, as if to confirm we were actually there. Trudy sat on the couch beside Doc, only it was more of a whooping down. Ruth went into the kitchen and got herself a beer. A miracle in itself.

“I wouldn’t mind one of those, Ruthie-doo,” my father said, and then—probably misinterpreting my slack and flabbergasted face for an expression of disapproval: “I feel better. Gut hardly hurts at all.”

“No beer for you, I think,” Nurse Chloe said. She was sitting in an easy chair across the room and showed no sign of gathering her things, a ritual that usually began twenty minutes before the end of her shift. Her annoying do-it-for-mommy authority seemed to have grown thin.

“When did this start?” I asked, not even sure what I meant by this, because the changes for the better seemed so general. But if I had any specific thing in mind, I suppose it was the departure of the smell.

“He was getting better when we left this afternoon,” Trudy said. “I just didn’t believe it.”

“Bolsheveky,” Ruth said. It was as close as she allowed herself to cursing.

Trudy paid no attention. “It was that little girl,” she said.

“Bolsheveky!” Ruth cried.

“What little girl?” my father asked. It was between innings. On the television, a fellow with no hair, big teeth, and mad eyes was telling us the carpets at Juker’s were so cheap they were almost free. And, dear God, no finance charges on layaway. Before any of us could reply to Ruth, Doc asked Nurse Chloe if he could have half a beer. She refused him. But Nurse Chloe’s days of authority in that little house were almost over, and during the next four years—before a chunk of half-chewed meat stopped his throat forever—my father drank a great many beers. And enjoyed every one, I hope. Beer is a miracle in itself.

*

It was that night, while lying sleepless in our hard Rammit Inn bed and listening to the air conditioner rattle, that Ruth told me to keep my mouth shut about the blind girl, whom she called not Ayana but “the magic negro child,” speaking in a tone of ugly sarcasm that was very unlike her.

“Besides,” she said, “it won’t last. Sometimes a light bulb will brighten up just before it burns out for good. I’m sure that happens to people too.”

Maybe, but Doc Gentry’s miracle took. By the end of the week he was walking in his backyard with me or Ralph supporting him. After that, we all went home. I got a call from Nurse Chloe on our first night back.

“We’re not going, no matter how sick he is,” Ruth said half-hysterically. “Tell her that.”

But Nurse Chloe only wanted to say that she’d happened to see Doc coming out of the Ford City Veterinary Clinic, where he had gone to consult with the young head of practice about a horse with the staggers. He had his cane, she said, but wasn’t using it. Nurse Chloe said she’d never seen a man “of his years” who looked any better. “Bright-eyed and ring-tailed,” she said. “I still don’t believe it.” A month later he was walking (caneless) around the block, and that

winter he was swimming every day at the local Y. He looked like a man of sixty-five. Everyone said so.

*

I talked to my father's entire medical team in the wake of his recovery. I did it because what had happened to him reminded me of the so-called miracle plays that were big in the stickville burghs of Europe in medieval times. I told myself if I changed Dad's name (or perhaps just called him Mr. G.) it could make an interesting article for some journal or other. It might have even been true—sort of—but I never did write the article.

It was Stan Sloan, Doc's family practice guy, who first raised the red flag. He had sent Doc to the University of Pittsburgh Cancer Institute and so was able to blame the consequent misdiagnosis on Drs. Retif and Zamachowski, who were my dad's oncologists there. They in turn blamed the radiologists for sloppy imaging. Retif said the chief of radiology was an incompetent who didn't know a pancreas from a liver. He asked not to be quoted, but after twenty-five years, I am assuming the statute of limitations on that one has run out.

Dr. Zamachowski said it was a simple case of organ malformation. "I was never comfortable with the original diagnosis," he confided. I talked to Retif on the phone, Zamachowski in person. He was wearing a white lab coat with a red T-shirt beneath that appeared to read I'D RATHER BE GOLFING. "I always thought it was Von Hippel-Lindau."

"Wouldn't that also have killed him?" I asked.

Zamachowski gave me the mysterious smile doctors reserve for clueless plumbers, housewives, and English teachers. Then he said he was late for an appointment.

When I talked to the chief of radiology, he spread his hands. "Here we are responsible for photography, not interpretation," he said. "In another ten years, we will be using equipment that will make such

misinterpretations as this one all but impossible. In the meantime, why not just be glad your pop is alive? Enjoy him.”

I did my best on that score. And during my brief investigation, which I of course called research, I learned an interesting thing: the medical definition of miracle is misdiagnosis.

*

Nineteen eighty-three was my sabbatical year. I had a contract with a scholarly press for a book called *Teaching the Unteachable: Strategies for Creative Writing*, but like my miracle-play article it never got written. In July, while Ruth and I were making plans for a camping trip, my urine abruptly turned pink. The pain came after that, first deep in my left buttock, then growing stronger as it migrated to my groin. By the time I started to piss actual blood—this was I think four days after the first twinges, and while I was still playing that famous game known the world over as *Maybe It Will Go Away on Its Own*—the pain had passed from serious into the realm of excruciating.

“I’m sure it’s not cancer,” Ruth said, which coming from her meant she was sure it was. The look in her eyes was even more alarming. She would deny this on her deathbed—her practicality was her pride—but I’m sure it occurred to her just then that the cancer that had left my father had batted on me.

It wasn’t cancer. It was kidney stones. My miracle was called extracorporeal shock wave lithotripsy, which—in tandem with diuretic pills—dissolved them. I told my doctor I had never felt such pain in my life.

“I should think you never will again, even if you suffer a coronary,” he said. “Women who’ve had stones compare the pain to that of childbirth. Difficult childbirth.”

I was still in considerable pain but able to read a magazine while waiting for my follow-up doctor’s appointment, and I considered this

a great improvement. Someone sat down beside me and said, “Come on now, it’s time.”

I looked up. It wasn’t the woman who had come into my father’s sickroom; it was a man in a perfectly ordinary brown business suit. Nevertheless, I knew why he was there. It was never even a question. I also felt sure that if I didn’t go with him, all the lithotripsy in the world would not help me.

We went out. The receptionist was away from her desk, so I didn’t have to explain my sudden decampment. I’m not sure what I would have said, anyway. That my groin had suddenly stopped smoldering? That was absurd as well as untrue.

The man in the business suit looked a fit thirty-five: an ex-marine, maybe, who hadn’t been able to part with the bristly gung-ho haircut. He didn’t talk. We cut around the medical center where my doctor keeps his practice, then made our way down the block to Groves of Healing Hospital, me walking slightly bent over because of the pain, which no longer snarled but still glowered.

We went up to pedes and made our way down a corridor with Disney murals on the walls and “It’s a Small World” drifting down from the overhead speakers. The ex-marine walked briskly, with his head up, as if he belonged there. I didn’t, and I knew it. I had never felt so far from my home and the life I understood. If I had floated up to the ceiling like a child’s Mylar GET WELL SOON balloon, I wouldn’t have been surprised.

At the central nurses’ station, the ex-marine squeezed my arm to make me stop until the two nurses there—one male, one female—were occupied. Then we crossed into another hall where a bald girl sitting in a wheelchair looked at us with starving eyes. She held out one hand.

“No,” the ex-marine said, and simply led me on. But not before I got another look into those bright, dying eyes.

He took us into a room where a boy of about three was playing with blocks in a clear plastic tent that belled down over his bed. The boy stared at us with lively interest. He looked much healthier than the girl in the wheelchair—he had a full shock of red curls—but his skin was the color of lead, and when the ex-marine pushed me forward and then fell back into a position like parade rest, I sensed the kid was very ill indeed. When I unzipped the tent, taking no notice of the sign on the wall reading THIS IS A STERILE ENVIRONMENT, I thought his remaining time could have been measured in days rather than weeks.

I reached for him, registering my father's sick smell. The odor was a little lighter, but essentially the same. The kid lifted his own arms without reservation. When I kissed him on the corner of the mouth, he kissed back with a longing eagerness that suggested he hadn't been touched in a long time. At least not by something that didn't hurt.

No one came in to ask us what we were doing, or to threaten the police, as Ruth had that day in my father's sickroom. I zipped up the tent again. In the doorway I looked back and saw him sitting in his clear plastic tent with a block in his hands. He dropped it and waved to me—a child's wigwag, fingers opening and closing twice. I waved back the same way. He looked better already.

Once more the ex-marine squeezed my arm at the nurses' station, but this time we were spotted by the male nurse, a man with the kind of disapproving smile the head of my English department had raised to the level of art. He asked what we were doing there.

"Sorry, mate, wrong floor," the ex-marine said.

On the hospital steps a few minutes later, he said, "You can find your own way back, can't you?"

"Sure," I said, "but I'll have to make another appointment with my doctor."

“Yes, I suppose you will.”

“Will I see you again?”

“Yes,” he said, and walked off toward the hospital parking lot. He didn’t look back.

*

He came again in 1987, while Ruth was at the market and I was cutting the grass and hoping the sick thud in the back of my head wasn’t the beginning of a migraine but knowing it was. Since the little boy in Groves of Healing, I had been subject to them. But it was hardly ever him I thought of when I lay in the dark with a damp rag over my eyes. I thought of the little girl.

That time we went to see a woman at St. Jude’s. When I kissed her, she put my hand on her left breast. It was the only one she had; the doctors had already taken the other.

“I love you, mister,” she said, crying. I didn’t know what to say. The ex-marine stood in the doorway, legs apart, hands behind his back. Parade rest.

Years passed before he came again: mid-December of 1997. That was the last time. By then my problem was arthritis, and it still is. The bristles standing up from the ex-marine’s block of a head had gone mostly gray, and lines so deep they made him look a little like a ventriloquist’s dummy had carved down from the corners of his lips. He took me out to an I-95 exit ramp north of town, where there had been a wreck. A panel truck had collided with a Ford Escort. The Escort was pretty well trashed. The paramedics had strapped the driver, a middle-aged man, to a stretcher. The cops were talking to the uniformed panel truck driver, who appeared shaken but unhurt.

The paramedics slammed the doors of the ambulance, and the ex-marine said, “Now. Shag your ass.”

I shagged my elderly ass to the rear of the ambulance. The ex-marine hustled forward, pointing. “Yo! Yo! Is that one of those medical bracelets?”

The paramedics turned to look; one of them, and one of the cops who had been talking to the panel truck driver, went to where the ex-marine was pointing. I opened the rear door of the ambulance and crawled up to the Escort driver’s head. At the same time I clutched my father’s pocket watch, which I had carried since he gave it to me as a wedding present. Its delicate gold chain was attached to one of my belt loops. There was no time to be gentle; I tore it free.

The man on the stretcher stared up at me from the gloom, his broken neck bulging in a shiny skin-covered doorknob at the nape. “I can’t move my fucking toes,” he said.

I kissed him on the corner of the mouth (it was my special place, I guess) and was backing out when one of the paramedics grabbed me. “What in the hell do you think you’re doing?” he asked.

I pointed to the watch, which now lay beside the stretcher. “That was in the grass. I thought he’d want it.” By the time the Escort driver was able to tell someone that it wasn’t his watch and the initials engraved on the inside of the lid meant nothing to him, we would be gone. “Did you get his medical bracelet?”

The paramedic looked disgusted. “It was just a piece of chrome,” he said. “Get out of here.” Then, not quite grudgingly: “Thanks. You could have kept that.”

It was true. I loved that watch. But ... spur of the moment. It was all I had.

*

“You’ve got blood on the back of your hand,” the ex-marine said as we drove back to my house. We were in his car, a nondescript Chevrolet sedan. There was a dog leash lying on the backseat and a

St. Christopher's medal hanging from the rearview mirror on a silver chain. "You ought to wash it off when you get home."

I said I would.

"You won't be seeing me again," he said.

I thought of what the black woman had said about Ayana then. I hadn't thought of it in years. "Are my dreams over?" I asked.

He looked puzzled, then shrugged. "Your work is," he said. "I sure don't know anything about your dreams."

I asked him three more questions before he dropped me off for the last time and disappeared from my life. I didn't expect him to answer them, but he did.

"Those people I kiss—do they go on to other people? Kiss their boobies and make them all gone?"

"Some do," he said. "That's how it works. Others can't." He shrugged. "Or won't." He shrugged again. "It comes to the same."

"Do you know a little girl named Ayana? Although I suppose she'd be a big girl now."

"She's dead."

My heart dropped, but not too far. I suppose I had known. I thought again of the little girl in the wheelchair.

"She kissed my father," I said. "She only touched me. So why was I the one?"

"Because you were," he said, and pulled into my driveway. "Here we are."

An idea occurred to me. It seemed like a good one, God knows why. "Come for Christmas," I said. "Come for Christmas dinner. We have

plenty. I'll tell Ruth you're my cousin from New Mexico." Because I had never told her about the ex-marine. Knowing about my father was enough for her. Too much, really.

The ex-marine smiled. That might not have been the only time I saw it, but it's the only time I remember. "Think I'll give it a miss, mate. Although I thank you. I don't celebrate Christmas. I'm an atheist."

*

That's really it, I guess—except for kissing Trudy. I told you she went gaga, remember? Alzheimer's. Ralph made good investments that left her well-off, and the kids saw that she went to a nice place when she was no longer okay to live at home. Ruth and I went to see her together until Ruth had her heart attack on the approach into Denver International. I went to see Trudy on my own not long after that, because I was lonely and sad and wanted some connection with the old days. But seeing Trudy as she had become, looking out the window instead of at me, munching at her lower lip while clear spit grizzled from the corners of her mouth, only made me feel worse. Like going back to your hometown to look at the house you grew up in and discovering a vacant lot.

I kissed the corner of her mouth before I left, but of course nothing happened. A miracle is no good without a miracle worker, and my miracle days are behind me now. Except late at night when I can't sleep. Then I can come downstairs and watch almost any movie I want. Even skin flicks. I have a satellite dish, you see, and something called Global Movies. I could even get the Pirates, if I wanted to order the MLB package. But I live on a fixed income these days, and while I'm comfortable, I also have to keep an eye on my discretionary spending. I can read about the Pirates on the Internet. All those movies are miracle enough for me.

STEPHEN KING'S BATTLEGROUND



A Commemoration of the
Emmy-Winning Television Adaptation

EDITED BY RICHARD CHRISTIAN MATHESON

BATTLEGROUND

Stephen King

“Mr. Renshaw?”

The desk clerk’s voice caught him halfway to the elevator, and Renshaw turned back impatiently, shifting his flight bag from one hand to the other. The envelope in his coat pocket, stuffed with twenties and fifties, crackled heavily. The job had gone well and the pay had been excellent—even after the Organization’s 15 percent finder’s fee had been skimmed off the top. Now all he wanted was a hot shower and a gin and tonic and sleep.

“What is it?”

“Package, sir. Would you sign the slip?”

Renshaw signed and looked thoughtfully at the rectangular package. His name and the building’s address were written on the gummed label in a spiky backhand script that seemed familiar. He rocked the package on the imitation-marble surface of the desk, and something clanked faintly inside.

“Should I have that sent up, Mr. Renshaw?”

“No, I’ve got it.” It was about eighteen inches on a side and fitted clumsily under his arm. He put it on the plush carpet that covered the elevator floor and twisted his key in the penthouse slot above the regular rack of buttons. The car rose smoothly and silently. He closed his eyes and let the job replay itself on the dark screen of his mind.

First, as always, a call from Cal Bates: “You available, Johnny?”

He was available twice a year, minimum fee \$10,000. He was very good, very reliable, but what his customers really paid for was the infallible predator’s talent. John Renshaw was a human hawk, constructed by both genetics and environment to do two things superbly: kill and survive.

After Bates's call, a buff-colored envelope appeared in Renshaw's box. A name, an address, a photograph. All committed to memory; then down the garbage disposal with the ashes of envelope and contents.

This time the face had been that of a sallow Miami businessman named Hans Morris, founder and owner of the Morris Toy Company. Someone had wanted Morris out of the way and had gone to the Organization. The Organization, in the person of Calvin Bates, had talked to John Renshaw. Pow. Mourners please omit flowers.

The doors slid open, he picked up his package and stepped out. He unlocked the suite and stepped in. At this time of day, just after 3 P.M., the spacious living room was splashed with April sunshine. He paused for a moment, enjoying it, then put the package on the end table by the door and loosened his tie. He dropped the envelope on top of it and walked over to the terrace.

He pushed open the sliding glass door and stepped out. It was cold, and the wind knifed through his thin topcoat. Yet he paused a moment, looking over the city the way a general might survey a captured country. Traffic crawled beetlelike in the streets. Far away, almost buried in the golden afternoon haze, the Bay Bridge glittered like a madman's mirage. To the east, all but lost behind the downtown high rises, the crammed and dirty tenements with their stainless-steel forests of TV aerials. It was better up here. Better than in the gutters.

He went back inside, slid the door closed, and went into the bathroom for a long, hot shower.

When he sat down forty minutes later to regard his package, drink in hand, the shadows had marched halfway across the wine-colored carpet and the best of the afternoon was past.

It was a bomb.

Of course it wasn't, but one proceeded as if it were. That was why one had remained upright and taking nourishment while so many others had gone to that great unemployment office in the sky.

If it was a bomb, it was clockless. It sat utterly silent; bland and enigmatic. Plastique was more likely these days, anyway. Less temperamental than the clocksprings manufactured by Westclox and Big Ben.

Renshaw looked at the postmark. Miami, April 15. Five days ago. So the bomb was not time-set. It would have gone off in the hotel safe in that case.

Miami. Yes. And that spiky backhand writing. There had been a framed photograph on the sallow businessman's desk. The photo had been of an even sallow old crone wearing a babushka. The script slanted across the bottom had read: "Best from your number-one idea girl—Mom."

What kind of a number-one idea is this, Mom? A do-it-yourself extermination kit?

He regarded the package with complete concentration, not moving, his hands folded. Extraneous questions, such as how Morris' number-one idea girl might have discovered his address, did not occur to him. They were for later, for Cal Bates. Unimportant now.

With a sudden, almost absent move, he took a small celluloid calendar out of his wallet and inserted it deftly under the twine that crisscrossed the brown paper. He slid it under the Scotch tape that held one end flap. The flap came loose, relaxing against the twine.

He paused for a time, observing, then leaned close and sniffed. Cardboard, paper, string. Nothing more. He walked around the box, squatted easily on his haunches, and repeated the process. Twilight was invading his apartment with gray, shadowy fingers.

One of the flaps popped free of the restraining twine, showing a dull green box beneath. Metal. Hinged. He produced a pocket knife and cut the twine. It fell away, and a few helping prods with the tip of the knife revealed the box.

It was green with black markings, and stenciled on the front in white letters were the words: G.I. JOE VIETNAM FOOTLOCKER. Below that: 20 Infantrymen, 10 Helicopters, 2 BAR Men, 2 Bazooka Men, 2 Medics, 4 Jeeps. Below that: a flag decal. Below that, in the corner: Morris Toy Company, Miami, Fla.

He reached out to touch it, then withdrew his hand. Something inside the footlocker had moved.

Renshaw stood up, not hurrying, and backed across the room toward the kitchen and the hall. He snapped on the lights.

The Vietnam Footlocker was rocking, making the brown paper beneath it rattle. It suddenly overbalanced and fell to the carpet with a soft thud, landing on one end. The hinged top opened a crack of perhaps two inches.

Tiny foot soldiers, about an inch and a half tall, began to crawl out. Renshaw watched them, unblinking. His mind made no effort to cope with the real or unreal aspect of what he was seeing—only with the possible consequences for his survival.

The soldiers were wearing minuscule army fatigues, helmets, and field packs. Tiny carbines were slung across their shoulders. Two of them looked briefly across the room at Renshaw. Their eyes, no bigger than pencil points, glittered.

Five, ten, twelve, then all twenty. One of them was gesturing, ordering the others. They lined themselves up along the crack that the fall had produced and began to push. The crack began to widen.

Renshaw picked one of the large pillows off the couch and began to walk toward them. The commanding officer turned and gestured.

The others whirled and unslung their carbines. There were tiny, almost delicate popping sounds, and Renshaw felt suddenly as if he had been stung by bees.

He threw the pillow. It struck them, knocking them sprawling, then hit the box and knocked it wide open. Insectlike, with a faint, high whirring noise like chiggers, a cloud of miniature helicopters, painted jungle green, rose out of the box.

Tiny phut! phut! sounds reached Renshaw's ears and he saw pinprick-sized muzzle flashes coming from the open copter doors. Needles pricked his belly, his right arm, the side of his neck. He clawed out and got one—sudden pain in his fingers; blood welling. The whirling blades had chopped them to the bone in diagonal scarlet hash marks. The others whirled out of range, circling him like horseflies. The stricken copter thumped to the rug and lay still.

Sudden excruciating pain in his foot made him cry out. One of the foot soldiers was standing on his shoe and bayoneting his ankle. The tiny face looked up, panting and grinning.

Renshaw kicked at it and the tiny body flew across the room to splatter on the wall. It did not leave blood but a viscid purple smear.

There was a tiny, coughing explosion and blinding agony ripped his thigh. One of the bazooka men had come out of the footlocker. A small curl of smoke rose lazily from his weapon. Renshaw looked down at his leg and saw a blackened, smoking hole in his pants the size of a quarter. The flesh beneath was charred.

The little bastard shot me!

He turned and ran into the hall, then into his bedroom. One of the helicopters buzzed past his cheek, blades whirring busily. The small stutter of a BAR. Then it darted away.

The gun beneath his pillow was a .44 Magnum, big enough to put a hole the size of two fists through anything it hit. Renshaw turned,

holding the pistol in both hands. He realized coolly that he would be shooting at a moving target not much bigger than a flying light bulb.

Two of the copters whirred in. Sitting on the bed, Renshaw fired once. One of the helicopters exploded into nothingness. That's two, he thought. He drew a bead on the second ... squeezed the trigger ...

It jiggged! Goddamnit, it jiggged!

The helicopter swooped at him in a sudden deadly arc, fore and aft overhead props whirring with blinding speed. Renshaw caught a glimpse of one of the BAR men crouched at the open bay door, firing his weapon in short, deadly bursts, and then he threw himself to the floor and rolled.

My eyes, the bastard was going for my eyes!

He came up on his back at the far wall, the gun held at chest level. But the copter was retreating. It seemed to pause for a moment, and dip in recognition of Renshaw's superior firepower. Then it was gone, back toward the living room.

Renshaw got up, wincing as his weight came down on the wounded leg. It was bleeding freely. And why not? he thought grimly. It's not everybody who gets hit point-blank with a bazooka shell and lives to tell about it.

So Mom was his number-one idea girl, was she? She was all that and a bit more.

He shook a pillowcase free of the tick and ripped it into a bandage for his leg, then took his shaving mirror from the bureau and went to the hallway door. Kneeling, he shoved it out onto the carpet at an angle and peered in.

They were bivouacking by the footlocker, damned if they weren't. Miniature soldiers ran hither and thither, setting up tents. Jeeps two

inches high raced about importantly. A medic was working over the soldier Renshaw had kicked. The remaining eight copters flew in a protective swarm overhead, at coffee-table level.

Suddenly they became aware of the mirror, and three of the foot soldiers dropped to one knee and began firing. Seconds later the mirror shattered in four places. Okay, okay, then.

Renshaw went back to the bureau and got the heavy mahogany odds-and-ends box Linda had given him for Christmas. He hefted it once, nodded, and went to the doorway and lunged through. He wound up and fired like a pitcher throwing a fast ball. The box described a swift, true vector and smashed little men like ninepins. One of the jeeps rolled over twice. Renshaw advanced to the doorway of the living room, sighted on one of the sprawling soldiers, and gave it to him.

Several of the others had recovered. Some were kneeling and firing formally. Others had taken cover. Still others had retreated back into the footlocker.

The bee stings began to pepper his legs and torso, but none reached higher than his rib cage. Perhaps the range was too great. It didn't matter; he had no intention of being turned away. This was it.

He missed with his next shot—they were so goddamn small—but the following one sent another soldier into a broken sprawl.

The copters were buzzing toward him ferociously. Now the tiny bullets began to splat into his face, above and below his eyes. He potted the lead copter, then the second. Jagged streaks of pain silvered his vision.

The remaining six split into two retreating wings. His face was wet with blood and he swiped at it with his forearm. He was ready to start firing again when he paused. The soldiers who had retreated inside the footlocker were trundling something out. Something that looked like ...

There was a blinding sizzle of yellow fire, and a sudden gout of wood and plaster exploded from the wall to his left.

... a rocket launcher!

He squeezed off one shot at it, missed, wheeled and ran for the bathroom at the far end of the corridor. He slammed the door and locked it. In the bathroom mirror an Indian was staring back at him with dazed and haunted eyes, a battle-crazed Indian with thin streamers of red paint drawn from holes no bigger than grains of pepper. A ragged flap of skin dangled from one cheek. There was a gouged furrow in his neck.

I'm losing!

He ran a shaking hand through his hair. The front door was cut off. So was the phone and the kitchen extension. They had a goddamn rocket launcher and a direct hit would tear his head off.

Damn it, that wasn't even listed on the box!

He started to draw in a long breath and let it out in a sudden grunt as a fist-sized section of the door blew in with a charred burst of wood. Tiny flames glowed briefly around the ragged edges of the hole, and he saw the brilliant flash as they launched another round. More wood blew inward, scattering burning slivers on the bathroom rug. He stamped them out and two of the copters buzzed angrily through the hole. Minuscule BAR slugs stitched his chest.

With a whining groan of rage he smashed one out of the air barehanded, sustaining a picket fence of deep slashes across his palm. In sudden desperate invention, he slung a heavy bath towel over the other. It fell, writhing, to the floor, and he stamped the life out of it. His breath was coming in hoarse whoops. Blood ran into one eye, hot and stinging, and he wiped it away.

There, goddamnit. There. That'll make them think.

Indeed, it did seem to be making them think. There was no movement for fifteen minutes. Renshaw sat on the edge of the tub, thinking feverishly. There had to be a way out of this blind alley. There had to be. If there was only a way to flank them ...

He suddenly turned and looked at the small window over the tub. There was a way. Of course there was.

His eyes dropped to the can of lighter fluid on top of the medicine cabinet. He was reaching for it when the rustling noise came.

He whirled, bringing the Magnum up ... but it was only a tiny scrap of paper shoved under the crack of the door. The crack, Renshaw noted grimly, was too narrow for even one of them to get through.

There was one tiny word written on the paper:

Surrender

Renshaw smiled grimly and put the lighter fluid in his breast pocket. There was a chewed stub of pencil beside it. He scrawled one word on the paper and shoved it back under the door. The word was:

NUTS

There was a sudden blinding barrage of rocket shells, and Renshaw backed away. They arched through the hole in the door and detonated against the pale blue tiles above the towel rack, turning the elegant wall into a pocket lunar landscape. Renshaw threw a hand over his eyes as plaster flew in a hot rain of shrapnel. Burning holes ripped through his shirt and his back was peppered.

When the barrage stopped, Renshaw moved. He climbed on top of the tub and slid the window open. Cold stars looked in at him. It was a narrow window, and a narrow ledge beyond it. But there was no time to think of that.

He boosted himself through, and the cold air slapped his lacerated face and neck like an open hand. He was leaning over the balance point of his hands, staring straight down. Forty stories down. From this height the street looked no wider than a child's train track. The bright, winking lights of the city glittered madly below him like thrown jewels.

With the deceptive ease of a trained gymnast, Renshaw brought his knees up to rest on the lower edge of the window. If one of those wasp-sized copters flew through that hole in the door now, one shot in the ass would send him straight down, screaming all the way.

None did.

He twisted, thrust one leg out, and one reaching hand grabbed the overhead cornice and held. A moment later he was standing on the ledge outside the window.

Deliberately not thinking of the horrifying drop below his heels, not thinking of what would happen if one of the helicopters buzzed out after him, Renshaw edged toward the corner of the building.

Fifteen feet ... ten ... There. He paused, his chest pressed against the wall, hands splayed out on the rough surface. He could feel the lighter fluid in his breast pocket and the reassuring weight of the Magnum jammed in his waistband.

Now to get around the goddamn corner.

Gently, he eased one foot around and slid his weight onto it. Now the right angle was pressed razorlike into his chest and gut. There was a smear of bird guano in front of his eyes on the rough stone. Christ, he thought crazily. I didn't know they could fly this high.

His left foot slipped.

For a weird, timeless moment he tottered over the brink, right arm backwatering madly for balance, and then he was clutching the two

sides of the building in a lover's embrace, face pressed against the hard corner, breath shuddering in and out of his lungs.

A bit at a time, he slid the other foot around.

Thirty feet away, his own living-room terrace jutted out.

He made his way down to it, breath sliding in and out of his lungs with shallow force. Twice he was forced to stop as sharp gusts of wind tried to pick him off the ledge.

Then he was there, gripping the ornamented iron railings.

He hoisted himself over noiselessly. He had left the curtains half drawn across the sliding glass partition, and now he peered in cautiously. They were just the way he wanted them—ass to.

Four soldiers and one copter had been left to guard the footlocker. The rest would be outside the bathroom door with the rocket launcher.

Okay. In through the opening like gangbusters. Wipe out the ones by the footlocker, then out the door. Then a quick taxi to the airport. Off to Miami to find Morris' number-one idea girl. He thought he might just burn her face off with a flame thrower. That would be poetic justice.

He took off his shirt and ripped a long strip from one sleeve. He dropped the rest to flutter limply by his feet, and bit off the plastic spout on the can of lighter fluid. He stuffed one end of the rag inside, withdrew it, and stuffed the other end in so only a six-inch strip of saturated cotton hung free.

He got out his lighter, took a deep breath, and thumbed the wheel. He tipped it to the cloth and as it sprang alight he rammed open the glass partition and plunged through.

The copter reacted instantly, kamikaze-diving him as he charged across the rug, dripping tiny splatters of liquid fire. Renshaw straight-armed it, hardly noticing the jolt of pain that ran up his arm as the turning blades chopped his flesh open.

The tiny foot soldiers scattered into the footlocker.

After that, it all happened very rapidly.

Renshaw threw the lighter fluid. The can caught, mushrooming into a licking fireball. The next instant he was reversing, running for the door.

He never knew what hit him.

It was like the thud that a steel safe would make when dropped from a respectable height. Only this thud ran through the entire high-rise apartment building, thrumming in its steel frame like a tuning fork.

The penthouse door blew off its hinges and shattered against the far wall.

A couple who had been walking hand in hand below looked up in time to see a very large white flash, as though a hundred flashguns had gone off at once.

“Somebody blew a fuse,” the man said. “I guess—”

“What’s that?” his girl asked.

Something was fluttering lazily down toward them; he caught it in one outstretched hand. “Jesus, some guy’s shirt. All full of little holes. Bloody, too.”

“I don’t like it,” she said nervously. “Call a cab, huh, Ralph? We’ll have to talk to the cops if something happened up there, and I ain’t supposed to be out with you.”

“Sure, yeah.”

He looked around, saw a taxi, and whistled. Its brake lights flared and they ran across to get it.

Behind them, unseen, a tiny scrap of paper floated down and landed near the remains of John Renshaw's shirt. Spiky backhand script read:

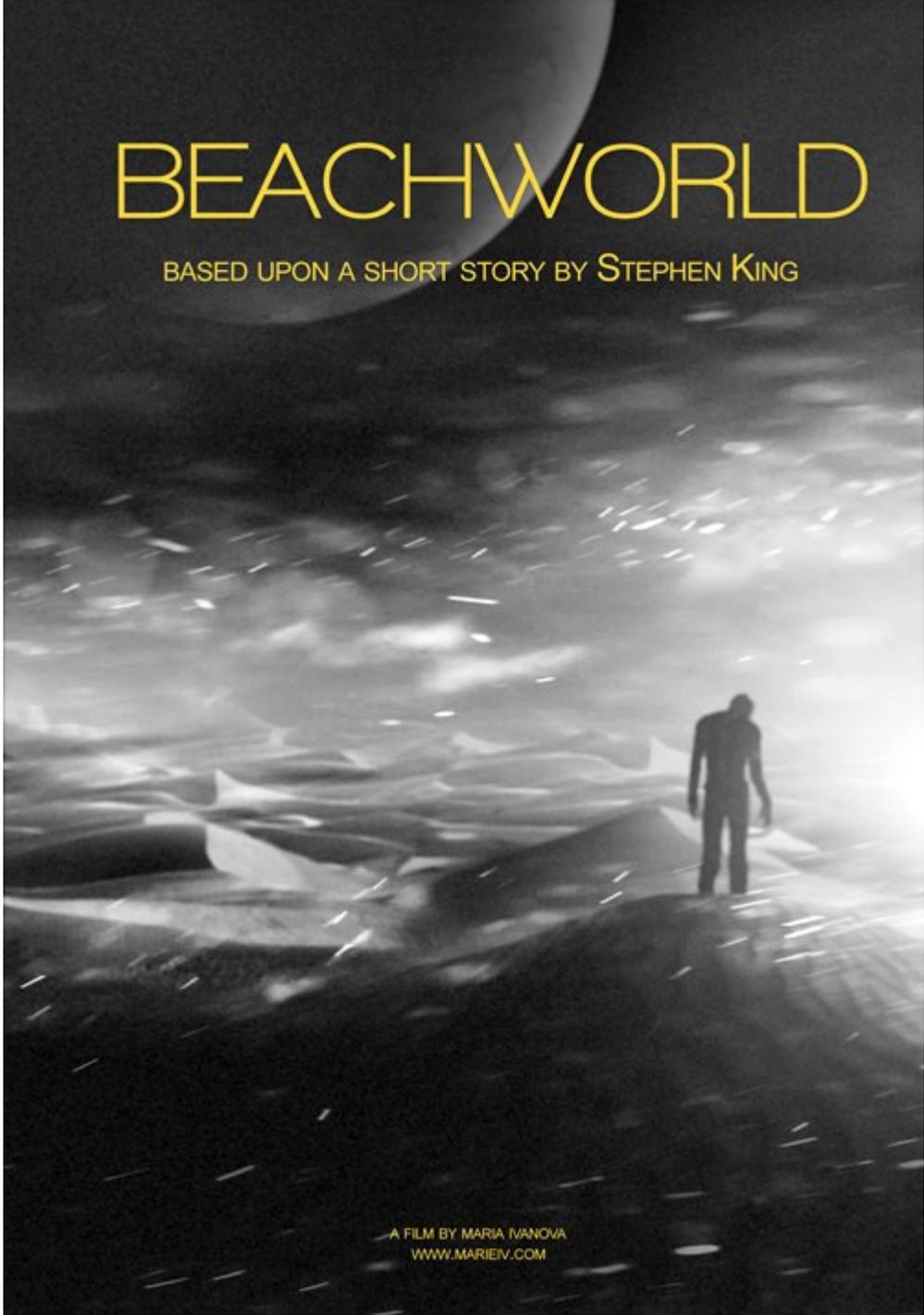
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BEACHWORLD

BASED UPON A SHORT STORY BY STEPHEN KING

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BEACHWORLD

Stephen King

FedShip ASN/29 fell out of the sky and crashed. After a while two men slipped from its cloven skull like brains. They walked a little way and then stood, helmets beneath their arms, and looked at where they had finished up.

It was a beach in no need of an ocean—it was its own ocean, a sculpted sea of sand, a black-and-white-snapshot sea frozen forever in troughs and crests and more troughs and crests.

Dunes.

Shallow ones, steep ones, smooth ones, corrugated ones. Knifecrested dunes, plane-crested dunes, irregularly crested dunes that resembled dunes piled on dunes—dune-dominoes.

Dunes. But no ocean.

The valleys which were the troughs between these dunes snaked in mazy black rat-runs. If one looked at those twisting lines long enough, they might seem to spell words—black words hovering over the white dunes.

“Fuck,” Shapiro said.

“Bend over,” Rand said.

Shapiro started to spit, then thought better of it. Looking at all that sand made him think better of it. This was not the time to go wasting moisture, perhaps. Half-buried in the sand, ASN/29 didn’t look like a dying bird anymore; it looked like a gourd that had broken open and disclosed rot inside. There had been a fire. The starboard fuel-pods had all exploded.

“Too bad about Grimes,” Shapiro said.

“Yeah.” Rand’s eyes were still roaming the sand sea, out to the limiting line of the horizon and then coming back again.

It was too bad about Grimes. Grimes was dead. Grimes was now nothing but large chunks and small chunks in the aft storage compartment. Shapiro had looked in and thought: It looks like God decided to eat Grimes, found out he didn't taste good, and sicked him up again. That had been too much for Shapiro's own stomach. That, and the sight of Grimes's teeth scattered across the floor of the storage compartment.

Shapiro now waited for Rand to say something intelligent, but Rand was quiet. Rand's eyes tracked over the dunes, traced the clockspring windings of the deep troughs between.

"Hey!" Shapiro said at last. "What do we do? Grimes is dead; you're in command. What do we do?"

"Do?" Rand's eyes moved back and forth, back and forth, over the stillness of the dunes. A dry, steady wind ruffled the rubberized collar of the Environmental Protection suit. "If you don't have a volleyball, I don't know."

"What are you talking about?"

"Isn't that what you're supposed to do on the beach?" Rand asked. "Play volleyball?"

Shapiro had been scared in space many times, and close to panic when the fire broke out; now, looking at Rand, he heard a rumor of fear too large to comprehend.

"It's big," Rand said dreamily, and for one moment Shapiro thought that Rand was speaking of Shapiro's own fear. "One hell of a big beach. Something like this could go on forever. You could walk a hundred miles with your surfboard under your arm and still be where you started, almost, with nothing behind you but six or seven footprints. And if you stood in the same place for five minutes, the last six or seven would be gone, too."

“Did you get a topographical compscan before we came down?”
Rand was in shock, he decided. Rand was in shock but Rand was not crazy. He could give Rand a pill if he had to. And if Rand continued to spin his wheels, he could give him a shot. “Did you get a look at—”

Rand looked at him briefly. “What?”

The green places. That had been what he was going to say. It sounded like a quote from Psalms, and he couldn't say it. The wind made a silver chime in his mouth.

“What?” Rand asked again.

“Compscan! Compscan!” Shapiro screamed. “You ever hear of a compscan, dronehead? What's this place like? Where's the ocean at the end of the fucking beach? Where's the lakes? Where's the nearest greenbelt? Which direction? Where does the beach end?”

“End? Oh. I grok you. It never ends. No greenbelts, no ice caps. No oceans. This is a beach in search of an ocean, mate. Dunes and dunes and dunes, and they never end.”

“But what'll we do for water?”

“Nothing we can do.”

“The ship ... it's beyond repair!”

“No shit, Sherlock.”

Shapiro fell quiet. It was now either be quiet or become hysterical. He had a feeling—almost a certainty—that if he became hysterical, Rand would just go on looking at the dunes until Shapiro worked it out, or until he didn't.

What did you call a beach that never ended? Why, you called it a desert! Biggest motherfucking desert in the universe, wasn't that right?

In his head he heard Rand respond: No shit, Sherlock.

Shapiro stood for some time beside Rand, waiting for the man to wake up, to do something. After a while his patience ran out. He began to slide and stumble back down the flank of the dune they had climbed to look around. He could feel the sand sucking against his boots. Want to suck you down, Bill, his mind imagined the sand saying. In his mind it was the dry, arid voice of a woman who was old but still terribly strong. Want to suck you right down here and give you a great ... big ... hug.

That made him think about how they used to take turns letting the others bury them up to their necks at the beach when he was a kid. Then it had been fun—now it scared him. So he turned that voice off—this was no time for memory lane, Christ, no—and walked through the sand with short, sharp kicking strides, trying unconsciously to mar the symmetrical perfection of its slope and surface.

“Where are you going?” Rand’s voice for the first time held a note of awareness and concern.

“The beacon,” Shapiro said. “I’m going to turn it on. We were on a mapped lane of travel. It’ll be picked up, vectored. It’s a question of time. I know the odds are shitty, but maybe somebody will come before—”

“The beacon’s smashed to hell,” Rand said. “It happened when we came down.”

“Maybe it can be fixed,” Shapiro called back over his shoulder. As he ducked through the hatchway he felt better in spite of the smells—fried wiring and a bitter whiff of Freon gas. He told himself he felt better because he had thought of the beacon. No matter how paltry, the beacon offered some hope. But it wasn’t the thought of the beacon that had lifted his spirits; if Rand said it was broken, it was probably most righteously broken. But he could no longer see the dunes—could no longer see that big, never-ending beach.

That was what made him feel better.

When he got to the top of the first dune again, struggling and panting, his temples pounding with the dry heat, Rand was still there, still staring and staring and staring. An hour had gone by. The sun stood directly above them. Rand's face was wet with perspiration. Jewels of it nestled in his eyebrows. Droplets ran down his cheeks like tears. More droplets ran down the cords of his neck and into the neck of his EP suit like drops of colorless oil running into the guts of a pretty good android.

Dronehead I called him, Shapiro thought with a little shudder. Christ, that's what he looks like—not an android but a dronehead who just took a neck-shot with a very big needle.

And Rand had been wrong after all.

“Rand?”

No answer.

“The beacon wasn't broken.” There was a flicker in Rand's eyes. Then they went blank again, staring out at the mountains of sand. Frozen, Shapiro had first thought them, but he supposed they moved. The wind was constant. They would move. Over a period of decades and centuries, they would

... well, would walk. Wasn't that what they called dunes on a beach? Walking dunes? He seemed to remember that from his childhood. Or school. Or someplace, and what in the hell did it matter?

Now he saw a delicate rill of sand slip down the flank of one of them. As if it heard

(heard what I was thinking)

Fresh sweat on the back of his neck. All right, he was getting a touch of the whim-whams. Who wouldn't? This was a tight place they were

in, very tight. And Rand seemed not to know it ... or not to care.

“It had some sand in it, and the warbler was cracked, but there must have been sixty of those in Grimes’s odds-and-ends box.”

Is he even hearing me?

“I don’t know how the sand got in it—it was right where it was supposed to be, in the storage compartment behind the bunk, three closed hatches between it and the outside, but—”

“Oh, sand spreads. Gets into everything. Remember going to the beach when you were a kid, Bill? You’d come home and your mother would yell at you because there was sand everywhere? Sand in the couch, sand on the kitchen table, sand down the foot of your bed? Beach sand is very ...” He gestured vaguely, and then that dreamy, unsettling smile resurfaced. “... ubiquitous.”

“—but it didn’t hurt it any,” Shapiro continued. “The emergency power output system is ticking over and I plugged the beacon into it. I put on the earphones for a minute and asked for an equivalency reading at fifty parsecs. Sounds like a power saw. It’s better than we could have hoped.”

“No one’s going to come. Not even the Beach Boys. The Beach Boys have all been dead for eight thousand years. Welcome to Surf City, Bill. Surf City sans surf.”

Shapiro stared out at the dunes. He wondered how long the sand had been here. A trillion years? A quintillion? Had there been life here once? Maybe even something with intelligence? Rivers? Green places? Oceans to make it a real beach instead of a desert?

Shapiro stood next to Rand and thought about it. The steady wind ruffled his hair. And quite suddenly he was sure all those things had been, and he could picture how they must have ended.

The slow retreat of the cities as their waterways and outlying areas were first speckled, then dusted, finally drifted and choked by the creeping sand.

He could see the shiny brown alluvial fans of mud, sleek as sealskins at first but growing duller and duller in color as they spread further and further out from the mouths of the rivers— out and out until they met each other. He could see sleek sealskin mud becoming reed-infested swamp, then gray, gritty till, finally shifting white sand.

He could see mountains shortening like sharpened pencils, their snow melting as the rising sand brought warm thermal updrafts against them; he could see the last few crags pointing at the sky like the fingertips of men buried alive; he could see them covered and immediately forgotten by the profoundly idiotic dunes.

What had Rand called them?

Ubiquitous.

If you just had a vision, Billy-boy, it was a pretty goddam dreadful one.

Oh, but no, it wasn't. It wasn't dreadful; it was peaceful. It was as quiet as a nap on a Sunday afternoon. What was more peaceful than the beach?

He shook these thoughts away. It helped to look back toward the ship.

“There isn't going to be any cavalry,” Rand said. “The sand will cover us and after a while we'll be the sand and the sand will be us. Surf City with no surf—can you catch that wave, Bill?”

And Shapiro was scared because he could catch it. You couldn't see all those dunes without getting it.

“Fucking dronehead asshole,” he said. He went back to the ship.

And hid from the beach.

Sunset finally came. The time when, at the beach—any real beach—you were supposed to put away the volleyball and put on your sweats and get out the weenies and the beer. Not time to start necking yet, but almost. Time to look forward to the necking.

Weenies and beer had not been a part of ASN/29’s stores.

Shapiro spent the afternoon carefully bottling all of the ship’s water. He used a porta-vac to suck up that which had run out of the ruptured veins in the ship’s supply system and puddled on the floor. He got the small bit left in the bottom of the shattered hydraulic system’s water tank. He did not overlook even the small cylinder in the guts of the air-purification system which circulated air in the storage areas.

Finally, he went into Grimes’s cabin.

Grimes had kept goldfish in a circular tank constructed especially for weightless conditions. The tank was built of impact-resistant clear-polymer plastic, and had survived the crash easily. The goldfish—like their owner—had not been impact-resistant. They floated in a dull orange clump at the top of the ball, which had come to rest under Grimes’s bunk, along with three pairs of very dirty underwear and half a dozen porno holograph-cubes.

He held the globe aquarium for a moment, looking fixedly into it. “Alas, poor Yorick, I knew him well,” he said suddenly, and laughed a screaming, distracted laugh. Then he got the net Grimes kept in his lockbin and dipped it into the tank. He removed the fish and then wondered what to do with them. After a moment he took them to Grimes’s bed and raised his pillow.

There was sand underneath.

He put the fish there regardless, then carefully poured the water into the jerrican he was using as a catcher. It would all have to be purified, but even if the purifiers hadn't been working, he thought that in another couple of days he wouldn't balk at drinking aquarium water just because it might have a few loose scales and a little goldfish shit in it.

He purified the water, divided it, and took Rand's share back up the side of the dune. Rand was right where he had been, as if he had never moved.

"Rand. I brought you your share of the water." He unzipped the pouch on the front of Rand's EP suit and slipped the flat plastic flask inside. He was about to press the zip-strip closed with his thumbnail when Rand brushed his hand away. He took the flask out. Stenciled on the front was ASN/CLASS SHIP'S SUPPLIES STORAGE FLASK CL. #23196755 STERILE WHEN SEAL IS UNBROKEN. The seal was broken now, of course; Shapiro had had to fill the bottle up.

"I purified—"

Rand opened his fingers. The flask fell into the sand with a soft plop. "Don't want it."

"Don't ... Rand, what's wrong with you? Jesus Christ, will you stop it?"

Rand did not reply.

Shapiro bent over and picked up storage flask #23196755. He brushed off the grains of sand clinging to the sides as if they were huge, swollen germs.

"What's wrong with you?" Shapiro repeated. "Is it shock? Do you think that's what it is? Because I can give you a pill

... or a shot. But it's getting to me, I don't mind telling you. You just standing out here looking at the next forty miles of nothing! It's sand!

Just sand!”

“It’s a beach,” Rand said dreamily. “Want to make a sand castle?”

“Okay, good,” Shapiro said. “I’m going to go get a needle and an amp of Yellowjack. If you want to act like a goddam dronehead, I’ll treat you like one.”

“If you try to inject me with something, you better be quiet when you sneak up behind me,” Rand said mildly. “Otherwise, I’ll break your arm.”

He could do it, too. Shapiro, the astrogator, weighed a hundred and forty pounds and stood five-five. Physical combat was not his specialty. He grunted an oath and turned away, back to the ship, holding Rand’s flask.

“I think it’s alive,” Rand said. “I’m actually pretty sure of it.”

Shapiro looked back at him and then out at the dunes. The sunset had given them a gold filigree at their smooth, sweeping caps, a filigree that shaded delicately down to the blackest ebony in the troughs; on the next dune, ebony shaded back to gold. Gold to black. Black to gold. Gold to black and black to gold and gold to—

Shapiro blinked his eyes rapidly, and rubbed a hand over them.

“I have several times felt this particular dune move under my feet,” Rand told Shapiro. “It moves very gracefully. It is like feeling the tide. I can smell its smell on the air, and the smell is like salt.”

“You’re crazy,” Shapiro said. He was so terrified that he felt as if his brains had turned to glass.

Rand did not reply. Rand’s eyes searched the dunes, which went from gold to black to gold to black in the sunset.

Shapiro went back to the ship.

Rand stayed on the dune all night, and all the next day.

Shapiro looked out and saw him. Rand had taken off his EP suit, and the sand had almost covered it. Only one sleeve stuck out, forlorn and supplicating. The sand above and below it reminded Shapiro of a pair of lips sucking with a toothless greed at a tender morsel. Shapiro felt a crazy desire to pelt up the side of the dune and rescue Rand's EP suit.

He did not.

He sat in his cabin and waited for the rescue ship. The smell of Freon had dissipated. It was replaced by the even less desirable smell of Grimes decaying.

The rescue ship did not come that day or that night or on the third day.

Sand somehow appeared in Shapiro's cabin, although the hatchway was closed and the seal still appeared perfectly tight. He sucked the little puddles of sand up with the porta-vac as he had sucked up puddles of spilled water on that first day.

He was very thirsty all the time. His flask was nearly empty already.

He thought he had begun to smell salt on the air; in his sleep he heard the sound of gulls.

And he could hear the sand.

The steady wind was moving the first dune closer to the ship. His cabin was still okay—thanks to the porta-vac—but the sand was already taking over the rest. Mini-dunes had reached through the blown locks and laid hold of ASN/29. It sifted in tendrils and membranes through the vents. There was a drift in one of the blown tanks.

Shapiro's face grew gaunt and pebbly with beard shadow.

Near sunset of the third day, he climbed up the dune to check on Rand. He thought about taking a hypodermic, then rejected it. It was a lot more than shock; he knew that now. Rand was insane. It would be best if he died quickly. And it looked as if that was exactly what was going to happen.

Shapiro was gaunt; Rand was emaciated. His body was a scrawny stick. His legs, formerly rich and thick with iron-pumper's muscle, were now slack and droopy. The skin hung on them like loose socks that keep falling down. He was wearing only his undershorts, and they were red nylon, and they looked absurdly like a ball-hugger bathing suit. A light beard had begun to grow on his face, fuzzing his hollow cheeks and chin. His beard was the color of beach sand. His hair, formerly a listless brown shade, had bleached out to a near blond. It hung over his forehead. Only his eyes, peering through the fringe of his hair with bright blue intensity, still lived fully. They studied the beach

(the dunes goddammit the DUNES)

relentlessly.

Now Shapiro saw a bad thing. It was a very bad thing indeed. He saw that Rand's face was turning into a sand dune. His beard and his hair were choking his skin.

"You," Shapiro said, "are going to die. If you don't come down to the ship and drink, you are going to die."

Rand said nothing.

"Is that what you want?"

Nothing. There was the vacuous snuffle of the wind, but no more. Shapiro observed that the creases of Rand's neck were filling up with sand.

“The only thing I want,” Rand said in a faint, faraway voice like the wind, “is my Beach Boys tapes. They’re in my cabin.”

“Fuck you!” Shapiro said furiously. “But do you know what I hope? I hope a ship comes before you die. I want to see you holler and scream when they pull you away from your precious goddam beach. I want to see what happens then!”

“Beach’ll get you, too,” Rand said. His voice was empty and rattling, like wind inside a split gourd—a gourd which has been left in a field at the end of October’s last harvest. “Take a listen, Bill. Listen to the wave.”

Rand cocked his head. His mouth, half-open, revealed his tongue. It was as shriveled as a dry sponge.

Shapiro heard something.

He heard the dunes. They sang songs of Sunday afternoon at the beach—naps on the beach with no dreams. Long naps. Mindless peace. The sound of crying gulls. Shifting, thoughtless particles. Walking dunes. He heard ... and was drawn. Drawn toward the dunes.

“You hear it,” Rand said.

Shapiro reached into his nose and dug with two fingers until it bled. Then he could close his eyes; his thoughts came slowly and clumsily together. His heart was racing.

I was almost like Rand. Jesus! ... it almost had me!

He opened his eyes again and saw that Rand had become a conch shell on a long deserted beach, straining forward toward all the mysteries of an undead sea, staring out at the dunes and the dunes and the dunes.

No more, Shapiro moaned inside himself.

Oh, but listen to this wave, the dunes whispered back.

Against his better judgment, Shapiro listened.

Then his better judgment ceased to exist.

Shapiro thought: I could hear better if I sat down.

He sat down at Rand's feet and put his heels on his thighs like a Yaqui Indian and listened.

He heard the Beach Boys and the Beach Boys were singing about fun, fun, fun. He heard them singing that the girls on the beach were all within reach. He heard—

—a hollow sighing of the wind, not in his ear but in the canyon between right brain and left brain—he heard that sighing somewhere in the blackness which is spanned only by the suspension bridge of the corpus callosum, which connects conscious thought to the infinite. He felt no hunger, no thirst, no heat, no fear. He heard only the voice in the emptiness.

And a ship came.

It came swooping out of the sky, afterburners scratching a long orange track from right to left. Thunder belted the delta-wave topography, and several dunes collapsed like bulletpath brain damage. The thunder ripped Billy Shapiro's head open and for a moment he was torn both ways, ripped, torn down the middle—

Then he was up on his feet.

“Ship!” he screamed. “Holy fuck! Ship! Ship! SHIP!”

It was a belt trader, dirty and bugged by five hundred—or five thousand—years of clan service. It surfed through the air, banged crudely upright, skidded. The captain blew jets and fused sand into black glass. Shapiro cheered the wound.

Rand looked around like a man awaking from a deep dream.

“Tell it to go away, Billy.”

“You don’t understand.” Shapiro was shambling around, shaking his fists in the air. “You’ll be all right—”

He broke toward the dirty trader in big, leaping strides, like a kangaroo running from a ground fire. The sand clutched at him. Shapiro kicked it away. Fuck you, sand. I got a honey back in Hansonville. Sand never had no honey. Beach never had no hard-on.

The trader’s hull split. A gangplank popped out like a tongue. A man strode down it behind three sampler androids and a guy built into treads that was surely the captain. He wore a beret with a clan symbol on it, anyway.

One of the androids waved a sampler wand at him. Shapiro batted it away. He fell on his knees in front of the captain and embraced the treads which had replaced the captain’s dead legs.

“The dunes ... Rand ... no water ... alive ... hypnotized him ... dronehead world ... I ... thank God ... “

A steel tentacle whipped around Shapiro and yanked him away on his gut. Dry sand whispered underneath him like laughter.

“It’s okay,” the captain said. “Bey-at shel! Me! Me! Gat!”

The android dropped Shapiro and backed away, clittering distractedly to itself.

“All this way for a fucking Fed!” the captain exclaimed bitterly.

Shapiro wept. It hurt, not just in his head, but in his liver.

“Dud! Gee-yat! Gat! Water-for-him-Cry!”

The man who had been in the lead tossed him a nipples low-grav bottle. Shapiro upended it and sucked greedily, spilling crystal-cold water into his mouth, down his chin, in dribbles that darkened his tunic, which had bleached to the color of bone. He choked, vomited, then drank again.

Dud and the captain watched him closely. The androids clattered.

At last Shapiro wiped his mouth and sat up. He felt both sick and well.

“You Shapiro?” the captain asked.

Shapiro nodded.

“Clan affiliation?”

“None.”

“ASN number?”

“29.”

“Crew?”

“Three. One dead. The other—Rand—up there.” He pointed but did not look.

The captain’s face did not change. Dud’s face did.

“The beach got him,” Shapiro said. He saw their questioning, veiled looks. “Shock ... maybe. He seems hypnotized. He keeps talking about the ... the Beach Boys ... never mind, you wouldn’t know. He wouldn’t drink or eat. He’s bad off.”

“Dud. Take one of the andies and get him down from there.” He shook his head. “Fed ship, Christ. No salvage.”

Dud nodded. A few moments later he was scrambling up the side of the dune with one of the andies. The andy looked like a twenty-year-old surfer who might make dope money on the side servicing bored widows, but his stride gave him away even more than the segmented tentacles which grew from his armpits. The stride, common to all androids, was the slow, reflective, almost painful stride of an aging English butler with hemorrhoids.

There was a buzz from the captain's dashboard.

"I'm here."

"This is Gomez, Cap. We got a situation here. Compscan and surface telemetry show us a very unstable surface. There's no bedrock that we can targ. We're resting on our own burn, and right now that may be the hardest thing on the whole planet. Trouble is, the burn itself is starting to settle."

"Recommendation?"

"We ought to get out."

"When?"

"Five minutes ago."

"You're a laugh riot, Gomez."

The captain punched a button and the communicator went out.

Shapiro's eyes were rolling. "Look, never mind Rand. He's had it."

"I'm taking you both back," the captain said. "I got no salvage, but the Federation ought to pay something for the two of you ... not that either of you are worth much, as far as I can see. He's crazy and you're chickenshit."

"No ... you don't understand. You—"

The captain's cunning yellow eyes gleamed.

"You got any contra?" he asked.

"Captain ... look ... please—"

"Because if you do, there's no sense just leaving it here. Tell me what it is and where it is. I'll split seventy-thirty. Standard salvor's fee. Couldn't do any better than that, hey? You—"

The burn suddenly tilted beneath them. Quite noticeably tilted. A horn somewhere inside the trader began to blat with muffled regularity. The communicator on the captain's dashboard went off again.

"There!" Shapiro screamed. "There, do you see what you're up against? You want to talk about contraband now? WE HAVE GOT TO GET THE FUCK OUT OF HERE!"

"Shut up, handsome, or I'll have one of these guys sedate you," the captain said. His voice was serene but his eyes had changed. He thumbed the communicator.

"Cap, I got ten degrees of tilt and we're getting more. The elevator's going down, but it's going on an angle. We've still got time, but not much. The ship's going to fall over."

"The struts will hold her."

"No, sir. Begging the captain's pardon, they won't."

"Start firing sequences, Gomez."

"Thank you, sir." The relief in Gomez's voice was unmistakable.

Dud and the android were coming back down the flank of the dune. Rand wasn't with them. The andy fell further and further behind. And now a strange thing happened. The andy fell over on its face. The captain frowned. It did not fall as an andy is supposed to fall—which

is to say, like a human being, more or less. It was as if someone had pushed over a mannequin in a department store. It fell over like that. Thump, and a little tan cloud of sand puffed up from around it.

Dud went back and knelt by it. The andy's legs were still moving as if it dreamed, in the 1.5 million Freon-cooled micro-circuits that made up its mind, that it still walked. But the leg movements were slow and cracking. They stopped. Smoke began to come out of its pores and its tentacles shivered in the sand. It was gruesomely like watching a human die. A deep grinding came from inside it: Graaaaagggg!

"Full of sand," Shapiro whispered. "It's got Beach Boys religion. "

The captain glanced at him impatiently. "Don't be ridiculous, man. That thing could walk through a sandstorm and not get a grain inside it."

"Not on this world."

The burn settled again. The trader was now clearly canted. There was a low groan as the struts took more weight.

"Leave it!" the captain bawled at Dud. "Leave it, leave it! Gee-yat! Come-me-for-Cry!"

Dud came, leaving the andy to walk face-down in the sand.

"What a balls-up," the captain muttered.

He and Dud engaged in a conversation spoken entirely in a rapid pidgin dialect which Shapiro was able to follow to some degree. Dud told the captain that Rand had refused to come. The andy had tried to grab Rand, but with no force. Even then it was moving jerkily, and strange grating sounds were coming from inside it. Also, it had begun to recite a combination of galactic strip-mining coordinates and a catalogue of the captain's folk-music tapes. Dud himself had then closed with Rand. They had struggled briefly. The captain told Dud that if Dud had allowed a man who had been standing three

days in the hot sun to get the better of him, that maybe he ought to get another First.

Dud's face darkened with embarrassment, but his grave, concerned look never faltered. He slowly turned his head, revealing four deep furrows in his cheek. They were welling slowly.

"Him-gat big indicis," Dud said. "Strong-for-Cry. Him-gat for umby."

"Umby-him for-Cry?" The captain was looking at Dud sternly.

Dud nodded. "Umby. Beyat-shel. Umby-for-Cry."

Shapiro had been frowning, conning his tired, frightened mind for that word. Now it came. Umby. It meant crazy. He's strong, for Christ's sake. Strong because he's crazy. He's got big ways, big force. Because he's crazy.

Big ways ... or maybe it meant big waves. He wasn't sure. Either way it came to the same.

Umby.

The ground shifted underneath them again, and sand blew across Shapiro's boots.

From behind them came the hollow ka-thud, ka-thud, ka-thud of the breather-tubes opening. Shapiro thought it one of the most lovely sounds he had ever heard in his life.

The captain sat deep in thought, a weird centaur whose lower half was treads and plates instead of horse. Then he looked up and thumbed the communicator.

"Gomez, send Excellent Montoya down here with a tranquilizer gun."

"Acknowledged."

The captain looked at Shapiro. “Now, on top of everything else, I’ve lost an android worth your salary for the next ten years. I’m pissed off. I mean to have your buddy.”

“Captain.” Shapiro could not help licking his lips. He knew this was a very ill-chosen thing to do. He did not want to appear mad, hysterical, or craven, and the captain had apparently decided he was all three. Licking his lips like that would only add to the impression ... but he simply couldn’t help himself. “Captain, I cannot impress on you too strongly the need to get off this world as soon as poss—”

“Can it, dronehead,” the captain said, not unkindly.

A thin scream rose from the top of the nearest dune.

“Don’t touch me! Don’t come near me! Leave me alone! All of you!”

“Big indicis gat umby,” Dud said gravely.

“Ma-him, yeah-mon,” the captain returned, and then turned to Shapiro. “He really is bad off, isn’t he?”

Shapiro shuddered. “You don’t know. You just—”

The burn settled again. The struts were groaning louder than ever. The communicator crackled. Gomez’s voice was thin, a little unsteady.

“We have to get out of here right now, Cap!”

“All right.” A brown man appeared on the gangway. He held a long pistol in one gloved hand. The captain pointed at Rand. “Ma-him, for-Cry. Can?”

Excellent Montoya, Unperturbed by the tilting earth that was not earth but only sand fused to glass (and there were deep cracks running through it now, Shapiro saw), unbothered by the groaning struts or the eerie sight of an android that now appeared to be

digging its own grave with its feet, studied Rand's thin figure for a moment.

"Can," he said.

"Gat! Gat-for-Cry!" The captain spat to one side. "Shoot his pecker off, I don't care," he said. "Just as long as he's still breathing when we ship."

Excellent Montoya raised the pistol. The gesture was apparently two-thirds casual and one-third careless, but Shapiro, even in his state of near-panic, noted the way Montoya's head tilted to one side as he lined the barrel up. Like many in the clans, the gun would be nearly a part of him, like pointing his own finger.

There was a hollow fooh! as he squeezed the trigger and the tranquilizer dart blew out of the barrel.

A hand reached out of the dune and clawed it down.

It was a large brown hand, wavery, made of sand. It simply reached up, in defiance of the wind, and smothered the momentary glitter of the dart. Then the sand fell back with a heavy thrrrrap. No hand. Impossible to believe there had been. But they had all seen it.

"Giddy-hump," the captain said in an almost conversational voice.

Excellent Montoya fell on his knees. "Aidy-May-for-Cry, bit-gat come! Saw-hoh got belly-gat for-Cry!—"

Numbly, Shapiro realized Montoya was saying a rosary in pidgin.

Up on the dune, Rand was jumping up and down, shaking his fists at the sky, screeching thinly in triumph.

A hand. It was a HAND. He's right; it's alive, alive, alive—

"Indic!" the captain said sharply to Montoya. "Cannit! Gat!"

Montoya shut up. His eyes touched on the capering figure of Rand and then he looked away. His face was full of superstitious horror nearly medieval in quality.

“Okay,” the captain said. “I’ve had enough. I quit. We’re going.”

He shoved two buttons on his dashboard. The motor that should have swiveled him neatly around so he faced up the gangplank again did not hum; it squealed and grated. The captain cursed. The burn shifted again.

“Captain!” Gomez. In a panic.

The captain slammed in another button and the treads began to move backward up the gangplank.

“Guide me,” the captain said to Shapiro. “I got no fucking rearview mirror. It was a hand, wasn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“I want to get out of here,” the captain said. “It’s been fourteen years since I had a cock, but right now I feel like I’m pissing myself.”

Thrrap! A dune suddenly collapsed over the gangway. Only it wasn’t a dune; it was an arm.

“Fuck, oh fuck,” the captain said.

On his dune, Rand capered and screeched.

Now the threads of the captain’s lower half began to grind. The mini-tank of which the captain’s head and shoulders were the turret now began to judder backward.

“What—”

The treads locked. Sand splurged out from between them.

“Pick me up!” the captain bawled to the two remaining androids.
“Now! RIGHT NOW!”

Their tentacles curled around the tread sprockets as they picked him up—he looked ridiculously like a faculty member about to be tossed in a blanket by a bunch of roughhousing fraternity boys. He was thumbing the communicator.

“Gomez! Final firing sequence! Now! Now!”

The dune at the foot of the gangplank shifted. Became a hand. A large brown hand that began to scrabble up the incline.

Shrieking, Shapiro bolted from that hand.

Cursing, the captain was carried away from it.

The gangplank was pulled up. The hand fell off and became sand again. The hatchway irised closed. The engines howled. No time for a couch; no time for anything like that. Shapiro dropped into a crash-fold position on the bulkhead and was promptly smashed flat by the acceleration. Before unconsciousness washed over him, it seemed he could feel sand grasping at the trader with muscular brown arms, straining to hold them down—

Then they were up and away.

Rand watched them go. He was sitting down. When the track of the trader’s jets was at last gone from the sky, he turned his eyes out to the placid endlessness of the dunes.

“We got a ‘34 wagon and we call it a woody,” he croaked to the empty, moving sand. “It ain’t very cherry; it’s an oldy but a goody.”

Slowly, reflectively, he began to cram handful after handful of sand into his mouth. He swallowed ... swallowed ... swallowed. Soon his belly was a swollen barrel and sand began to drift over his legs.

**STEPHEN
KING**

I S S U E

The master of
modern horror
unearths the
lost prologue to

**THE SHINING
BEFORE
THE PLAY**

FIRST PRINTING

HARD COVER

BEFORE THE PLAY

Stephen King

Scene I: The Third Floor of a Resort Hotel

Fallen Upon Hard Times

IT WAS OCTOBER 7, 1922, and the Overlook Hotel had closed its doors on the end of another season. When it re-opened in mid-May of 1923, it would be under new management. Two brothers named Clyde and Cecil Brandywine had bought it, good old boys from Texas with more old cattle money and new oil money than they knew what to do with.

Bob T. Watson stood at the huge picture window of the Presidential Suite and stared out at the climbing heights of the Rockies, where the aspens had now shaken most of their leaves, and hoped the Brandywine brothers would fail. Since 1915 the hotel had been owned by a man named James Parris. Parris had begun his professional life as a common shyster in 1880. One of his close friends rose to the presidency of a great western railroad, a robber baron among robber barons. Parris grew rich on his fiend's spoils, but had none of his friends colorful flamboyancy. Parris was a gray little man with an eye always turned to an inward set of accounting books. He would have sold the Overlook anyway, Bob T. Watson thought as he continued to stare out the window. The little shyster bastard just happened to drop dead before he got a chance.

The man who had sold the Overlook to James Parris had been Bob T. Watson himself. One of the last of the Western giants that arose in the years 1870-1905, Bob T. came from a family that had made a staggering fortune in silver around Placer, Colorado. They lost the fortune, rebuilt it in land speculation to the railroads, and lost most of it again in the depression of '93-'94, when Bob T.'s father was gunned down in Denver by a man suspected of organizing.

Bob T. had rebuilt the fortune himself, single-handedly, in the years 1895 to 1905, and had begun searching then for something, some perfect thing, to cap his achievement. After two years of careful thought (during the interim he had bought himself a governor and a representative to the US. Congress), he had decided, in modest Watson fashion, to build the grandest resort hotel in America. It would stand at the roof of America, with nothing in the country at a higher altitude except the sky. It would be a playground of the national and international rich - the people that would be known three generations later as the super-rich.

Construction began in 1907, forty miles west of Sidewinder, Colorado, and supervised by Bob T. himself.

"And do you know what?" Bob T. said aloud in the third-floor suite, which was the grandest set of apartments in the grandest resort hotel in America. "Nothing ever went right after that. Nothing."

The Overlook had made him old. He had been forty-three when ground was broken in 1907, and when construction was completed two years later (but too late for them to be able to open the hotel's doors until 1910), he was bald. He had developed an ulcer. One of his two sons, the one he had loved best, the one that had been destined to carry the Watson banner forward into the future, had died in a stupid riding accident. Boyd had tried to jump his pony over a pile of lumber where the topiary now was, and the pony had caught its back feet and broken its leg. Boyd had broken his neck.

There had been financial reverses on other fronts. The Watson fortune, which had looked so secure in 1905, had begun to look decidedly shaky in that autumn of 1909. There had been a huge investment in munitions in anticipation of a foreign War that did not happen, and had not happened until 1914. There had been a dishonest accountant in the timbering end of the Watson operation, and although he had been sent to jail for twenty long years, he had done half a million dollars worth of damage first.

Perhaps disheartened by the death of his oldest son, Bob T. had become unwisely convinced that the way to recoup was the way that his father had couped in the first place: silver. There were advisers who contended against this, but after the calumny of the head accountant, who was the son of one of his father's best friends, Bob T. trusted his advisers less and less. He had refused to believe that Colorado's mining days were over. A million dollars in dry investments hadn't convinced him. Two million had. And by the time the Overlook opened its doors in the late spring of 1910, Bob T. realized that he was precariously close to being in shirt-sleeves again ... and building on the ruins at the age of forty-five might be an impossibility.

The Overlook was his hope.

The Overlook Hotel, built against the roof of the sky, with its topiary of hedge animals to enchant the children, its playground, its long and lovely croquet course, its putting green for the gentlemen, its tennis courts outside and shuffleboard courts inside, its dining room with the western exposure looking out over the last rising jagged peaks of the Rockies, its ballroom facing east, where the land dropped into green valleys of spruce and pine. The Overlook with its one hundred and ten rooms, its staff of specially trained domestics, and not one but two French chefs. The Overlook with its lobby as wide and grand as three Pullman cars, the grand staircase rising to the second floor, and its ponderous neo-Victorian furniture, all capped by the huge crystal chandelier which hung over the stairwell like a monster diamond.

Bob T. had fallen in love with the hotel as an idea, and his love had deepened as the hotel took shape, no longer a mental thing but an actual edifice with strong, clean lines and infinite possibility. His wife had grown to hate it - at one point in 1908 she told him that she would have preferred competing with another woman, that at least she would have known how to cope with - but he had dismissed her hate as a hysterical female reaction to Boyd's death on the grounds.

"You're not natural on the subject," Sarah had told him. "When you look at that there, it's like there was no sense left in you. No one can talk to you about what it's costing, or how people are going to get here when the last sixty miles of road aren't even paved-."

"They'll be paved," he said quiet "I'll pave them."

"And how much will that cost?" Sarah asked hysterically. "Another million?"

"Nowhere near," Bob T. said. "But if it did, I'd pay it."

"You see? Can't you see? You're just not natural on the subject. It's taken your wits, Bob T.!"

Perhaps it had at that.

The Overlook's premier season had been a nightmare. Spring came late, and the roads were not passable until the first of June, and even then they were a nightmare of washboards and axle-smashing chuckholes and hastily-laid corduroy over stretches of jellied mud. There was more rain that year than Bob T. had ever seen before or since, climaxed by a day of snow flurries in August ... black snow, the old women called it, a terrible omen for the winter ahead. In September he had hired a contractor to pave the last twenty miles of the road that led west from Estes Park to Sidewinder, and the forty miles from Sidewinder to the hotel itself, and it had turned into an expensive, round-the-clock operation to finish the two roads before the snow covered them for the long, long winter. The winter his wife had died.

But the roads and the abbreviated season had not been the worst of the Overlook's first year. No. The hotel had been officially opened on June 1, 1910 at a ribbon-cutting ceremony presided over by Bob T's pet congressman. That day had been hot and clear and bright, the kind of day the Denver Post must have had in mind when they took "Tis a privilege to live in Colorado" as their motto. And when the pet

congressman cut the ribbon, the wife of one of the first guests fainted dead away. The applause that had begun at the cutting of the ribbon dried up in little exclamations of alarm and concern. Smelling salts had brought her around, of course, but she had come back to the world with such an expression of dazed terror on her vapid little face that Bob T. could cheerfully have strangled her.

"I thought I saw something in the lobby," she said. "It didn't look like a man."

Later she admitted that it must have been the unexpected heat after all the chilly weather, but of course by then the damage had been done.

Nor was the tale of that days reverses all told.

One of the two chefs had scalded his arm while preparing lunch and had to be taken to the hospital closest by, far away in Boulder. Mrs. Arkinbauer, the wife of the meat-packing king had slipped while towelling herself dry after her bath and had broken her wrist. And finally, the crowning touch, at dinner that night. Bob T.'s pet congressman swallowed a piece of heavy Western sirloin strip steak the wrong way and choked to death in the full and horrified view of two hundred guests, nearly all of them there at Bob T. Watson's personal invitation.

The pet congressman had clawed and clutched at his throat, he had turned first red and then purple, he had actually begun to stagger among the assembled company in his death-throes, bouncing from table to table, his wildly swinging arms knocking over wine-glasses and vases full of freshly cut flowers, eyes bulging hideously at the assembled revellers. It was as if, one Bob T.'s friends told him much later in private, Poe's story about the Red Death had come to life in front of all of them. And perhaps Bob T.'s chance to make his beloved hotel a success had died on that very first night, had died a

jittering, twitching, miserable death right alongside the pet congressman and in full view of those assembled.

The son of one of the guests who had been invited for the gratis opening week was a second-year med student, and he had performed an emergency tracheotomy in the kitchen. Either he was too late to begin with or his hand shook at a critical moment; in either case the results were the same. The man was dead, and before the end of the week, half the guests had departed.

Bob T. mourned to his wife that he had never seen or heard a spectacular run of bad luck.

"Are you so sure that bad luck is all it is?" She responded, only six months away from her own death now.

"What else, Sarah? What else?"

"You've put that hotel up in the tabernacle of your heart!" She assured him in a shrill voice. "Built it on the bones of your first-born son!"

Mention of Boyd still made his throat roughen, even a year later.

"Sarah, Boyd is buried in Denver, next to your own mother."

"But he died here! He died here! And how much is it costing you, Bob T.? How much have you sunk into the wretched place that we'll never get back?"

"I'll get it back."

Then his unlettered wife, who had once kept house for him in a one-room log cabin, had spoken prophecy to him:

"You'll die a poor an sorry man, Bob T. Watson, before you see the first pennyworth of profit from that place."

She had died of influenza, and took her place between her son and her mother.

The season of 1911 had begun just as badly. Spring and then summer had come at more normal times, but Bob T.'s younger son, a fourteen-year-old boy named Richard, had brought him the bad news in mid-April, still a full month before the hotel was due to open.

"Daddy," Richard said, "that bastard Grondin has diddled you."

Grondin was the contractor who had paved the sixty miles of road, at a total cost of seventy thousand dollars. He had cut corners and had used substandard material. After an autumn of frost, a winter of freeze, and a spring of thaw, the paving was breaking up in great, rotted chunks. The last sixty miles of the trip to the Overlook would be impassable by buggy, let alone by one of the new flivvers.

The worst thing about it to Bob T.'s mind, the most frightening thing, was that he had spent at least two days of every week supervising Grondin's work. How could Grondin have slipped the substandard materials past him? How could he have been so blind?

Grondin, of course, was nowhere to be found.

Repaving the roads was more expensive than the original paving had been, because the original paving had to be taken up. It would not serve even as a foundation for the new road. Once again work had to proceed around the clock, entailing overtime wages. There were holdups and snags and confusions. Wagons drawing the materials up from the railhead in Estes Park lost their wheels. Horses burst their hearts trying to draw overloaded wagons up the steep grades. There was a week of rain at the beginning of May. The road was not re-completed until the first week of July, and by then most of the people Bob T. had hoped to draw had made their summer plans and less than half of the Overlook's one hundred and ten rooms were occupied.

In spite of the panicked clamorings of his accountants - and even his son Richard - Bob T. had refused to lay off any of the hotel's staff. He would not even let one of the two expensive chefs go (two new chefs; neither of the two from the previous year had come back), although there was barely enough work for one. He was stubbornly convinced that in late July ... or August ... or

even in September when the aspens had begun to turn ... that the guests would come, the rich would come with their retainers and their hangers-on and their careless money. The statesmen would come, the machine politicians, the actors and actresses who aced the Broadway stage, the foreign nobility who were always in search of a new and diverting place. They would hear about the gorgeous hotel that had been built for their pleasure at the roof of America, and they would come. But they never came. And when

winter put finishes to the Overlook's second season, only one hundred and six guests had signed the register in three months.

Bob T. sighed and continued to stare out the wide window of the Presidential Suite, where in 1922, only one President had actually stayed - Woodrow Wilson. And he had come he had already been a man broken in all the ways a man could be broken - in body, in spirit, in his believability with the people. When Wilson had come here he had been a sorry joke. There had been talk in the country that his wife was actually the President of the United States.

If Sarah hadn't died, Bob T. thought, tracing aimlessly on the window with the tip of his finger, I might have laid them off, some of them at least. she might have badgered me into it. She might have ... but I don't believe it.

You've put that hotel up in the tabernacle of your heart.

The 1912 season had been better. In a manner of speaking, at least, the Overlook had only run eighty thousand dollars in the red. The two previous seasons had cost him over a quarter of a million, not

counting the paving of that double ... no, triple-damned road. When the 1912 season ended he had been hopefully convinced that the pump had finally been primed, that his whining accountants could finally put away their pots of red ink and begin writing with black.

The 1913 season had been better still - only fifty thousand dollars in losses. He became convinced that they would turn the corner in 1914. That the Overlook was gradually coming into its own.

His head accountant had come to him in September of 1914, while the season still had three weeks to run, and advised he filed for bankruptcy.

"What in the name of God are you talking about?" Bob T. asked.

"I'm talking about nearly two hundred thousand dollars in debts which you cannot hope to repay." The accountant's name was Rutherford and he was a fussy little man, an Easterner.

"That's ridiculous," Bob T. said. "Get out of here." His head cook Geroux, would be in soon. They were going to plan the menu for the closing three nights, what Bob T. had conceived of as the Overlook Festival.

The accountant put a thin sheaf of papers down on Bob T.'s desk and left.

Three hours later, after the cook had left, Bob T. found himself looking at the papers. Never mind them, he told himself. Into the wastebasket with them. I'll pink the little bastard, him with his Boston accent and his three piece suits. He was nothing but an incompetent tenderfoot. And did you keep folks on our payroll after they advised you to go into bankruptcy? It was laughable.

He had picked up the papers Rutherford had left, to file them in the circular file, and found himself looking at them. What he saw was enough to make his blood stop in his veins.

On top was a bill from the Keystone Paving Works of Golden. Principal plus interest in the sum of seventy thousand dollars. Account due on receipt of bill. Below that, a bill from the Denver Electrical Outfitters, Inc., who had wired the Overlook for electricity and had installed not one but two gigantic power generators in the cavernous basement. All of this had happened in the

late fall of 1913 when his son Richard had assured him that electricity was not going to go away, and that soon his guests would come to expect it, not as a luxury but a necessity. That bill was in the sum of eighteen thousand dollars.

Bob T. flicked through the remainder of the papers with growing horror. A building maintenance bill, a landscaping bill, the second well he had sunk, the contractors who were even now putting in a health room, the contractors who had just finished the two greenhouses, and last ... last, an itemization in Rutherford's neat and ruthless hand of salaries outstanding.

Fifteen minutes later, Rutherford was standing before him again.

"It can't be this bad," Bob T. whispered hoarsely.

"It is worse," Rutherford said. "If my estimates are correct, you will finish this season twenty thousand dollars or better in the red."

"Only twenty? If we can hold out until next year, we can turn the corner-."

"There is no way we can do that," Rutherford said patiently. "The Overlook's accounts are not depleted, Mr. Watson, they are empty. I even closed out the petty cash account last Thursday afternoon so I could finish making up the staff's pay envelopes. The checking accounts are likewise empty. Your mining interest in Haggie Notch is closed out, as per your order this July. That is everything ...

Rutherford's eyes gleamed with brief hope. "That is, everything I know of."

"It's everything!" Bob T. agreed dully, and the hope in Rutherford's eyes was extinguished. Bob T. sat up a little straighter. "I'll go to Denver tomorrow. I'll see about a second mortgage on the hotel."

"Mr. Watson," Rutherford said with a curious gentleness. "You took the second mortgage last winter."

And so he had. How could he have forgotten a thing like that? Bob T. wondered with real fright. The same way he had forgotten two hundred thousand dollars worth of payment due? Just forgotten it? When a man started "just forgetting" things like that, it was time for that man to get out of business before he was pushed out.

But he would not let the Overlook go.

"I'll get a third," he said. "Bill Steeves will give me a third."

"No, I don't believe he will," Rutherford said.

"What do you mean, you don't believe he will, you little Boston bean?" Bob T. had roared. "Billy Steeves and me go back to 1890 together! I got him his start in business ... helped to capitalize his bank ... kept my money in with him in '94 when everybody west of the Mississippi was shitting in their drawers! Hell give me a *tenth* mortgage, or I'll know the reason why!"

Rutherford looked at Bob T. and wondered what he should say, what he *could* say that the old man didn't already know. Could he tell him that William Steeves had put his position as President of the First Mercantile Bank of Denver in severe Jeopardy by granting the second mortgage when the situation at the Overlook was clearly hopeless? That Steeves had done it anyway under the ridiculous conviction that he owed Bob T. Watson a debt (to Rutherford's precision-balanced mind the only real debt was a debt that had been contracted for in triplicate)? Could he tell Watson that even if Steeves cut his own throat and agreed to try and get him a third mortgage that he would succeed in doing nothing but putting himself

on the severely depressed executive job market? That even if the unthinkable happened and the mortgage were issued, it would not be even enough to clear the outstanding debts?

Surely the old man must know those things.

Old man, Rutherford mused. Surely he can't be more than fifty, but right at this minute he looks more like seventy-five. What is there to tell him? That his wife was right, maybe, that the creditors were right. The hotel had sucked him dry. It had stolen his business acumen, his savvy, even his common sense. You needed a special kind of sense to survive in American business, a special kind of sight. And now Bob T. Watson was blind. It was the hotel that had blinded him and made him old.

Rutherford said, "I believe the time has come for me to thank you for my two years of employment and give my notice, Mr. Watson. I'll waive any further emolument." That was a bitter joke.

"Go on, then," Bob T. said. His face was gray and drawn. "You don't belong in the west anyway. You don't understand what the west is all about. You are just a cheap tin Eastern chamberpot with a time-clock for a mind. Get out of here."

Bob T. took the stack of accounts due, tipped them in half, in fourths, and with a clench that went all the way up his arms to his shoulders, in eighths. He threw the pieces in Rutherford's face.

"Get out!" He yelled. "Go on back to Baaston! I'll still be running this hotel in 1940! Me and my son Richard! Get out! Get out!"

Bob T. turned away from the window and looked thoughtfully at the large double bed where President Wilson and his wife had slept ... if they *had* slept. It seemed to Bob T. that a great many people who came to the Overlook slept very poorly.

I'll still be running this hotel in 1940!

Well, in a way that might be true. I just might. He went into the living room, a tall, stooped man, mostly bald now, wearing carpenter's overalls and heavy workshoes instead of the expensive Western boots he had once worn. There was a hammer in one pocket and a keychain in the other, and on the ring attached to the chain were all the keys to the hotel. Better than fifty in all, including a different passkey for each wing of each floor, but none of them were labelled. He knew them all by sight and by touch.

The Overlook had not wanted for a buyer, and Bob T. supposed it never would. There was something about the place that reminded him of that old Greek story about Homer and the sirens on the rock. Businessmen (the Homers of the 20th century) who were otherwise sane and hardheaded, became irrationally convinced that they could take the place over and over beyond their wildest dreams. This pleased Bob T. to no end. It was finding out that he wasn't alone in his craziness, it seemed. Or maybe it was just knowing that the Overlook would never stand empty and deserted. He didn't think he could have borne that.

Despite Rutherford's protests that he could only salvage something declaring bankruptcy and letting the bank sell the Overlook, Bob T. had it himself. He had grown more and more fond of his son Richard - perhaps he would never be able to fill Boyd's shoes but he was a good, hardworking boy and now that his mother was dead they only had each other - and he was not going to let the boy grow up with the stigma of a bankruptcy case hanging over his head.

There had been three interested parties and Bob T. had held on grimly until he got his price, always staying just one jump ahead of the buying creditors who wanted to bring him down and divide the spoils up among themselves. He had called a hundred old debts, some of them going back to his father's time. To keep the Overlook out of the bank's hands and in his own he had browbeaten a widow into hysteria, he had threatened an Albuquerque newspaper publisher with exposure (the news publisher had a penchant for

young, pre-pubescent, actually - girls), he had gotten down on his knees and once begged a man who had been so revolted that he had given Bob T. a check for ten thousand dollars just to get him off his knees and out of his office.

None of it was enough to blot away the rising tide of red ink - nothing could do that, he recognized - but he mustered enough in that winter of 1914-15 to keep his hotel out of receivership.

In the spring he had dealt with James Parris, the man who had begun life as a common shyster. Bob T.'s price - a ridiculously low one - had been one hundred and eighty thousand dollars plus lifetime jobs for himself and his son ... as the Overlook's maintenance men.

"You're insane, man," Parris had said. "Is that what you want to avoid bankruptcy for? So the Denver papers can report you're working as a janitor in the hotel you once owned?" And he reiterated: "You're insane."

Bob T. was adamant. He would not leave the hotel. And for all his cold businessman's talk, he knew that Parris would give in. The cold talk did not hide the funny, eager look in Parris's eyes. Didn't Bob T. know that look well enough? Hadn't he seen it in his own mirror every day for the last six years?

"I don't have to dicker with you over it," Parris had replied, affecting indifference. "If I wait another two months, perhaps only three weeks, you'll crash. And then I can deal with the First Mercantile."

"And they'll charge you a quarter of a million if they charge you a penny," Bob T. replied.

For that Parris had no answer. He could pay the two Watsons' salaries for the rest of their lives out of the money he would save by dealing with this lunatic instead of the bank.

So the deal was made. The one hundred and eighty thousand dollars at last mopped up the red ink. The road was paid for, and the electricity, and the landscaping, and all the rest. Bankruptcy was avoided. James Parris took over in the manager's office upstairs. Bob T. and Dick Watson moved downstairs from their suite in the west wing of the third floor to an apartment in the huge cellar. Their domain was behind a door that said Maintenance Only - Keep Out!

If James Parris had ever thought that Bob T.'s insanity would extend to his work, he was wrong. He was the ideal maintenance man, and his son, who was more fitted for this life than one of affluence and college and business things that made his head hurt to think of them, was his eager apprentice. "If we're janitors," Bob T. had once told his son, "then that thing going on over in France is nothing but a barroom squabble."

They kept the place clean, yes, Bob T. was something of a fanatic about that. But they did more. They kept the generators in perfect running condition. From June of 1915 to this day, October 7th, 1922, there had never been a power outage. When the telephones had been installed, Bob T. and his son Richard had put in the switchboard themselves, working from manuals they had pored over night after late night in preparation. They kept the roof in perfect condition, replaced broken panes of glass, turned the rug in the dining room once a month, painted, plastered, and oversaw the Installation of the elevator in 1917.

And they lived there in the winter.

"Not too exciting up there in the winter, is it?" The bell-captain had asked them once while they were on coffee break. "What do you do, hibernate?"

"We keep busy," Bob T. had answered shortly. And Richard had only offered an uneasy grin, uneasy, yes, because every Hotel had a

skeleton or two in the closet, and sometimes the skeletons rattled their bones.

One late January afternoon when Bob T. had been putting a piece of glass over the top of the reception desk, a terrible noise had come from the dining room, a horrible choking noise that had encased him in horror and had taken him back over the years to that first night, when his pet congressman had choked to death on a piece of steak.

He stood stock-still, willing the noise to stop, but the terrible strangling noises went on and on and he thought, *if I went in there now I'd see him, staggering around from table to table like some awful beggar at a king's feast, his eyes bulging,, begging someone to help him.*

His entire body broke out in gooseflesh - even the thin skin on his back knobbed up into bumps. And as suddenly as it had begun, the choking sound sank to a breathless, gargling moan, and then to nothing.

Bob T. broke the paralysis that had gripped him and lunged for the big double doors that gave on the dining room. Surely time had taken some sort of twist, and when he got inside he would see the congressman stretched out on the floor with the guests gathered helplessly around him. Bob T. would call out as he had on that long-ago day, "Is there a doctor in the house?" and the second-year med student would brush through the crowd and say, "Let's take him into the kitchen."

But when he pushed through the double doors, the dining room was empty, all the tables in one corner with their chairs upturned on them, and there was no sound but the wind singing high around the eaves. Outside It was snowing, obscuring the mountains for a moment and then revealing them for another moment, like the flap of ragged curtains.

There had been other things. Dick reported hearing knocking noises from inside the elevator, as if somebody had been caught in there and was rapping to be let out. Only when he opened the door with the special key and slid back the brass gate, the elevator was empty. One night they had both awakened thinking they heard a woman sobbing somewhere above them, in the lobby it sounded like, and went up to find nothing.

These things had all happened in the off-season, and Bob T. didn't have to tell Dick not to talk about them. There were enough folks, Mr.-High-and-Mighty-Parris among them, who thought they were crazy already.

But sometimes Bob T. wondered if things didn't sometimes happen in season. If some of the staff and some of the guests hadn't heard things themselves ... or seen things. Parris had maintained the quality of the service, and had even added a feature to it that Bob T. had never thought of - a limousine which made a run from The Longhorn House in downtown Denver right up to the Overlook once every three days. He had kept prices low in spite of the inflation the Kaiser's war had brought on, hoping to build the trade. Hoping to build a name. He had added a swimming pool to the hotel's other formidable recreation features.

The people who came to the Overlook to enjoy these features rarely re-booked for a second season, though. Nor did they give the Overlook benefit of that best and cheapest advertising, word-of-mouth, by recommending it to their friends. Some of them would book for a month and then leave in two weeks, shaking their heads in an almost embarrassed way and brushing aside Parris's earnest questions: Was something wrong with the food? You were treated poorly? The service was slow? The housekeeping was sloppy? It seemed it was none of those things. The people left and rarely came back.

Bob T. had been pleased to see the Overlook become something of an obsession with Parris. The man was going gray over it, trying to figure out what was wrong and having no luck.

Had the Overlook ever had a season in the black between 1915 and 1922? Bob T. wondered now, as he sat in the Presidential Suite living room and looked at his reflection. That was between Parris and his accountant, of course, and they had been a couple of close ones. But it was Bob T.'s guess that it never had. Maybe Parris had never let his obsession get out of hand as the Overlook's owner and builder had done (Bob T. sometimes thought these days that he had tried to ride and break whatever jinx had been built into his hotel the way his grandfather would have ridden and broken a wild mustang pony), but he was quite sure that Parris had pumped large amounts of money into the hotel every season without getting anything back, as Bob T. himself had done.

You'll die a poor and sorry man before you see the first pennyworth of profit from that place.

Sarah had told him that. Sarah had been right. She had been right for Parris, too. The shyster might not have been stony broke, but he surely must have been sorry he had ever hooked up to this combination when he died of an apparent heart attack while strolling the grounds this August past.

Bob T.'s boy (although Dick wasn't such a boy now, old enough to drink and smoke and vote, old enough to plan on getting married this December) had himself found Parris early in the morning. Dick had been down in the topiary by the playground with his hedge-trimmers at seven AM and there Parris had been, stretched out stone dead between two of the hedge lions.

It was funny about that topiary; it had become the Overlook's trademark in a way, and it had come into being in a very offhand fashion. It had been the landscaper's idea to fringe the playground

with hedge animals. He had submitted a sketch to Bob T. showing the playground area surrounded by lions, buffalo, a rabbit, a cow, and so on. Bob T. had scratched a go-ahead on the memo accompanying the sketch without a pause. He couldn't remember that he had even thought twice about it, one way or another. But it had often been the playground topiary that that the guests went away talking about instead of the meals or the spare-no-expense decor of the rooms 29 suites. Bob T. supposed it was just another example of how nothing at the Overlook had gone as he had expected.

Parris, they figured, must have gone out for a late evening stroll across the front lawn and the putting green and through the playground to the road. On the way back the heart attack had struck him down. There had been no one to miss him, because his wife had left him in 1920.

In a way, that had been the Overlook's fault, too. In the years 1915-1917, Parris had spent no more than two weeks of the season here. His wife, a sulky, pretty thing who had been something on Broadway, didn't like the place - or so it was rumored. In 1918 they had spent a month and according to the gossip there had been several bitter fights over it. She saying that she wanted to go to the Bahamas or to Cuba. He asking sarcastically if she wanted to catch some kind of jungle rot. She saying that if he didn't take her she would go on her own. He saying that if she did that she could find someone else to support her expensive tastes. She stayed. That year.

In 1919, Parris and his wife stayed for six weeks, occupying a suite on the third floor. The hotel was getting hold of him, Bob T. thought with some satisfaction. After awhile it got so you felt like a gambler who couldn't leave the table.

Anyway, Parris had been planning on a longer stay, and then, at the end of their sixth week, the woman had gone into hysterics. Two of the upstairs maids had heard her, weeping and screaming and

begging for him to take her away, to take her anyplace. They had left that same afternoon, Parris's brow like thunder, his wife's pretty face pale and devoid of make-up, her eyes resting like dark raisins in the hollows of her eyesockets, as if she had been sleeping badly or not at all. Parris had not even stopped to confer with his manager or with Bob T. And when he had shown up in June of 1921, it had been sans wife. The head housekeeper's sister lived in New Jersey, and she sent out one of those gossip papers saying that Parris's wife had asked for a divorce on the grounds of "mental cruelty," whatever that meant.

"What I guess it means," Harry Durker, the groundskeeper told Bob T. over bourbon, "is that she couldn't pan out the gold as fast as she thought she could."

Or was it the Overlook? Bob T. wondered. Anyway, didn't matter. Parris had been up here on opening day of the season just past, the Overlook's thirteenth, and he hadn't left until they carried him off in the Sidewinder funeral hack. The little shyster's will was still in probate, but that matter was going to be quite straightforward. Parris's hotel manager had gotten a letter from the firm of New York lawyers acting as executors, and the letter had mentioned the Brandywine brothers from Texas, who were expected to buy. They wanted to keep Parris's manager on if he wanted to stay, and at a substantially higher salary. But the manager had already told Bob T. (also over bourbon) that he was going to turn the offer down.

"This place is never going to make a go," he told Bob T. "I don't care if Jesus Christ Himself bought the place and got John the Baptist to manage it. I feel more like a cemetery caretaker than a hotel manager. It's like something died up in the walls and everybody who comes here can smell it from time to time."

Yes, Bob T. thought, that's exactly what it's like. Only ain't it funny how something like that can sometimes get a hold on a man?

He stood up and stretched. Sitting here and thinking over old times was all very well and good, but it wasn't getting the work done. And there was a lot of it this winter. New elevator cables to be put in. A new service shed to be built out back, and that had to be done before the snow flew and cut them off. The shutters had to be put up, of course, and-

Bob T., on his way to the door, stopped dead still.

He heard, or thought he heard, Boyd's voice, high and young and full of joy. It was faint with distance, but unmistakably Boyd's. Coming from the direction of what was now the topiary.

"Come on. Rascal! Come on! Come on! Go it!"

Rascal? The name of Boyd's pony.

Like a man in a dream, like a man caught in some slow and slushy delirium, Bob T. turned to the wide window. Again that curious feeling of time doubling back on itself. When he reached the window and looked out he would not see the hedge animals because the year was 1908 and the topiary had not yet been set in. Instead he would see a buddy stretch of hill clumped and clotted with building materials, he would see a pile of new lumber where the entrance to the playground would later be, he would see Boyd racing toward that pile of lumber on board Rascal, he would see them go up together, he would see Rascal's rear feet catch the top of the pile, and he would see them tumble down, together with all grace gone, and hope of life with it.

Bob T. staggered toward the window where he would see these things, his face dough-pale, his mouth a slack wound. He could hear- surely it was not only in his mind? - hoofbeats drumming on muddy ground.

"Go it, Rascal! Get up, boy! Get!"

A thudding, flat crack. And then the screaming began, the high, unhuman scream of the pony, the rattle of boards, the final thud.

"Boyd!" Bob T. screamed. *"Oh my God, Boyd! BOYD!"*

He struck the window forcibly, shattering three of the six panes of glass. Drawing a jagged though shallow cut across the back of his right hand. The glass fell outward, turning over and over, twinkling in the sun, to strike and shatter on the outsloping second floor roof below.

He saw the lawn, green and manicured, sloping smoothly down to the putting green and beyond it to the topiary. The three hedge lions that guarded the gravelled path were crouched in their usual half-threatening, half-playful postures. The hedge rabbit stood on its hind legs with its ears perked up cockily. The hedge cow stood as was its wont, cropping at the grass, now with a few autumn-yellow aspen leaves caught on its head and stuck to its sides.

No pile of lumber. No Boyd. No Rascal.

Running footsteps up the hall. Bob T. turned to the door just as it opened and Dick hurried in with his tool box in one hand.

"Dad , are you all right?"

"Fine."

"You're bleeding."

"Cut my hand," Bob T. said. "Tripped over my own stupid feet and hit that window. Guess I made us some work."

"But you're all right?"

"Fine, I told you," he said testily.

"I was down at the end of the hall, looking at those elevator cables. I thought I heard someone outside."

Bob T. looked at his son sharply.

"You didn't hear anyone, did you, daddy?"

"No," Bob T. said. He took his handkerchief out of his back pocket and wrapped it around his bleeding hand. "Who'd be up here this time of year?"

"That's right," Dick said. And his eyes and his father's eyes met with kind of electric shock, and in that second they both saw more than they might perhaps have wished. They dropped their eyes simultaneously.

"Come on," Bob T. said gruffly. "Let's see if we've got the glass to fix this bastard."

They went out together and Bob T. spared a single backward glance at the living room of the Presidential Suite with its silk wallpaper and its heavy furnishings dreaming in the late afternoon sun.

Guess they'll have to carry me out in the meatwagon, the same as they did Parris, he thought. Only way they'll get me to leave. He looked with love at his son, who had drawn ahead of him.

Dick, too. This place has got us, I guess.

It was a thought that made him feel loathing and love at the same time.

Scene II. A Bedroom in the Wee Hours of the Morning

Coming here had been a mistake, and Lottie Kilgallon didn't like to admit her mistakes.

And I won't admit this one, she thought with determination as she stared up at the ceiling that glimmered overhead.

Her husband of ten days slumbered beside her. Sleeping the sleep of the just was how some might have put it. Others, more honest, might have called it the sleep of the monumentally' stupid. He was William Pillsbury of the Westchester Pillsburys, only son and heir of Harold M. Pillsbury, old and comfortable money. Publishing was what they liked to talk about, because publishing was a gentleman's profession, but there was also a chain of New England textile a foundry in Ohio, and extensive agricultural holdings in the south - cotton and citrus and fruit. Old money was always better than *nouveau riche*, but either way they had money falling out of their assholes. If she ever said that aloud to Bill, he would undoubtedly go pale and might even faint dead away. No fear, Bill. Profanation of the Pillsbury family shall never cross my lips.

It had been her idea to honeymoon at the Overlook in Colorado, and there had been two reasons for this. First, although it was tremendously expensive (as the best resorts were), it was not a "hep" place to go, and Lottie did not *like to go to* the hep places. Where did you go on your honeymoon, Lottie? Oh, this *perfectly wonderful resort* hotel in Colorado - the Overlook. Lovely place. Quite out of the way but so romantic. And her friends - whose stupidity was exceeded in most cases only by that of William Pillsbury himself - would look at her in dumb - literally! - wonder. Lottie had done it again.

Her second reason had been of more personal importance. She had wanted to honeymoon at the Overlook because Bill wanted to go to Rome. It was imperative to find out certain things as soon as possible. Would she be able to have her own way immediately? And if not, how long would it take to grind him down? He was stupid, and

he had followed her around like a dog with its tongue hanging out since her debutante ball, but would he be as malleable after the ring was slipped on as he had been before?

Lottie smiled a little in the dark in spite of her lack of sleep and the bad dreams she had had since they arrived here. *Arrived here*, that was the key phrase. "Here" was not the American Hotel in Rome but the Overlook in Colorado. She was going to be able to manage him just fine, and that was the important thing. She would only make him stay another four days (she had originally planned on three weeks, but the bad dreams had changed that), and then could go back to New York. After all, that was where the action was in this August of 1929. The stock market was going crazy, the sky was the limit, and Lottie expected to be an heiress to multi-millions instead of just one or two millions by this time next year. Of course there were some weak sisters who claimed the market was riding for a fall, but no one had ever called Lottie Kilgallon a weak sister.

Lottie Kilgallon Pillsbury now, at least that's the way I'll have to sign my letters ... and my checks, of course. But inside I'll always be Lottie Kilgallon. Because he's never going to touch me. Not inside where it counts.

The most tiresome thing about this first contest of her marriage was that Bill actually *liked* the Overlook. He was up every day at two minutes past the crack of dawn, disturbing what ragged bits of sleep she had managed after the restless nights, staring eagerly out at the sunrise like some sort of disgusting Greek nature boy. He had been hiking two or three times, he had gone on several nature rides with other guests, and bored her almost to the point of screaming with stories about the horse he rode on these jaunts, a bay mare named Tessie. He had tried to get her to go on these outings with him, but Lottie refused. Riding meant slacks, and her posterior was just a trifle too wide for slacks. The idiot had also suggested that she go hiking with him and some of the others - the caretaker's son doubled as a guide, Bill enthused, and he knew a hundred trails. The amount

of game you saw, Bill said, would make you think it was 1829 instead of a hundred years later. Lottie had dumped cold water on this idea, too.

'I believe, darling, that all hikes should be one-way, you see.'

"One way?" His wide anglo-saxon brow criggled and croggled into its usual expression of befuddlement. "How can you have a one-way hike, Lottie?"

"By hailing a taxi to take you home when your feet begin to hurt," she replied coldly. The barb was wasted. He went without her, and came back glowing. The stupid bastard was getting a tan.

She had not even enjoyed their evenings of bridge in the downstairs recreation room, and that was most unlike her. She was something of a barracuda at bridge, and if it had been ladylike to play for stakes in mixed company, she could have brought a cash dowry to her marriage (not that she would have, of course). Bill was a good bridge partner, too, he had both qualifications. He understood the basic rules and he allowed Lottie to dominate him. She thought it was poetic justice that her new husband spent most of their bridge evenings as the dummy.

Their partners at the Overlook were the Compsons occasionally, the Vereckers more frequently. Verecker was in his early seventies, a surgeon who had retired following a near-fatal heart attack. His wife smiled a lot, spoke softly, and had eyes like shiny nickles. They played only adequate bridge, but they kept beating Lottie and Bill. On the occasions when the men played against the women, the men ended up trouncing Lottie and Malvina Verecker. When Lottie and Dr. Verecker played Bill and Malvina, she and the doctor usually won but there was no pleasure in it because Bill was a dullard and Malvina could not see the game of bridge as anything but a social tool.

Two nights ago, after the doctor and his wife had made a bid of four clubs that they had absolutely no right to make, Lottie had mused

the cards in a sudden flash of pique that was very unlike her. She usually kept her feelings under much better control.

"You could have led into my spades on that third trick!" She rattled at Bill. "That would have put a stop to it right there!"

"But dear," Bill said, flustered, "I thought you were thin in spades-"

"If I had been thin in spades, I shouldn't have bid two of them, should I? Why I continue to play this game with you I don't know!"

The Vereckers blinked at them in mild surprise. Later that evening Mrs. Verecker, she of the nickle-bright eyes, would tell her husband that she had thought them such a nice couple, so loving, but when she rumped the cards like that she had looked just like a female shrew ... or was that a shrewess?

Bill was staring at her with his jaw agape.

"I'm very sorry," she said, gathering up the reins of her control and giving them an inward shake. "I'm off my feed a little, I suppose. I haven't been sleeping well."

"That's a pity," the doctor said. "Usually this mountain air ... we're almost twelve thousand feet above sea level, you know ... is very conducive to good rest. Less oxygen, you know. The body doesn't-"

"I've had bad dreams," Lottie told him shortly.

And so she had. Not just bad dreams but nightmares. She had never been much of a one to dream (which said something disgusting and Freudian about her psyche, no doubt), even as a child. Oh yes, there had been some, pretty humdrum affairs, mostly. The only one she could remember that came even close to being a nightmare was one in which she had been delivering a Good Citizenship speech at the school assembly and had looked down to discover she had forgotten

to put on her dress. Later someone had told her almost everyone had a dream like that at sometime or another.

The dreams that she had had at the Overlook were much worse. It was not a case of one dream or two repeating themselves with variations; they were all different. Only the setting of each was similar: in each one she found herself in a different part of the Overlook Hotel. Each dream would begin with an awareness on her part that she was dreaming, and that something terrible and frightening was going to happen to her in the course of the dream. There was an inevitability about it that was particularly awful.

In one of them she had been hurrying for the elevator because she was late for dinner, so late that Bill had already gone down before her in a temper.

She rang for the elevator which came promptly and was empty except for the operator. She thought too late that it was odd; at mealtimes you could barely wedge yourself in. Even though the stupid hotel was only half-full, the elevator had a ridiculously small capacity. Her unease heightened as the elevator descended and continued to descend ... for far too long a time. Surely they must have reached the lobby or even the basement by now, and still the operator did not open the doors and still the sensation of downward motion continued. She tapped him on the shoulder with mixed feelings of indignation and panic, aware too late of how spongy he felt, how strange, like a scarecrow stuffed with rotten straw. And as he turned his head and grinned at her she saw that the elevator was being piloted by a dead man, his face a greenish-white corpse-hue, his eyes sunken, the hair under his cap lifeless and sere. The fingers wrapped around the switch were fallen away to bones.

Even as she filled her lungs to shriek, the corpse threw the switch over and uttered, "Your floor, madam," in a husked and empty voice. The doors drew open to reveal flames and basalt plateaus and the stench of brimstone. The elevator operator had taken her to hell.

In another near the end of the afternoon she was on the playground. The light was curiously golden although the sky overhead was black with thunderheads. Membranes of shower danced between two of the saw-toothed peaks further west. It was like a Breughel landscape, a moment of sunshine and low pressure. And she felt something behind her, moving. Something in the topiary. And she turned to see with frozen horror that it was the topiary: the hedge animals had left their places and were creeping toward her, the green lions, the buffalo, even the rabbit that usually looked so comic and friendly. Their horrid hedge features were bent on her as they moved slowly toward the playground on their hedge paws, green and silent and deadly under the black thunderheads.

In the one she had just awakened from, the hotel had been on fire. She had awakened in their room to find Bill gone and smoke drifting slowly through the apartment. She fled in her nightdress but lost her direction in the narrow halls, which were obscured by smoke. All the numbers seemed to be gone from the doors, and there was no way to tell if you were running toward the stairwell and the elevator or away from it. She had rounded a corner and had seen Bill standing outside the window at the end, motioning her forward. Somehow she had run all the way to the back of the hotel and he was standing out there on the fire escape landing. Now there was heat baking into her back through the thin filmy stuff of her nightgown. The place must be in flames behind her, she thought. Perhaps it had been the boiler. You had to keep an eye on the boiler because if you didn't, she would creep on you.

Lottie started forward and suddenly something wrapped around her arm like a python, holding her back. It was one of the fire hoses that she had seen spotted along the corridor walls, white canvas hose in a bright red frame. It had come alive somehow. It writhed and coiled around her, now securing a leg, now her other arm. She was held fast and it was getting hotter, hotter. She could hear the hungry crackle of the flames now only feet behind her. The wallpaper was

peeling and blistering. Bill was gone from the fire escape landing. And then she had been-

She had been awake in the big double bed, no smell of smoke, and Bill Pillsbury sleeping the sleep of the justly stupid beside her. She had been running sweat, and if it hadn't been so late she would have gotten up to shower. It was quarter past three in the morning.

Dr. Verecker had offered to give her a sleeping medicine, but Lottie had refused. She distrusted any concoction you put in your body to knock out your mind. It was like giving up the command of your ship voluntarily, and she had sworn to herself that she would never do that.

But for the next four days ... well, he played shuffleboard in the mornings with his nickle-eyed wife. Perhaps she would look him up and get the prescription after all.

Lottie looked up at the white ceiling high above her, glimmering ghostlike, and admitted again that the Overlook had been a very bad mistake. None of the ads for the Overlook in the *New Yorker* or *The American Mercury* mentioned that the place's real specialty seemed to be giving people the whim-whams. Four more days, and that was plenty. It had been a mistake, all right, but it was a mistake she would never admit, or have to admit. In fact, she was sure that she could

You had to keep an eye on the boiler because if you didn't, she would creep on you. What did that mean, anyway? Or was it just one of those nonsensical things that sometimes came to you in dreams, so much gibberish? Of course there was undoubtedly a boiler in the basement or *somewhere* to heat the place, even summer resorts had to have heat sometimes, didn't they (if only to supply hot water)? But creep? Would a boiler creep?

You had to keep an eye on the boiler.

It was like one of those crazy riddles, why is a mouse when it runs, when is a raven like a writing desk, what is a creeping boiler? Is that like the hedges, maybe? She'd had a dream where the hedges crept. And a firehose that had - what? - slithered?

A chill touched her. It was not good to think much about the dreams in the night, in the dark. You could ... well, you could bother yourself. It was better to think about the things you would be doing when you got back to New York, about how you were going to convince Bill that a baby was a bad idea for awhile, until he got firmly settled in the vice presidency his father had awarded him as a wedding present

She'll creep on you.

- and how you were going to encourage him to bring his work home so he would get used to the idea that she was going to be involved with it, very much involved.

Or did the whole hotel creep? Was that the answer?

I'll make him a good wife, Lottie thought frantically. We'll work it the same way we always worked being bridge partners. He knows the rules of the game, and he knows enough to let me run him. It will be just like the bridge, just like that, and if we've been off our game up here that doesn't mean anything, it's just the hotel, the dreams-

An affirming voice: *That's it. The whole place. It ... creeps.*

"Oh shit," Lottie Kilgallon whispered in the dark. It was dismaying for her to realize just how badly her nerves were shot. Like the other nights, there would be no more sleep for her now. She would lie here in bed until the sun started to come up and then she would get an uneasy hour or so.

Smoking in bed was a bad habit, a terrible habit, but she had begun to leave her cigarettes in an ashtray on the floor by the bed in case

of the dreams. Sometimes it calmed her. She reached down to get the ashtray and the thought burst on her like a revelation:

It does creep, the whole place- like it was alive!

And that was when the hand reached out *unseen from* under the bed and gripped her wrist firmly ... almost lecherously. A finger-like canvas scratched suggestively against her palm and something was under there, something had been under there all the time, and Lottie began to scream. She screamed until her throat was raw and hoarse and her eyes were bulging from her face and Bill was awake and pallid with terror beside her.

When he put on the lamp she leaped from the bed, retreated into the farthest corner of the room and curled up with her thumb in her mouth.

Both Bill and Dr. Verecker tried to find out what was wrong; she told them, but it was past her thumb, and it was some time before she realized she was saying, "It crept under the bed. It crept under the bed."

And even though they flipped up the coverlet and Bill had actually lifted the whole bed by its foot off the floor to show her there was nothing under there, not even a litter of dust kitties, she would not come out of the corner. When the sun came up, she did at last come out of the corner. She took her thumb out of her mouth. She stayed away from the bed. She stared at Bill Pillsbury from her clown-white face.

"We're going back to New York," she said. "This morning."

"Of course," Bill muttered. "Of course, dear."

Bill Pillsbury's father died of a heart attack two weeks after the stock market crash. Bill and Lottie could not keep the company's head above water. Things went from bad to worse. in the years that

followed she thought often of their honeymoon at the Overlook Hotel, and the dreams, and the canvas hand that had crept out from under the bed to squeeze her own. She thought about these things more and more. She committed suicide in a Yonkers motel room in the year 1949, a woman who was prematurely gray and prematurely lined. It had been twenty years and the hand that had gripped her wrist when she reached down to get her had never really let go. She left a one-sentence suicide note written on Holiday Inn stationery. The note said: *I wish we had gone to Rome.*

Scene III: On the Night of the Grand Masquerade

Downstairs, upstairs, in corners and hallways, the party went on and on. The music was louder, the laughter was louder, the shrieks were louder and sounded less and less like cries of pleasure and amusement to Lewis Toner's ears and more like cries of agony, the sound of death-throes. Perhaps they were. There was a monster in the hotel. As a matter of fact, a monster *owned* the hotel now. His name was Horace Derwent.

Lewis Toner, who had come to the ball as a dog (at Horace's request, of course), reached the second floor and began to walk down the hall toward his room, his shoulders slumped inside the hot costume. The dog's head, its muzzle set in a snarling rictus, was under arm.

He turned a corner and there was a couple entwined by one of the fire extinguisher hoses, one of the Derwent Enterprises secretaries - Patty? Sherry? Merry? - and one of Derwent's bright young subalterns, a fellow named Norman something. At first he thought the girl was wearing a skin-tight ballerina's leotard and then he realized it was skin - she was naked from the waist down. Norman was wearing some sort of Arabian nights thing, complete with slippers that came to upturned points. His little toothbrush

moustache, grown in imitation of the boss, looked ridiculous in contrast.

Patty-Sherry-Merry giggled when she saw him and made no attempt to cover herself. She was openly caressing Norman. The thing was turning into an orgy.

"It's Lewis," she said. "Woof-woof, doggie."

"Do a trick," Norman said thickly, breathing scotch fumes into his face "Up, boy, up! Roll over! Shake hands."

Lewis broke into a run, chased by their drunken laughter. You'll find out, he thought. You'll find out when he turns on you like he turned on me tonight.

At first he couldn't get into his room because the door was locked and the key was in his pants pocket and his pants were under the dog costume and the costume's zipper was in the back. He reached and clutched and got it started and finally managed to get it down, knowing that he must look to them grotesquely like a woman wriggling out of her evening dress, and at last the hot, wolly dog costume slipped off his shoulders and pooled around his feet. Behind him their laughter went on and on grinding and mechanical, reminding him of a date he had gone on with his first lover, a career sailor originally from San Diego. Ronnie his name had been, and he always had been called San Diego Dago. Just Dago. They had gone to a carnival, and there had been a funhouse, and to the left of the stage out front, under a huge canvas sign that said House of a Thousand Thrills, there had been a mechanical clown that laughed on and on the way they were laughing at him now as he fumbled his room key from his pocket, on and on the clown had laughed, prisoner of some circulating tape loop in its guts, cackling into an uneasy night of shrieking carnival rides and cruising men and beer and unshaded bulbs. Its mechanical body had leaned back and forth as it laughed, and it had seemed to Lewis then that it was laughing

at him, a slight boy of nineteen, wearing spectacles and walking close enough to the heavy-set, thirtyish sailor so that their hips brushed from time to time with some miserable electricity. The clown shrieked hoarse laughter, laughing at him the way the half-naked couple down the hall was laughing, laughing the way all of them had laughed downstairs in the ballroom when Horace Derwent put him through his paces.

Woof-woof, do Roll over. Shake hands.

The key turned-in the lock, he was inside, it was locked behind him.

"Thank God," Lewis murmured, and put his forehead against the door. He fumbled at the bolt and shot it. He put on the safety chain. At last he sat on the floor and pulled off the dog costume, pulled it all the way off. He threw the head onto the sofa, where it snarled at itself in the dressing table mirror.

He had been Horace's lover for how long? Since 1939. Could it really be seven years now? It could. It was. People had told him that Derwent could go both ways and Lewis hadn't believed them. Hadn't believed, that wasn't quite right.

It was immaterial to you, the room seemed to whisper to him.

He looked around gratefully. That was it, that was just it. He had joined the Derwent organization as a bookkeeper ten years ago, in 1936, just after Derwent had picked up the movie studio on the depression market. Derwent's Folly, people had called it then. They didn't know Horace Derwent, Lewis reflected.

Horace wasn't like the others, the quick fumbles in the park, the sailors, the fat and sweaty high school boys who spent too much time in the movie theater bathrooms.

I know what I am, he had told Lewis, and locks and chains of fear, long rusted, had fallen from Lewis's heart, as if Horace had touched

some secret place in him with a magic wand. *I choose to accept what I am. Life is too short to let the world tell a man what he should do and what he shouldn't.*

Lewis had been the head accountant of Derwent Enterprises since early 1940. He had an apartment on the East Side of New York City, and a bungalow in Hollywood. Horace Derwent had a key to each. And some nights he would lie awake beside the big man (Lewis weighed 135, and Horace Derwent lacked eleven pounds of weighing twice that) until gray dawn was prying at the curtains, listening as Derwent poured out everything ... his plans to become the richest individual on planet Earth.

The war is coming, Derwent said. We'll be in it by April of 1942 and if we're lucky it will go on until 1948. Derwent Enterprises can plan on making three million dollars a year on the aircraft side alone. You figure it out, Lew. When the war ends, Derwent is going to be the biggest company in America.

It was not always business. It was a hundred other things. Derwent speculating on how much could be made on a World Series if you could pocket two of the umpires. Derwent talking about Las Vegas and the plans he and some of his business associates had for it - *Vegas will be the playground of America in the 1960s if things go right, Lew.* His obsessional fear of cancer, which had killed his mother at forty-six and all four of his grandparents. His interest in geology, in long-range weather prediction, photo-copying machines, and a possible something called 3-D movies. Lewis had listened to these long rambling monologues enthralled, rarely speaking, thinking: *He tells me these things. Only me.*

And so when people told him that Horace made it a practice to lay any new female studio acquisitions before signing them, when they told him that he kept a woman who was the current toast of Broadway in a 5th Avenue penthouse apartment, when they told him that Horace was a perfect study in amorality, a man who honestly

thought himself the only totally alive being in the world, Lewis laughed them off. They didn't know the man the way he did, they had not listened to him talk the night away, leaping from subject to subject like a ballet dancer ... or like something rather more deadly, a fencer perhaps, the greatest natural fencer of his time.

He dragged himself to his feet and went into the bathroom to draw a tub of hot water. His body was slicked with sour sweat. His head ached. His stomach was upset. And he knew that even with a hot tub there would be no sleep for him tonight. And he hadn't brought his sleeping pills. He had even been lucky to get a seat on a connecting flight from New York to Denver. He hadn't been invited on Horace's chartered planeload of revellers. Even his invitation had arrived late. Another studied insult.

The bathroom was spare white tile, old fashioned, hopeless. Lewis put the plug in the tub and turned it on. He would lie sleepless in his bed all night, listening to the shrieks of merriment from below, playing the evening's waking nightmare over again and again ... why had he forgotten his pills?

Roll over, doggie. Play dead. Woof-woof.

Horace had put on the golden chain in 1939, and when it served his purpose he had knocked it off. That had happened tonight. Lewis had been savaged in front of the whole crowd.

But didn't you know it was coming? He asked himself wretchedly as the water roared into the tub, smoking. The keys to the apartment and the bungalow had come back to him in a Derwent Enterprises envelope with an impersonal note from Horace's personal secretary saying that Lewis must have misplaced these. It suddenly became very difficult to see the boss, who was often tied up. Lewis was passed over for the board position that opened up when old Hanneman had a heart attack ... a board position that Horace had practically promised him in the spring of 1943. Horace had been

seen around New York squiring the Broadway actress, which did not bother Lewis, and also with his new social secretary, which definitely did. The new social secretary was British, a small compact man who was ten years younger than Lewis. And of course Lewis had never been that handsome. Worst, Horace had purchased the Overlook without even telling him, his own head accountant. It had been Burrey, one of the execs in the aircraft division, who had taken enough pity on Lewis to tell him that he was head accountant now in name only, by contract only.

"He's out to get you, boyo," Burrey said. "He's got a sharp stick with your name on it. He won't fire you or demote you, it's not his style. That's not how our Fearless Leader has his fun. Hell poke you with that sharp stick. In the legs, in the belly, in the neck, in the balls. Hell poke you and poke you until you run away. And if you stay on after he's gotten tired of the game, hell poke your eyes out with his stick."

"But why?" Lewis cried. "What did I do? My work has been perfect, my ... my ..." But there was no way to talk about that to Burrey.

"You didn't do anything," Burrey said patiently. "He's not like other people, Lew. He's like a big, smart bab with a lot of pretty toys. He plays with one until he gets tired of it, then he throws it away and plays with a new one. That limey Hart is the new one. You got the toss. And I in warning you. Don't push it. He'll make you the sorriest man alive if you do."

"Has he talked to you? Is that it?"

"No. And I'm not going to talk to you anymore. Because the walls around here have ears and I like my job. I like to eat even better. Good morning, Lew."

But he hadn't been able to leave it alone. Even when the invitation to the masked ball had arrived late (with no accompanying letter about the Derwent charter flight from New York to Colorado) he hadn't been able to leave it alone. He had been invited by Horace's

commanding scrawl across the bottom of the invitation, written in draftsman's pencil as so much of his personal and inter-office correspondence was: *If you come, come as a dog.*

Even then, even though the truth of everything Burrey had said was borne out in that one scrawled sentence, he had not been able to let go of it. He had preferred to see it as Horace's own personal request, albeit brusque, that he attend. He had gone to the most expensive costumer in New York and even as he walked out with it wrapped in brown paper under his arm, he had refused to see it the other way. He had wanted to see it as *Come home, Hon, all is forgiven* and not *If you come, I'll poke your eyes out, Lewis - this is your only warning.*

And now he knew. Oh yes, he knew. Everything.

The tub was full. Lewis turned off the water and slowly stripped off his clothes. A hot tub was supposed to relax you, they said. Help you to sleep. But nothing would help him tonight except his pills. Which were in the medicine cabinet of his apartment, two thousand miles east of here.

He turned his eyes to the bathroom medicine cabinet without much hope. There was never anything in a hotel medicine cabinet except maybe a box of tissues. Nevertheless he opened it and stared in, hardly believing it. There was a hotel-sized box of Kleenex, a water glass wrapped in waxed paper, and a small bottle labelled simply Seconal. He took the bottle out and opened it. The pills inside were large and pink. They looked like no Seconals Lewis had ever seen before.

I'll only take one, he thought. Stupid to take someone else's medicine anyway. Stupid and dangerous. And the hotel had stood vacant since 1936, he reminded himself, when the last owner had gone broke and shot himself. Surely those pills couldn't have been there since 1936? An uncomfortable thought. Maybe he'd better not take any.

Up, boy, up! Woof- Woof!. Good doggy ... here's a bone, doggy.

Well , just one then. And a hot tub. Maybe I will sleep.

But it was two of the pills he shook out into his hand, and after he had unwrapped the water glass and taken them, he decided to take a third. Then into the bathtub. A quick soak. Things would look better in the morning

They found him at just past three o'clock the next afternoon. He had apparently fallen asleep in the tub and drowned, although the coroner, who was from Sidewinder, wasn't exactly sure how an accident like that could have happened, unless the man had been drunk or drugged. The postmortem showed no sign of either. The coroner asked for a private audience with Horace Derwent, and the audience was granted.

"Listen here," the coroner said. "You said on the stand that there was quite a party going on that night."

Horace Derwent agreed that that was so.

"Could it have been that somebody might have gone up to this fella Toner's room and sort of held his head underwater? For a joke, I mean. The kind of joke that sometimes can go too far."

Derwent demurred strongly.

"Well, I know you are a busy man," the coroner said, "and the last I want to do is to cause any trouble for a man who helped us to win the war or the man who is planning to reopen the Overlook Hotel ... the Overlook always drew a lot of its chambermaids and busboys and so on from right here in Sidewinder, you know ..."

Derwent thanked him for the compliment and assured him that the Overlook would continue to make use of the Sidewinder work force.

"But," the coroner said, "you have to understand the position I am in."

Derwent said he would do his best.

"With the water in Toner's lungs, the county pathologist says drowning was the cause of death. But a man don't just *drown* in the bathtub. If he falls asleep and his mouth and nose slip under, he will wake up unless his reflexes are severely depressed. But this man had only a trace of alcohol in him, no barbituates, no nothing. There was no bump on his head to indicate he might have slipped getting out. You see what a cat's cradle I am in?"

Derwent agreed it was purely a puzzle.

"Now I have to at least think someone might have murdered him," the coroner went on. "Suicide's out. You can kill yourself by drowning, but I just don't think you can do it in your bathtub. But murder! Well."

Derwent enquired about fingerprints.

"Now that's sharp," the coroner said admiringly. "You're probably thinking of the cleaning that place took in the month before you had your party. The chief of police, he thought of that too, since his sister was one of the girls from Sidewinder that helped to do the job. Why, there was thirty of them up there if there was one, scrubbing that place from stem to stem. And since there was no other help there when your party was held, our chief had a man from the State Police come up and dust the whole room. They only found Toner's fingerprints."

Derwent suggested that went a long way toward disproving the murder theory.

"Oh, but it don't," the coroner said, fetching a deep sigh from the foundations of his large belly. "It might, if you folks had been having

any sort of a regular party. But it wasn't a regular party; it was a costume party. And God knows how many people were wearing gloves or false hands as part of their outfits. You know that fella Hart? The limey?"

Derwent admitted knowing his social secretary.

"That guy said he came as a devil and you came as a circus ringmaster. So you were both wearing gloves. In a manner of speaking, Toner himself was wearing gloves, when you think of his dog costume. So you see the bind we're in?"

Derwent said he saw.

"It don't make me happy to have to instruct that jury to bring in an 'unknown causes' verdict. That will make every goddam paper in the country. Millionaire Industrialist. Mysterious Death. All-Night Orgy in Mountain Resort."

Derwent protested with some asperity that it had been a party, not an orgy.

"Oh, but it's all the same to those guys on the yellow sheets," the coroner said. "They could find a do turd in a basket of easter lillies. It puts a black mark beside your name before you even get the place opened up again. It makes it so you have to start out under a cloud. What a bitter bitch."

Horace Derwent leaned forward and began to talk. He discussed a great many aspects of life and finance in the small mountain community of Sidewinder, Colorado. He discussed various contracts that might be drawn between the Overlook Hotel and the Municipal Board of Sidewinder. He discussed the town's need for a library and for a school addition. He commiserated with the coroner on the coroner's own salary, so inadequate for a retired G.P. The coroner began to smile and nod. And when Horace Derwent stood up, looking a little paler than usual, the coroner stood with him.

"I believe it might have been some sort of seizure," the coroner said. "Accidental death. Unfortunate."

The story made no more than page two, even in the Colorado papers. The Overlook opened on schedule, and nearly fifty percent of the staff came from Sidewinder. It was good for the town. The new library, donated by the Automatic Service Company of Colorado (which was in turn owned by the Automatic Service Company of America, which was in turn owned by Derwent Enterprises), was good for the town. The police chief got a new cruiser and was able to buy a ski-lodge in Aspen two years later. And the coroner retired to St. Petersburg.

The Overlook eventually proved too much for Horace Derwent, too, although it was never able to bankrupt him. But he had conceived it as a glorious sort of toy for him to play with, and the toy had gone sour for him when Lewis had, in a way, turned the tables on Derwent's revenge by dying so inexplicably in the bathtub. He had been forced to buy a whole town to even commence operations at his hotel, but that was not the humiliation, that was not what made him hate Lewis for the way he had died. It was being held up for common blackmail by a grinning small-town coroner and having to give in. Years later, long after he had washed his hands of the Overlook, Derwent would wake up the night from a dream of that coroner's voice as he slowly and efficiently beat him into a corner that he would have to pay to get out of.

He would lie in the dark aftermath of the dream thinking: *Cancer. My mother was dead of cancer at my age.*

And of course, he had never really been able to wash his hands of the Overlook, not entirely. His relationship with it ceased, but not its relationship with him. It only went underground. It existed in secret books kept behind vault doors in places like Las Vegas and Reno. It belonged to people who had done him favors, to whom he owed favors in return. The kind of people that sometimes surfaced in the

bright are of some Senate subcommittee's publicity. Ownership shuffles. Laundered money. Hiding places and secret sex. No, he had never really gotten shut of the Overlook. Murder had been done there - somehow - and would be done there again.

Scene IV. And Now this Word from New Hampshire

In that long hot summer of 1953, the summer Jacky Torrance turned six, his father came home drunk one night from the hospital and broke Jacky's arm. He almost killed the boy. He was drunk.

Jacky was sitting on the front step of the porch and reading a Combat Casey comic book when his father came down the street, listing to one side, torpedoed by beer somewhere down the line. As he always did, the boy felt a mixture of love-hate-fear rise in his chest at the sight of his old man, who looked like a giant malevolent ghost in his hospital whites. He was an orderly at the Berlin Community Hospital. His father was like God, like Nature, sometimes lovable, sometimes terrible. You never knew which it would be. Jacky's mother feared and served him. His brothers hated him. Only Jacky of all of them still loved him in spite of the fear and the hate, and sometimes the volatile mixture of emotions made him want to cry out at the sight of his father coming, to simply cry out: *I love you, daddy! Go away! Hug me! I'll kill you! I'm so afraid of you! I need you!* And his father seemed to sense in his stupid way - he was a stupid man, and selfish - that all of them had gone beyond him but Jacky, the youngest, that the only way he could touch the others was to bludgeon them to attention. But with Jacky there was still love, and there had been times when he had cuffed the boy's mouth into running blood and then hugged him with frightful force, the killing force just barely held back by some other thing, and Jacky would let

himself be hugged deep into the atmosphere of malt and hops that hung around his old man forever, quailing, loving, fearing.

He leaped off the step and ran halfway down the path before something stopped him.

"Daddy?" he said. "Where's the car?"

Torrance came toward him, and Jacky saw how very drunk he was. "Wrecked it up," he said thickly.

"Oh ..." Careful now. Careful what you say. For your life, be careful. "That's too bad."

His father stopped and regarded Jacky from his stupid pig eyes. Jacky held his breath. Somewhere behind his father's brow, under the, lawnmowered brush of his crewcut, the scales were turning. The hot afternoon stood still while Jacky waited, staring up anxiously into his father's face to see if his father would throw a rough bear arm around his shoulder, grinding Jacky's cheek against the cracked rough leather of the belt that held up his white pants and say *Walk me into the house, big boy* in the hard and contemptuous way that was the only way he could even approach love without destroying himself, or if it would be something else.

Tonight it was something else.

The thunderheads appeared on his father's brow. "What do you mean that's too bad? What kind of shit is that?"

"Just ... too bad, daddy. That's all I meant. It's-"

Torrance's hand swept out at the end of his arm, huge hand, hammock arm, but speedy, yes, very speedy, and Jacky went on his ass with churchbells in his head and a split lip.

"Shitass," his father said, giving it the broad A.

Jacky said nothing. Nothing would do any good now. The balance had swung the wrong way.

"You ain't gonna sass me," Torrance said. "You won't sass your daddy. Get up here and take your medicine."

Something in his face this time, some dark and blazing thing. And Jacky suddenly knew that this time there might be no hug at the end of the blows, and if there was he might be unconscious and unknowing ... maybe even dead.

He ran.

Behind him, his father let out a bellow of rage and chased him, a flapping specter in his hospital whites, a juggernaut of doom following his son from the front yard to the back.

Jacky ran for his life. The treehouse, he was thinking. He can't get up there, the ladder nailed to the tree won't hold him, I'll get up there, talk to him, maybe he'll go to sleep, - Oh God. Oh please let him go to sleep - he was weeping in terror as he ran.

"Come back here, goddammit!" His father was roaring behind him. "Come back here and take your medicine! Take it like a man!"

Jacky flashed past the back steps. His mother, that thin and defeated woman, scrawny in a faded housedress, had come out through the screen door from the kitchen, just as Jacky ran past with his bellowing father in pursuit. She opened her mouth as if to speak or cry out, but her hand came up in a fist and stopped whatever she might have said, kept it safe behind her teeth. She was afraid for her son, more afraid that her husband would turn on her.

"No you don't Come back here!"

Jacky reached the large elm in the back yard, the elm where last year his father had smoke-drugged a colony of wasps and then

burned their nest with gasoline. The boy went up the haphazardly nailed-on rungs like greased lightning and still he was nearly not fast enough. His father's clutching, enraged hand grasped the boy's ankle in a grip like flexed steel, then slipped a little and only succeeded in pulling off Jacky's loafer. Jacky went up last three rungs and crouched on the floor of the treehouse twelve feet above the ground, panting and crying on his hands and knees.

His father seemed to go crazy. He danced around the tree like an Indian, bellowing his rage. He slammed his fists into it, making bark fly and bringing lattices of blood to his knuckles. He kicked it. His huge moon face was white with frustration and red with anger.

"Please, daddy," Jacky moaned. "Whatever I said ... I'm sorry I said it..."

"Come down! You come down out of there and take your fucking medicine, you little cur! *Right now!*"

"I will ... I will if you promise not to ... to hit me too hard ... not hurt me ... just spank me but not hurt me ..."

"Get out of that tree!" his father screamed.

Jacky looked toward the house but that was hopeless. His mother had retreated somewhere far away, to neutral ground.

"GET OUT RIGHT NOW!"

"Oh, daddy, I don't dare!" he cried out, and that was the truth. Because now his father might kill him.

There was a period of stalemate. A minute, perhaps, or perhaps two. His father circled the tree, puffing and blowing like whale. Jacky turned around and around on his hands and knees, following the movement. They were like parts of a visible clock.

The second or third time he came back to the ladder nailed to the tree, Torrance stopped. He looked speculatively at the ladder. And laid his hands on the rung before his eyes. He began to climb.

"No, daddy, it won't hold you," Jacky whispered.

But his father came on relentlessly, like fate, like death, like doom. Up and up, closer to the treehouse, one rung snapped off under his hands and he almost fell but caught the next one up with a grunt and a lunge, and one of the rungs twisted around from the horizontal to the perpendicular under his weight with a rasping scream of pulling nails, but it did not give way, and then his working, congested face was visible over the edge of the treehouse floor, and for that one moment of his childhood Jack Torrance had his father at bay, if he could have kicked that face with the foot that still wore its loafer, kicked it where the nose terminated between the piggy eyes) he could have driven his father off the ladder backwards, perhaps killed him (but if he had killed him, would anyone have said anything but "Thanks, Jacky"?), but it was love that stopped him, and love that would not let him just put his face in his hands and give up as first one of his father's pudgy, short-fingered hands appeared on the boards and then the other.

"Now, by God -" his father breathed. He stood above his huddled son like a giant.

"Oh daddy, " Jacky mourned for both of them. And for a moment his father paused, his face sagged into lines of uncertainty, and Jacky felt a thread of hope.

Then the face drew up, he could smell the beer, and his father said, "I'll teach you to sass me," and all hope was gone as the foot swung out, burying itself in his belly, driving the wind from his body in a whoosh as he flew from the treehouse platform and fell to the ground, turning over once and on the point of his left elbow, which snapped with a greenstick crack. He didn't even have breath enough

to scream. The last thing he saw before he blacked out was his father's face, which seemed to be at the end of a long dark tunnel. It seemed to be filling with surprise, the way a vessel may fill with some pale liquid.

He is just starting to know what he did, Jacky thought incoherently.

And on the heels of that a thought with no meaning at all, coherent or otherwise, a thought that chased him into blackness as he fell back on the chewed and tattered grass of the back lawn in a faint:

What you see is what you'll be, what you see is what you'll be, what you-

The break in his arm was cleanly healed in six months. The nightmares went on much longer. In a way, they never stopped.

Scene V. The Overlook Hotel, Third Floor, 1958

The murderers came up the stairs in their stocking feet.

The two men posted outside the door of the Presidential Suite never heard them. They were young, dressed in Ivy League suits with the cut of the jackets a little wider than the fashion of the day decreed. You couldn't wear a .357 Magnum concealed in a shoulder holster and be quite in fashion. They were discussing whether or not the Yankees could take yet another pennant. It was lacking two days of September, and as usual, the pinstripers looked formidable. Just talking about the Yankees made them feel a little better. They were New York boys, on loan from Walt Abruzzi, and they were a long way from home.

The man inside was a big wheel in the Organization. That was all they knew, all they wanted to know. "You do your job, we all get

well," Abruzzi had told them. "What's to know?"

They had heard things, of course. That there was a place in Colorado that was completely neutral ground. A place where even a crazy little West Coast hood like Tony Giorgio could sit down and have a fancy brandy in a balloon glass with the Gray Old Men who saw him as some sort of homicidal stinging insect to be crushed. A place where guys from, Boston who had been used to putting each other in the trunks of cars behind bowling allies in Malden or into garbage cans in Roxbury could get together and play gin and tell jokes about the Polocks. A place where hatchets could be buried or unearthed, pacts made, plans laid. A place where warm people could sometimes cool off.

Well, they were here, and it wasn't so much - in fact, both of them were homesick for New York, which was why they were talking about the Yankees. But they never saw New York or the Yankees again.

Their voices reached down the hall to the stairwell where the murderers stood six risers down, with their stocking-covered heads just below line-of-sight if you happened to be looking down the hall from the door of the Presidential Suite. There were three of them on the stairs, dressed in dark pants and coats, carrying shotguns with the barrels sawed off to six inches. The shotguns were loaded with expanding buckshot.

One or me three beckoned and they walked up the stairs to the hall.

The two outside the door never even saw them until the murderers were almost on top of them. One of them was saying animatedly, "Now you take Ford. Who's better in the American League than Whitey Ford? No, I want to ask you that sincerely, because when it comes to the stretch he just-"

The speaker looked up and saw three black shapes with no discernable faces standing not ten paces away. For a moment he could not believe them. They were just standing there. He shook his

head, fully expecting them to go away like the floating black specks you sometimes saw in the darkness. They didn't. Then he knew.

"What's the matter?" His buddy said. "What-"

The young man who had been speaking about Whitey Ford clawed under his jacket for his gun. One of the murderers placed the butt of his shotgun against a leather pad strapped to his belly beneath his dark turtleneck and pulled both triggers. The blast in the narrow hallway was deafening. The muzzle flash was like summer lightning, purple in its brilliance. A stink of cordite. The young man was blown backwards down the hall in a disintegrating cloud of Ivy League jacket, blood and hair. His arm looped over backwards, spilling the Magnum from his dying fingers, and the pistol thumped harmlessly to the carpet with the safety still on.

The second young man did not even make an effort to go for his gun. He stuck his hands high in the air and wet his pants at the same time.

"I give up, don't shoot me, it's okay-"

"Say hello to Albert Anastasia when you get down there, punk," one of the murderers said, and placed the butt of his shotgun against his belly.

"I ain't a problem, I ain't a problem!" The young man screamed in a thick Bronx accent, and then the blast of the shotgun lifted him out of his shoes and slammed him back against the silk wallpaper with its delicate raised pattern. He actually *stuck* for a moment before collapsing to the hall floor.

The three of them walked to the door of the suite. One of them tried the knob. "Locked."

"Okay."

The third man, who hadn't shot yet, stood in front of the door, levelled his weapon slightly above the knob, and pulled both triggers. A jagged hole appeared in the door, and light rayed through. The third man reached through the hole and grasped the deadbolt on the other side. There was a pistol shot, then two more. None of the three flinched.

There was a snap as the deadbolt gave, and then the third man kicked the door open. Standing in the wide sitting room in front of the picture window which now showed a view only of darkness was a man of about thirty-five wearing only jockey shorts. He held a pistol in each hand and as the murderers walked in he began to fire at them, spraying bullets wildly. Slugs peeled splinters from the doorframe, dug furrows in the rug, dusted plaster down from the ceiling. He fired five times, and the closest he came to any of his assassins was a bullet that twitched the pants of the second man at the left knee.

They raised their shotguns with almost military precision.

The man in the sitting room screamed, threw both guns to the floor, and ran for the bedroom. The triple blast caught him just outside the door and a wet fan of blood, brains, and bits of flesh splashed across the cherry striped wallpaper. He fell in the open bedroom doorway, half in and out.

"Watch the door," the first man said, and dropped his smoking shotgun to the rug. He reached in his coat pocket, brought out a bone-handled switchblade, and thumbed the chrome button. He approached the dead man, who was lying in the doorway on his side. He squatted beside the corpse and yanked down the front of the man's jockey shorts.

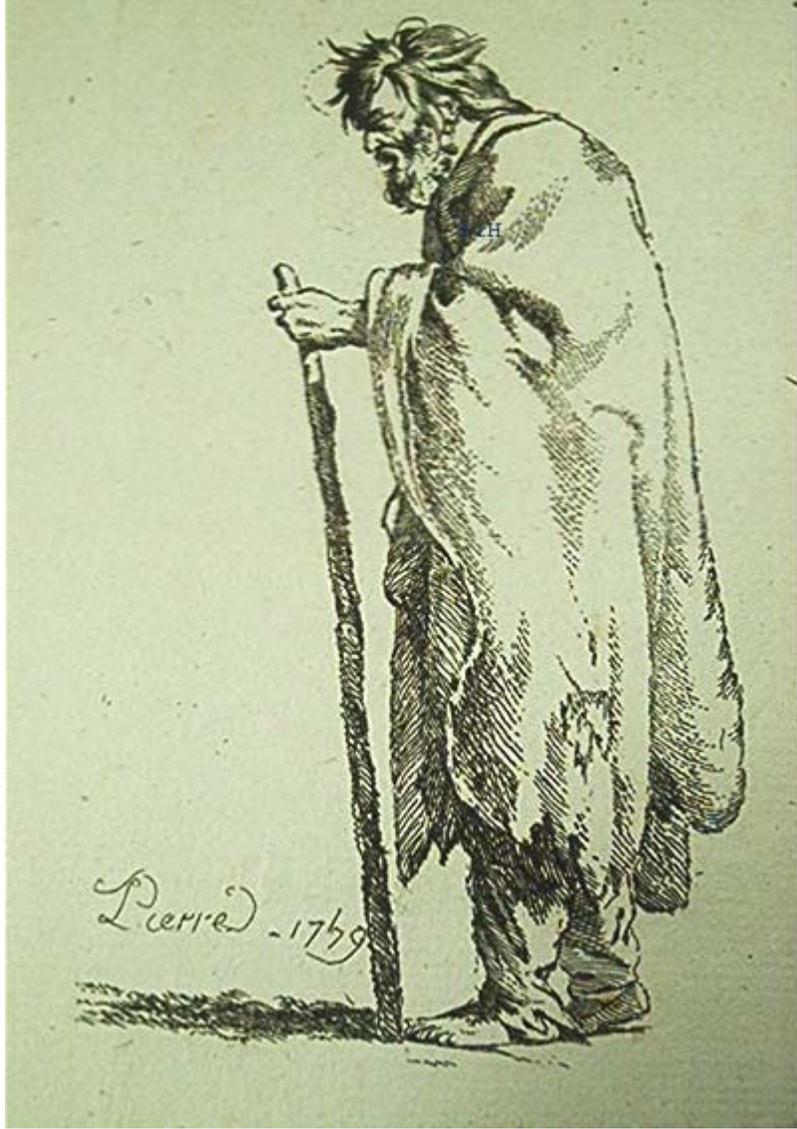
Down the hall the door to one of the other suites opened and a pallid face peered out. The third man raised his shotgun and the face jerked back in. The door slammed. A bolt rattled frantically.

The first man rejoined them.

"All right," he said. "Down the stairs and out the back door. Let's go."

They were outside and climbing into the parked car three minutes later. They left the Overlook behind them, standing gilded in mountain moonlight, white as bone under high stars. It would stand long after the three of them were as dead as the three they had left behind.

The Overlook was at home with the dead.



THE BEGGAR AND THE DIAMOND

Stephen King

AUTHOR'S NOTE: This little story—a Hindu parable in its original form—was first told to me by Mr. Surendra Patel, of Scarsdale, New York. I have adapted it freely and apologize to those who know it in its true form, where Lord Shiva and his wife, Parvati, are the major characters.

One day the archangel Uriel came to God with a downcast face. "What troubles you?" God asked.

"I have seen something very sad," Uriel replied, and then pointed between his feet. "Down there."

"On earth?" God asked with a smile. "Oh! No shortage of sadness there! Well, let us see."

They bent over together. Far below they saw a ragged figure trudging slowly along a country road on the outskirts of Chandrapur. He was very thin, this figure, and his legs and arms were covered with sores. Dogs frequently chased after him, barking, but the figure never turned to strike at them with his staff even when they nipped at his heels; he simply trudged onward, favoring his right leg as he walked. At one point a number of handsome, well-fed children with wicked smiling faces boiled out of a large house and threw stones at the ragged man when he held his empty begging bowl out to them.

"Go away, you nasty thing!" one of them cried. "Go away into the fields and die!"

At this, the archangel Uriel burst into tears.

"Now, now," God said, clapping him on the shoulder. "I thought you were made of sterner stuff."

"Yes, no doubt," Uriel said, drying his eyes. "It's just that the fellow down there seems to sum up everything which has ever gone wrong for all the sons and daughters of the earth."

“Of course he does,” God replied. “That is Ramu, and that is his job. When he dies, another will hold it. It is an honorable job.”

“Perhaps,” Uriel said, covering his eyes with a shudder, “but I cannot bear to watch him do it. His sorrow fills my heart with darkness.”

“Darkness is not allowed here,” said God, “and therefore I must take steps to change what has brought it to you. Look here, my good archangel.”

Uriel looked and saw that God was holding a diamond as big as a peacock’s egg.

“A diamond of this size and quality will feed Ramu for the rest of his life, and keep his descendants unto the seventh generation,” God remarked. “It is, in fact, the finest on the earth. Now... let us see ...” He leaned forward on His hands and knees, held the diamond out between two gauzy clouds, and let it drop. He and Uriel marked its fall closely, watching as it struck the center of the road upon which Ramu walked.

The diamond was so large and so heavy that Ramu would no doubt have heard it strike the earth had he been a younger man, but his hearing had failed quite severely in the last few years, along with his lungs and his back and his kidneys. Only his eyesight remained as keen as it had been when he was one-and-twenty.

As he struggled up a rise in the road, unaware of the huge diamond which lay gleaming and flashing on the far side in the hazy sunshine, Ramu sighed deeply ... then stopped, bent over his staff, as his sigh turned into a fit of coughing. He held onto his staff with both hands, trying to weather the fit, and just as it was easing, the staff—old and dry and almost as worn-out as Ramu himself—snapped with a dry crack, pitching Ramu into the dust.

He lay there, looking up at the sky and wondering why God was so cruel. “I have outlived all those I loved the most,” he thought, “but not those I hate. I have grown so old and ugly that the dogs bark at me

and the children throw stones at me. I have had nothing but scraps to eat these last three months, and no decent meal with family and friends for ten years or more. I am a wanderer on the face of the earth with no home to call my own; tonight I will sleep under a tree or a hedge with no roof to keep the rain off. I am covered with sores, my back aches, and when I pass water I see blood where no blood should be. My heart is as empty as my begging bowl.”

Ramu slowly got to his feet, unaware that less than sixty feet and a dry bulge of land hid his still-keen glance from the world’s largest diamond, and looked up at the hazy blue sky. “God, I am unlucky,” he said. “I do not hate You, but I fear You are not my friend, nor any man’s friend.”

Having said this, he felt a little better and resumed his trudge, pausing only to pick up the longer piece of his broken staff. As he walked, he began to reproach himself for his self-pity and for his ungrateful prayer.

“For I do have a few things to be grateful for,” he reasoned. “The day is extraordinarily beautiful, for one thing, and although I have failed in many respects, my vision remains keen. Think how terrible it would be if I were blind!”

To prove this to himself, Ramu closed his eyes tightly and shuffled along with his broken staff stretched out in front of him, as a blind man uses his cane. The darkness was terrible, stifling, and disorienting. He soon had no idea if he was moving on as he had been, or if he was wandering off to one side of the road or the other, and might soon go tumbling into the ditch. The thought of what could happen to his old, brittle bones in such a fall frightened him, but he kept his eyes firmly shut and continued to forge ahead.

“This is just the thing to cure you of your ingratitude, old fellow!” he told himself. “You will spend the rest of the day remembering that you may be a beggar, but at least you are not a blind beggar, and you will be happy!”

Ramu did not walk into the ditch on either side, but he did begin to drift off to the right of the road as he topped the rise and started down the far side, and this was how he walked past the huge diamond which lay glowing in the dust; his left foot missed it by less than two inches.

Thirty yards or so farther on, Ramu opened his eyes. Bright summer sunshine flooded them, and seemed to flood his mind, as well. He looked with gladness at the dusty blue sky, the dusty yellow fields, the beaten-silver track of the road upon which he walked. He marked the passage of a bird from one tree to the next with laughter, and although he never turned once to see the huge diamond which lay close behind him, his sores and his aching back were forgotten.

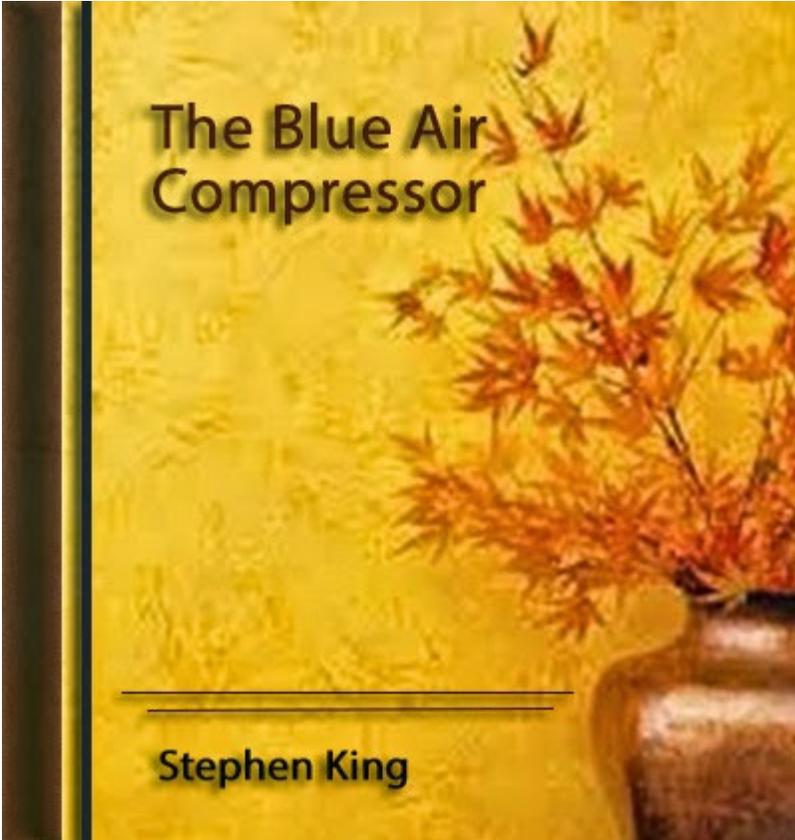
“Thank God for sight!” he cried. “Thank God for that, at least! Perhaps I shall see something of value on the road—an old bottle worth money in the bazaar, or even a coin—but even if I do not, I shall look my fill. Thank God for sight! Thank God for God!”

And, well satisfied, he set off again, leaving the diamond behind. God then reached down and scooped it up, replacing it beneath the mountain in Africa from which He had taken it. Almost as an afterthought (if God can be said to have afterthoughts), He plucked up an ironwood branch from the veldt and dropped it onto the Chandrapur Road, as He had dropped the diamond.

“The difference is,” God told Uriel, “our friend Ramu will find the branch, and it will serve him as a staff for the rest of his days.”

Uriel looked at God (as nearly as anyone—even an archangel—can look at that burning face, at least) uncertainly. “Have You given me a lesson, Lord?”

“I don’t know,” God responded blandly. “Have I?”



The Blue Air
Compressor

Stephen King

THE BLUE AIR COMPRESSOR

Stephen King

The house was tall, with an incredible slope of shingled roof. As he walked up toward it from the shore road, Gerald Nately thought it was almost a country in itself, geography in microcosm. The roof dipped and rose at varying angles above the main building and two strangely-angled wings; a widow's walk skirted a mushroom-shaped cupola which looked toward the sea; the porch, facing the dunes and lusterless September scrubgrass was longer than a Pullman car and screened in. The high slope of roof made the house seem to beetle its brows and loom above him. A Baptist grandfather of a house.

He went to the porch and after a moment of hesitation, through the screen door to the fanlighted one beyond. There was only a wicker chair, a rusty porch swing, and an old discarded knitting basket to watch him go. Spiders had spun silk in the shadowy upper corners. He knocked.

There was silence, inhabited silence. He was about to knock again when a chair someplace inside wheezed deeply in its throat. It was a tired sound. Silence. Then the slow, dreadfully patient sound of old, overburdened feet finding their way up the hall. Counterpoint of cane: Whock... whock... whock...

The floorboards creaked and whined. A shadow, huge and unformed in the pearled glass, bloomed on the fanlight. Endless sound of fingers laboriously solving the riddle of chain, bolt, and hasp lock. The door opened. "Hello," the nasal voice said flatly. "You're Mr. Nately. You've rented the cottage. My husband's cottage."

"Yes." Gerald said, his tongue swelling in his throat. "That's right. And you're—"

"Mrs. Leighton," the nasal voice said, pleased with either his quickness or her name, though neither was remarkable. "I'm Mrs. Leighton."

*

this woman is so goddam fucking big and old she looks like oh jesus christ print dress she must be six-six and fat my god Shes fat as a hog can't smell her white hair long white hair her legs those redwood trees ill that movie a Lank she could be a tank she could kill me her voice is out of any context like a kazoo jesus if i laugh i can't laugh can she be seventy god how does she walk and the cane her hands are bigger than my feet like a goddam tank she could go through oak oak for christ's sake.

*

"You write." She hadn't offered him in.

"That's about the size of it," he said, and laughed to cover his own sudden shrinking from that metaphor.

"Will you show me some after you get settled?" she asked. Her eyes seemed perpetually luminous and wistful. They were not touched by the age that had run riot in the rest of her

*

wait get that written down

*

image: "age had run riot in her with luxuriant fleshiness: she was like a wild sow let loose in a great and dignified house to shit on the carpet, gore at the welsh dresser and send the crystal goblets and wine-glasses all crash-atumble, to trample the wine colored divans to lunatic puffs of springs and stuffing, to spike the mirrorbright finish of the great hall floor with barbarian hoofprints and flying puddles of urine"

okay Shes there its a story i feel her

*

body, making it sag and billow.

“If you like,” he said. “I didn’t even see the cottage from the Shore Road, Mrs. Leighton. Could you tell me where—”

“Did you drive in?”

“Yes. I left my car over there.” He pointed beyond the dunes, toward the road.

A smile, oddly one-dimensional, touched her lips. “That’s why. You can only see a blink from the road: unless you’re walking, you miss it.” She pointed west at a slight angle away from the dunes and the house. “There. Right over that little hill.”

“All right,” he said, then stood there smiling. He really had no idea how to terminate the interview.

“Would you like to come in for some coffee? Or a Coca-Cola?”

“Yes,” he said instantly.

She seemed a little taken back by his instant agreement. He had, after 211, been her husband’s friend, not her own. The face loomed above Gerald, moonlike, disconnected, undecided. Then she led him into the elderly, waiting house.

She had tea. He had Coke, Millions of eyes seemed to watch them. He felt like a burglar, stealing around the hidden fiction he could make of her, carrying only his own youthful winsomeness and a psychic flashlight.

*

My own name, of course, is Steve King, and you’ll pardon my intrusion on your mind-or I hope you will. I could argue that the drawing-aside of the curtain of presumption between reader and author is permissible because I am the writer; i.e., since it’s my story I’ll do any goddam thing I please with it-but since that leaves the reader out of it completely, that is not valid. Rule One for all writers is

that the teller is not worth a tin tinker's fart when compared to the listener. Let us drop the matter, if we may. I am intruding for the same reason that the Pope defecates: we both have to.

You should know that Gerald Nately was never brought to the dock; his crime was not discovered. He paid all the same. After writing four twisted, monumental, misunderstood novels, he cut his own head off with an ivory-figured guillotine purchased in Kowloon.

I invented him first during a moment of eight o'clock boredom in a class taught by Carroll F. Terrell of the University of Maine English faculty. Dr. Terrell was speaking of Edgar A. Poe, and I thought

ivory guillotine Kowloon

twisted woman of shadows, like a pig

some big house

The blue air compressor did not come until later. It is desperately important that the reader be made cognizant of these facts.

*

He did show her some of his writing. Not the important part, the story he was writing about her, but fragments of poetry, the spine of a novel that had ached in his mind for a year like embedded shrapnel, four essays. She was a perceptive critic, and addicted to marginal notations with her black felt-tip pen. Because she sometimes dropped in when he was gone to the village, he kept the story hidden in the back shed.

September melted into cool October, and the story was completed, mailed to a friend, returned with suggestions (bad ones), rewritten. He felt it was good, but not quite right. Some indefinable was missing. The focus was a shade fuzzy. He began to toy, with the idea of giving it to her for Criticism, rejected it, toyed with it again. After

all. the story was her; he never doubted she could supply the final vector.

His attitude concerning her became increasing]- unhealthy; he was fascinated by her huge, animalistic bulk, by the slow, tortoise-like way she trekked across the space between the house and the cottage.

*

image: "mammoth shadow of decay swaying across the shadowless sand, cane held in one twisted hand, feet clad in huge canvas shoes which pump and push at the coarse grains, face like a serving platter, puffy dough arms, breasts like drumlins, a geography in herself, a country of tissue"

*

by her reedy, vapid voice; but at the same time he loathed her, could not stand her touch. lie began to feel like the young man in "The Tell-Tale Heart," by Edgar A. Poe. He felt lie could stand at her bedroom door for endless midnights, shining one Tay of light on her sleeping eye, ready to pounce and rip the instant it flashed open.

The urge to show her the story itched at him maddeningly. He had decided, by the first day of December, that he would do it. The decision-making did not relieve him, as it is supposed to do in the novels, but it did leave him with a feeling of antiseptic pleasure. It was right that it should be so-an omega that quite dovetailed with he alpha. And it was omega; he was vacating the cottage on he fifth of December. On this day he had just returned from the Stowe Travel Agency in Portland, where he had booked passage for the Far East. He had done this almost on the spur of the moment: the decision to go and the decision to show his manuscript to Mrs. Leighton had come together, almost as if he had been guided by an invisible hand.

*

In truth, he was guide; by an invisible hand-mine.

*

The day was white with overcast and the promise of snow lurked in its throat. The dunes seemed to foreshadow the winter already, as Gerald crossed them between the slate-roofed house of her dominion and the low stone cottage of his. The sea, sullen and gray, curled on the shingle of beach. Gulls rode the slow swells like buoys.

He Crossed the top of the last dune and knew she it-as there-her cane, with its white bicycle handgrip at the base, stood against the side of the door. Smoke rifted from the toy chimney.

Gerald went up the board steps, kicked sand from his high-topped shoes to make her aware of his presence, and then went in.

“Hi, Mrs. Leighton!”

But the tiny living room and the kitchen both stood empty. The ship’s clock on the mantle ticked only for itself and for Gerald. Her gigantic fur coat lay draped over the rocker like Some animal sail. A small fire had been laid in the fireplace, and it glowed and crackled busily. The teapot was on the gas range in the kitchen, and one teacup stood on the counter, still waiting for water. He peered into the narrow hall which led to the bedroom.

“Mrs. Leighton?”

Hall and bedroom both empty.

He was about to turn back to the kitchen when the mammoth chuckles began. They were large, helpless shakings of laughter, the kind that stays hidden for years and ages like wine. (There is also an Edgar A. Poe story about wine.)

The chuckles evolved into large bellows of laughter. They came from behind the door to the right of Gerald’s bed, the last door in the

cottage. From the tool-shed.

*

my balls are crawling like in grammar school the old bitch shes laughing she found it the old fat shebitch goddam her goddam her goddam her you old whore youre doing that cause im out here you old she bitch whore you piece of shit

*

He went to the door in one step and pulled it open. She was sitting next to the small spaceheater in the shed, her dress pulled up over oak-stump knees to allow her to sit cross-legged, and his manuscript was held, dwarfed, in her bloated hands.

Her laughter roared and racketed around him. Gerald Nately saw bursting colors in front of his eyes. She it-as a slug, a maggot, a gigantic crawling thing evolved in the cellar of the shadowy house by the sea. a dark bug that had swaddled itself in grotesque human form.

In the flat light from the one cobwebbed window her face became a hanging graveyard moon, pocked by the Sterile craters of her eyes and the Tagged earthquake rift of her mouth.

“Don’t you laugh,” Gerald said stiffly.

“Oh Gerald,” she said, laughing all the same. “This is such a bad story. I don’t blame you for using a penname. it’s-” she wiped tears of laughter from her eyes “it’s abominable!”

He began to walk toward her stiffly.

“You haven’t made me big enough, Gerald. That’s the trouble. I’m too big for you. Perhaps Poe, or Dostoyevsky, or Melville... but not you, Gerald. Not even under your royal penname. Not you. Not you.

She began to laugh again, huge racking explosions of sound.

“Don’t you laugh,” Gerald said stiffly.

*

The tool-shed, after the manner of Zola:

Wooden walls, which showed occasional chinks of light, surrounded rabbit-traps hung and slung in corners; a pair of dusty, unstrung snow-shoes; a rusty spaceheater showing flickers of yellow flame like cat’s eyes; Tales; 2 shovel; hedgeclippers; an ancient green hose coiled like a garter-snake; four bald tires stacked like doughnuts; a rust), Winchester rifle with no bolt; a twohanded saw; a dusty work-bench covered with nails, screws, bolts, washers, two hammers, a plane, a broken level, a dismantled carburetor which one sat inside a 1949 Packard convertible; a 4 hp. aircompressor painted electric blue, plugged into an extension cord running back into the house.

*

“Don’t you laugh,” Gerald said again, but she continued to rock back and forth, holding her stomach and flapping the manuscript with her wheezing breath like a white bird.

His hand found the rusty Winchester rifle and he pole-axed her with it.

*

Most horror stories are sexual in nature.

I’m sorry to break in with this information, but feel I must in order to make the way clear for the grisly conclusion of this piece, which is (at least psychologically) a clear metaphor for fears of sexual impotence on in), part. Mrs. Leighton’s large mouth is symbolic of the vagina; the hose of the compressor is a penis. Her female bu lk huge and overpowering, is a mythic representation of the sexual fear that lives

in every male, to a greater or lesser degree: that the woman, with her opening, is a devouter.

*

In the works of Edgar A. Poe, Stephen King, Gerald Natley, and others who practice this particular literary form, we are apt to find locked rooms, dungeons, empty mansions (all symbols of the womb); scenes of living burial (sexual impotence); the dead returned from the grave (necrophilia); grotesque monsters or human beings (externalized fear of the sexual act itself); torture and/or murder (a viable alternative to the sexual act).

These possibilities are not always valid, but the postfreild reader and writer must take them into consideration when attempting the genre.

Abnormal psychology has become a part of the human experience.

*

She made thick, unconscious noises in her throat as he whirled around madly, looking for an instrument; her head lolled brokenly on the thick stalk of her neck.

*

He seized the hose of the aircompressor.

“All right,” he said thickly. “All right, now. All Tight.”

*

bitch fat old bitch youve had yours not big enough is that right well youll be bigger youll be bigger still

*

He ripped her head back by the hair and rammed the hose into her mouth, into her gullet. She screamed around it, a scund like a cat.

*

Part of the inspiration for this story came from an old E. C. horror comic (boo), which I bought in a Lisbon Falls drugstore. In one particular story, a husband and wife murdered each other (simultaneous))- in mutually ironic (and brilliant) fashion. He was very fat; she was very thin. He shoved the hose of an aircompressor down her throat and blew her up to dirigible size. On his way downstairs a booby-trap she had rigged fell on him and squashed him to a shadow.

Any author who tells you he has never plagiarized is 2 liar. A good author begins with bad ideas and improbabilities and fashions them into comments on the human condition.

In a horror story, it is imperative that the grotesque be elevated to the status of the abnormal.

*

The compressor turned on with a whoosh and a chug. The hose flew out of Mrs. Leighton's mouth. Giggling and gibbering, Gerald stuffed it back in. Her feet drummed and thumped on the floor. The flesh of her cheeks and diaphragm began to swell rhythmically. Her eyes bulged, and became glass marbles. Her torso began to expand.

*

here it is here it is you lousy louse are you big enough yet are you big enough

*

The compressor wheezed and racketed. Mrs. Leighton swelled like a beachball. Her lungs became Straining blowfish.

*

Fiends! Devils' Dissemble no more! Here! Here! It is the beating of his hideous heart!

*

She seemed to explode all at once.

*

Sitting in a boilin hotel room in Bombay, Gerald re-wrote the story he had begun at the cottage on the other side of the world. The original title had been "The Hog." After some deliberation he retitled it "The Blue Air Compressor."

He had resolved it to his own satisfaction. There was a certain lack of motivation concerning the final scene where the fat old woman was murdered, but he did not see that as a fault. In "The Tell-Tale Heart," Edgar A. Poe's finest story, there is no real motivation for the murder of the old man, and that was as it should be. The motive is not the point.

*

She got very big just before the end: even her legs swelled up to twice their normal size. At the very end, her tongue popped out of her mouth like a party-favor.

*

After leaving Bombay, Gerald Nately went on to Hong Kong, then to Kowloon. The ivory guillotine caught his fancy immediately.

*

As the author, I can see only one correct omega to this story, and that is to tell you how Gerald Nately got rid of the body. He tore up the floor boards of the shed, dismembered Mrs. Leighton, and buried the sections in the sand beneath.

When he notified the police that she had been missing for a week, the local constable and a State Policeman came at once. Gerald entertained them quite naturally, even offering them coffee. He heard no beating heart, but then—the interview was conducted in the big house.

On the following day he flew away, toward Bombay, Hong Kong, and Kowloon.



BASED ON A STORY BY STEPHEN KING

THE BOOGEYMAN

COMING 2011

THE BOOGEYMAN

Stephen King

“I came to you because I want to tell my story,” the man on Dr. Harper’s couch was saying. The man was Lester Billings from Waterbury, Connecticut. According to the history taken from Nurse Vickers, he was twenty-eight, employed by an industrial firm in New York, divorced, and the father of three children. All deceased.

“I can’t go to a priest because I’m not Catholic. I can’t go to a lawyer because I haven’t done anything to consult a lawyer about. All I did was kill my kids. One at a time. Killed them all.”

Dr. Harper turned on the tape recorder.

Billings lay straight as a yardstick on the couch, not giving it an inch of himself. His feet protruded stiffly over the end. Picture of a man enduring necessary humiliation. His hands were folded corpselike on his chest. His face was carefully set. He looked at the plain white composition ceiling as if seeing scenes and pictures played out there.

“Do you mean you actually killed them, or—”

“No.” Impatient flick of the hand. “But I was responsible. Denny in 1967. Shirl in 1971. And Andy this year. I want to tell you about it.”

Dr. Harper said nothing. He thought that Billings looked haggard and old. His hair was thinning, his complexion sallow. His eyes held all the miserable secrets of whiskey.

“They were murdered, see? Only no one believes that. If they would, things would be all right.”

“Why is that?”

“Because ...”

Billings broke off and darted up on his elbows, staring across the room. “What’s that?” he barked. His eyes had narrowed to black slots.

“What’s what?”

“That door.”

“The closet,” Dr. Harper said. “Where I hang my coat and leave my overshoes.”

“Open it. I want to see.”

Dr. Harper got up wordlessly, crossed the room, and opened the closet. Inside, a tan raincoat hung on one of four or five hangers. Beneath that was a pair of shiny galoshes. The New York Times had been carefully tucked into one of them. That was all.

“All right?” Dr. Harper said.

“All right.” Billings removed the props of his elbows and returned to his previous position.

“You were saying,” Dr. Harper said as he went back to his chair, “that if the murder of your three children could be proved, all your troubles would be over. Why is that?”

“I’d go to jail,” Billings said immediately. “For life. And you can see into all the rooms in a jail. All the rooms.” He smiled at nothing.

“How were your children murdered?”

“Don’t try to jerk it out of me!”

Billings twitched around and stared balefully at Harper.

“I’ll tell you, don’t worry. I’m not one of your freaks strutting around and pretending to be Napoleon or explaining that I got hooked on heroin because my mother didn’t love me. I know you won’t believe me. I don’t care. It doesn’t matter. Just to tell will be enough.”

“All right.” Dr. Harper got out his pipe.

“I married Rita in 1965—I was twenty-one and she was eighteen. She was pregnant. That was Denny.” His lips twisted in a rubbery, frightening grin that was gone in a wink. “I had to leave college and get a job, but I didn’t mind. I loved both of them. We were very happy.

“Rita got pregnant just a little while after Denny was born, and Shirl came along in December of 1966. Andy came in the summer of 1969, and Denny was already dead by then. Andy was an accident. That’s what Rita said. She said sometimes that birth-control stuff doesn’t work. I think that it was more than an accident. Children tie a man down, you know. Women like that, especially when the man is brighter than they. Don’t you find that’s true?”

Harper grunted noncommittally.

“It doesn’t matter, though. I loved him anyway.” He said it almost vengefully, as if he had loved the child to spite his wife.

“Who killed the children?” Harper asked.

“The boogeyman,” Lester Billings answered immediately. “The boogeyman killed them all. Just came out of the closet and killed them.” He twisted around and grinned. “You think I’m crazy, all right. It’s written all over you. But I don’t care. All I want to do is tell you and then get lost.”

“I’m listening,” Harper said.

“It started when Denny was almost two and Shirl was just an infant. He started crying when Rita put him to bed. We had a two-bedroom place, see. Shirl slept in a crib in our room. At first I thought he was crying because he didn’t have a bottle to take to bed anymore. Rita said don’t make an issue of it, let it go, let him have it and he’ll drop it on his own. But that’s the way kids start off bad. You get permissive with them, spoil them. Then they break your heart. Get some girl knocked up, you know, or start shooting dope. Or they get to be

sissies. Can you imagine waking up some morning and finding your kid—your son—is a sissy?

“After a while, though, when he didn’t stop, I started putting him to bed myself. And if he didn’t stop crying I’d give him a whack. Then Rita said he was saying light’ over and over again. Well, I didn’t know. Kids that little, how can you tell what they’re saying. Only a mother can tell.

“Rita wanted to put in a nightlight. One of those wall-plug things with Mickey Mouse or Huckleberry Hound or something on it. I wouldn’t let her. If a kid doesn’t get over being afraid of the dark when he’s little, he never gets over it.

“Anyway, he died the summer after Shirl was born. I put him to bed that night and he started to cry right off. I heard

what he said that time. He pointed right at the closet when he said it. ‘Boogeyman,’ the kid says. ‘Boogeyman, Daddy.’

“I turned off the light and went into our room and asked Rita why she wanted to teach the kid a word like that. I was tempted to slap her around a little, but I didn’t. She said she never taught him to say that. I called her a goddamn liar.

“That was a bad summer for me, see. The only job I could get was loading Pepsi-Cola trucks in a warehouse, and I was tired all the time. Shirl would wake up and cry every night and Rita would pick her up and sniffle. I tell you, sometimes I felt like throwing them both out a window. Christ, kids drive you crazy sometimes. You could kill them.

“Well, the kid woke me at three in the morning, right on schedule. I went to the bathroom, only a quarter awake, you know, and Rita asked me if I’d check on Denny. I told her to do it herself and went back to bed. I was almost asleep when she started to scream.

“I got up and went in. The kid was dead on his back. Just as white as flour except for where the blood had ... had sunk. Back of the legs, the head, the a—the buttocks. His eyes were open. That was the worst, you know. Wide open and glassy, like the eyes you see on a moosehead some guy put over his mantel. Like pictures you see of those gook kids over in Nam. But an American kid shouldn't look like that. Dead on his back. Wearing diapers and rubber pants because he'd been wetting himself again the last couple of weeks. Awful, I loved that kid.”

Billings shook his head slowly, then offered the rubbery, frightening grin again. “Rita was screaming her head off. She tried to pick Denny up and rock him, but I wouldn't let her. The cops don't like you to touch any of the evidence. I know that—”

“Did you know it was the boogeyman then?” Harper asked quietly.

“Oh, no. Not then. But I did see one thing. It didn't mean anything to me then, but my mind stored it away.”

“What was that?”

“The closet door was open. Not much. Just a crack. But I knew I left it shut, see. There's dry-cleaning bags in there. A kid messes around with one of those and bango. Asphyxiation. You know that?”

“Yes. What happened then?”

Billings shrugged. “We planted him.” He looked morbidly at his hands, which had thrown dirt on three tiny coffins.

“Was there an inquest?”

“Sure.” Billings eyes flashed with sardonic brilliance. “Some back-country fuckhead with a stethoscope and a black bag full of Junior Mints and a sheepskin from some cow college. Crib death, he called it! You ever hear such a pile of yellow manure? The kid was three years old!”

“Crib death is most common during the first year,” Harper said carefully, “but that diagnosis has gone on death certificates for children up to age five for want of a better—”

“Bullshit!” Billings spat out violently.

Harper relit his pipe.

“We moved Shirl into Denny’s old room a month after the funeral. Rita fought it tooth and nail, but I had the last word. It hurt me, of course it did. Jesus, I loved having the kid in with us. But you can’t get overprotective. You make a kid a cripple that way. When I was a kid my mom used to take me to the beach and then scream herself hoarse. ‘Don’t go out so far! Don’t go there! It’s got an undertow! You only ate an hour ago! Don’t go over your head!’ Even to watch out for sharks, before God. So what happens? I can’t even go near the water now. It’s the truth. I get the cramps if I go near a beach. Rita got me to take her and the kids to Savin Rock once when Denny was alive. I got sick as a dog. I know, see? You can’t overprotect kids. And you can’t coddle yourself either. Life goes on. Shirl went right into Denny’s crib. We sent the old mattress to the dump, though. I didn’t want my girl to get any germs.

“So a year goes by. And one night when I’m putting Shirl into her crib she starts to yowl and scream and cry. ‘Boogeyman, Daddy, boogeyman, boogeyman!’

“That threw a jump into me. It was just like Denny. And I started to remember about that closet door, open just a crack when we found him. I wanted to take her into our room for the night.”

“Did you?”

“No.” Billings regarded his hands and his face twitched. “How could I go to Rita and admit I was wrong? I had to be strong. She was always such a jellyfish ... look how easy she went to bed with me when we weren’t married.”

Harper said, "On the other hand, look how easily you went to bed with her."

Billings froze in the act of rearranging his hands and slowly turned his head to look at Harper. "Are you trying to be a wise guy?"

"No, indeed," Harper said.

"Then let me tell it my way," Billings snapped. "I came here to get this off my chest. To tell my story. I'm not going to talk about my sex life, if that's what you expect. Rita and I had a very normal sex life, with none of that dirty stuff. I know it gives some people a charge to talk about that, but I'm not one of them."

"Okay," Harper said.

"Okay," Billings echoed with uneasy arrogance. He seemed to have lost the thread of his thought, and his eyes wandered uneasily to the closet door, which was firmly shut.

"Would you like that open?" Harper asked.

"No!" Billings said quickly. He gave a nervous little laugh. "What do I want to look at your overshoes for?"

"The boogeyman got her, too," Billings said. He brushed at his forehead, as if sketching memories. "A month later. But something happened before that. I heard a noise in there one night. And then she screamed. I opened the door real quick—the hall light was on—and ... she was sitting up in the crib crying and ... something moved. Back in the shadows, by the closet. Something slithered"

"Was the closet door open?"

"A little. Just a crack." Billings licked his lips. "Shirl was screaming about the boogeyman. And something else that sounded like 'claws.' Only she said 'craws,' you know. Little kids have trouble with that 'l'

sound. Rita ran upstairs and asked what the matter was. I said she got scared by the shadows of the branches moving on the ceiling.”

“Crawset?” Harper said.

“Huh?”

“Crawset ... closet. Maybe she was trying to say ‘closet.’ “

“Maybe,” Billings said. “Maybe that was it. But I don’t think so. I think it was ‘claws.’” His eyes began seeking the closet door again.

“Claws, long claws.” His voice had sunk to a whisper.

“Did you look in the closet?”

“Y-yes.” Billings’ hands were laced tightly across his chest, laced tightly enough to show a white moon at each knuckle.

“Was there anything in there? Did you see the—”

“I didn’t see anything!” Billings screamed suddenly. And the words poured out as if a black cork had been pulled from the bottom of his soul: “When she died I found her, see. And she was black. All black. She swallowed her own tongue and she was just as black as a nigger in a minstrel show and she was staring at me. Her eyes, they looked like those eyes you see on stuffed animals, all shiny and awful, like live marbles, and they were saying it got me, Daddy, you let it get me, you killed me, you helped it kill me ...” His words trailed off. One single tear very large and silent, ran down the side of his cheek.

“It was a brain convulsion, see? Kids get those sometimes. A bad signal from the brain. They had an autopsy at Hartford Receiving and they told us she choked on her tongue from the convulsion. And I had to go home alone because they kept Rita under sedation. She was out of her mind. I had to go back to that house all alone, and I know a kid don’t just get convulsions because their brain friggid up.

You can scare a kid into convulsions. And I had to go back to the house where it was.”

He whispered, “I slept on the couch. With the light on.”

“Did anything happen?”

“I had a dream,” Billings said. “I was in a dark room and there was something I couldn’t ... couldn’t quite see, in the closet. It made a noise ... a squishy noise. It reminded me of a comic book I read when I was a kid. Tales from the Crypt, you remember that? Christ! They had a guy named Graham Ingles; he could draw every god-awful thing in the world—and some out of it. Anyway, in this story this woman drowned her husband, see? Put cement blocks on his feet and dropped him into a quarry. Only he came back. He was all rotted and black-green and the fish had eaten away one of his eyes and there was seaweed in his hair. He came back and killed her. And when I woke up in the middle of the night, I thought that would be leaning over me. With claws ... long claws ...”

Dr. Harper looked at the digital clock inset into his desk. Lester Billings had been speaking for nearly half an hour. He said, “When your wife came back home, what was her attitude toward you?”

“She still loved me,” Billings said with pride. “She still wanted to do what I told her. That’s the wife’s place, right? This women’s lib only makes sick people. The most important thing in life is for a person to know his place. His ... his ... uh ...”

“Station in life?”

“That’s it!” Billings snapped his fingers. “That’s it exactly. And a wife should follow her husband. Oh, she was sort of colorless the first four or five months after—dragged around the house, didn’t sing, didn’t watch the TV, didn’t laugh. I knew she’d get over it. When they’re that little, you don’t get so attached to them. After a while you have to go to the bureau drawer and look at a picture to even remember exactly what they looked like.

“She wanted another baby,” he added darkly. “I told her it was a bad idea. Oh, not forever, but for a while. I told her it was a time for us to get over things and begin to enjoy each other. We never had a chance to do that before. If you wanted to go to a movie, you had to hassle around for a baby-sitter. You couldn’t go into town to see the Mets unless her folks would take the kids, because my mom wouldn’t have anything to do with us. Denny was born too soon after we were married, see? She said Rita was just a tramp, a common little corner-walker. Corner-walker is what my mom always called them. Isn’t that a sketch? She sat me down once and told me diseases you can get if you went to a cor ... to a prostitute. How your pri ... your penis has just a little tiny sore on it one day and the next day it’s rotting right off. She wouldn’t even come to the wedding.”

Billings drummed his chest with his fingers.

“Rita’s gynecologist sold her on this thing called an IUD—interuterine device. Foolproof, the doctor said. He just sticks it up the woman’s ... her place, and that’s it. If there’s anything in there, the egg can’t fertilize. You don’t even know it’s there.” He smiled at the ceiling with dark sweetness. “No one knows if it’s there or not. And next year she’s pregnant again. Some foolproof.”

“No birth-control method is perfect,” Harper said. “The pill is only ninety-eight percent. The IUD may be ejected by cramps, strong menstrual flow, and, in exceptional cases, by evacuation.”

“Yeah. Or you can take it out.”

“That’s possible.”

“So what’s next? She’s knitting little things, singing in the shower, and eating pickles like crazy. Sitting on my lap and saying things about how it must have been God’s will. Piss.”

“The baby came at the end of the year after Shirl’s death?”

“That’s right. A boy. She named it Andrew Lester Billings. I didn’t want anything to do with it, at least at first. My motto was she screwed up, so let her take care of it. I know how that sounds but you have to remember that I’d been through a lot.

“But I warmed up to him, you know it? He was the only one of the litter that looked like me, for one thing. Denny looked like his mother, and Shirl didn’t look like anybody, except maybe my Grammy Ann. But Andy was the spitting image of me.

“I’d get to playing around with him in his playpen when I got home from work. He’d grab only my finger and smile and gurgle. Nine weeks old and the kid was grinning up at his old dad. You believe that?

“Then one night, here I am coming out of a drugstore with a mobile to hang over the kid’s crib. Me! Kids don’t appreciate presents until they’re old enough to say thank you, that was always my motto. But there I was, buying him silly crap and all at once I realize I love him the most of all. I had another job by then, a pretty good one, selling drill bits for Cluett and Sons. I did real well, and when Andy was one, we moved to Waterbury. The old place had too many bad memories.

“And too many closets.

“That next year was the best one for us. I’d give every finger on my right hand to have it back again. Oh, the war in Vietnam was still going on, and the hippies were still running around with no clothes on, and the niggers were yelling a lot, but none of that touched us. We were on a quiet street with nice neighbors. We were happy,” he summed up simply. “I asked Rita once if she wasn’t worried. You know, bad luck comes in threes and all that. She said not for us. She said Andy was special. She said God had drawn a ring around him.”

Billings looked morbidly at the ceiling.

“Last year wasn’t so good. Something about the house changed. I started keeping my boots in the hall because I didn’t like to open the

closet door anymore. I kept thinking: Well, what if it's in there? All crouched down and ready to spring the second I open the door? And I'd started thinking I could hear squishy noises, as if something black and green and wet was moving around in there just a little.

“Rita asked me if I was working too hard, and I started to snap at her, just like the old days. I got sick to my stomach leaving them alone to go to work, but I was glad to get out. God help me, I was glad to get out. I started to think, see, that it lost us for a while when we moved. It had to hunt around, slinking through the streets at night and maybe creeping in the sewers. Smelling for us. It took a year, but it found us. It's back. It wants Andy and it wants me. I started to think, maybe if you think of a thing long enough, and believe in it, it gets real. Maybe all the monsters we were scared of when we were kids, Frankenstein and Wolfman and Mummy, maybe they were real. Real enough to kill the kids that were supposed to have fallen into gravel pits or drowned in lakes or were just never found. Maybe ...”

“Are you backing away from something, Mr. Billings?”

Billings was silent for a long time—two minutes clicked off the digital clock. Then he said abruptly; “Andy died in February. Rita wasn't there. She got a call from her father. Her mother had been in a car crash the day after New Year's and wasn't expected to live. She took a bus back that night.

“Her mother didn't die, but she was on the critical list for a long time—two months. I had a very good woman who stayed with Andy days. We kept house nights. And closet doors kept coming open.”

Billings licked his lips. “The kid was sleeping in the room with me. It's funny, too. Rita asked me once when he was two if I wanted to move him into another room. Spock or one of those other quacks claims it's bad for kids to sleep with their parents, see? Supposed to give them traumas about sex and all that. But we never did it unless the kid was asleep. And I didn't want to move him. I was afraid to, after Denny and Shirk”

“But you did move him, didn’t you?” Dr. Harper asked.

“Yeah,” Billings said. He smiled a sick, yellow smile. “I did.”

Silence again. Billings wrestled with it.

“I had to!” he barked finally. “I had to! It was all right when Rita was there, but when she was gone, it started to get bolder. It started ...” He rolled his eyes at Harper and bared his teeth in a savage grin. “Oh, you won’t believe it. I know what you think, just another goofy for your casebook, I know that, but you weren’t there, you lousy smug head-peeper.

“One night every door in the house blew wide open. One morning I got up and found a trail of mud and filth across the hall between the coat closet and the front door. Was it going out? Coming in? I don’t know! Before Jesus, I just don’t know! Records all scratched up and covered with slime, mirrors broken ... and the sounds ... the sounds ...”

He ran a hand through his hair. “You’d wake up at three in the morning and look into the dark and at first you’d say, ‘It’s only the clock.’ But underneath it you could hear something moving in a stealthy way. But not too stealthy, because it wanted you to hear it. A slimy sliding sound like something from the kitchen drain. Or a clicking sound, like claws being dragged lightly over the staircase banister. And you’d close your eyes, knowing that hearing it was bad, but if you saw it ...

“And always you’d be afraid that the noises might stop for a little while, and then there would be a laugh right over your face and a breath of air like stale cabbage on your face, and then hands on your throat.”

Billings was pallid and trembling.

“So I moved him. I knew it would go for him, see. Because he was weaker. And it did. That very first night he screamed in the middle of

the night and finally, when I got up the cojones to go in, he was standing up in bed and screaming. The boogeyman, Daddy ... boogeyman ... wanna go wif Daddy, go wif Daddy.” Billings’ voice had become a high treble, like a child’s. His eyes seemed to fill his entire face; he almost seemed to shrink on the couch.

“But I couldn’t,” the childish breaking treble continued, “I couldn’t. And an hour later there was a scream. An awful, gurgling scream. And I knew how much I loved him because I ran in, I didn’t even turn on the light, I ran, ran, ran, oh, Jesus God Mary, it had him; it was shaking him, shaking him just like a terrier shakes a piece of cloth and I could see something with awful slumped shoulders and a scarecrow head and I could smell something like a dead mouse in a pop bottle and I heard ...” He trailed off, and then his voice clicked back into an adult range. “I heard it when Andy’s neck broke.” Billings’ voice was cool and dead. “It made a sound like ice cracking when you’re skating on a country pond in winter.”

“Then what happened?”

“Oh, I ran,” Billings said in the same cool, dead voice. “I went to an all-night diner. How’s that for complete cowardice? Ran to an all-night diner and drank six cups of coffee. Then I went home. It was already dawn. I called the police even before I went upstairs. He was lying on the floor and staring at me. Accusing me. A tiny bit of blood had run out of one ear. Only a drop, really. And the closet door was open—but just a crack.”

The voice stopped. Harper looked at the digital clock. Fifty minutes had passed.

“Make an appointment with the nurse,” he said. “In fact, several of them. Tuesdays and Thursdays?”

“I only came to tell my story,” Billings said. “To get it off my chest. I lied to the police, see? Told them the kid must have tried to get out of his crib in the night and ... they swallowed it. Course they did. That’s

just what it looked like. Accidental, like the others. But Rita knew. Rita ... finally ... knew ...”

He covered his eyes with his right arm and began to weep.

“Mr. Billings, there is a great deal to talk about,” Dr. Harper said after a pause. “I believe we can remove some of the guilt you’ve been carrying, but first you have to want to get rid of it.”

“Don’t you believe I do?” Billings cried, removing his arm from his eyes. They were red, raw, wounded.

“Not yet,” Harper said quietly. “Tuesdays and Thursdays?”

After a long silence, Billings muttered, “Goddamn shrink. All right. All right.”

“Make an appointment with the nurse, Mr. Billings. And have a good day.”

Billings laughed emptily and walked out of the office quickly, without looking back.

The nurse’s station was empty. A small sign on the desk blotter said: “Back in a Minute.”

Billings turned and went back into the office. “Doctor, your nurse is —”

The room was empty.

But the closet door was open. Just a crack.

“So nice,” the voice from the closet said. “So nice.” The words sounded as if they might have come through a mouthful of rotted seaweed.

Billings stood rooted to the spot as the closet door swung open. He dimly felt warmth at his crotch as he wet himself.

“So nice,” the boogeyman said as it shambled out.

It still held its Dr. Harper mask in one rotted, spade-claw hand.

CAIN ROSE UP

Stephen King

Garrish walked out of the bright May sunshine and into the coolness of the dorm. It took his eyes a moment to adjust, and at first Harry the Beaver was just a bodiless voice from the shadows.

“It was a bitch, wasn’t it?” the Beaver asked. “Wasn’t that one a really truly bitch?”

“Yes,” Garrish said. “It was tough.”

Now his eyes pulled in the Beaver. He was rubbing a hand across the pimples on his forehead and sweating under his eyes. He was wearing sandals and a 69 T-shirt with a button on the front that said Howdy Doody was a pervert. The Beaver’s huge buck teeth loomed in the gloom.

“I was gonna drop it in January,” the Beaver said. “I kept telling myself to do it while there was still time. And then add-drop was over and it was either go for it or pick up an incomplete. I think I flunked it, Curt. Honest to God.” The housemother stood in the corner by the mailboxes. She was an extremely tall woman who looked vaguely like Rudolph Valentino. She was trying to push a slip strap back under the sweaty armhole of her dress with one hand while she tacked up a dorm sign-out sheet with the other.

“Tough,” Garrish repeated.

“I wanted to bag a few off you but I didn’t dare, honest to God, that guy’s got eyes like an eagle. You think you got your A all right?”

“I guess maybe I flunked,” Garrish said.

The Beaver gaped. “You think you flunked? You think you—”

“I’m going to take a shower, okay?”

“Yeah, sure, Curt. Sure. Was that your last test?”

“Yes,” Garrish said. “That was my last test.”

Garrish crossed the lobby and pushed through the doors and began to climb. The stairwell smelled like an athletic supporter. Same old stairs. His room was on the fifth floor.

Quinn and that other idiot from three, the one with the hairy legs, piled by him, tossing a softball back and forth. A little fella wearing horn-rimmed glasses and a valiantly struggling goatee passed him between four and five, holding a calculus book to his chest like a Bible, his lips moving in a rosary of logarithms. His eyes were blank as blackboards.

Garrish paused and looked after him, wondering if he wouldn't be better off dead, but the little fella was now only a bobbing, disappearing shadow on the wall. It bobbed once more and was gone. Garrish climbed to five and walked down the hall to his room. Pig Pen had left two days ago. Four finals in three days, wham-bam and thank-ya-ma'am. Pig Pen knew how to arrange things. He had left only his pinups, two dirty mismatched sweatsocks, and a ceramic parody of Rodin's Thinker perched on a toilet seat.

Garrish put his key in the lock and turned it.

"Curt! Hey, Curt!"

Rollins, the asinine floor-counselor who had sent Jimmy Brody up to visit the Dean of Men for a drinking offense, was coming down the hall and waving at him. He was tall, well-built, crewcut, symmetrical. He looked varnished.

"You all done?" Rollins asked.

"Yeah. "

"Don't forget to sweep the floor of the room and fill out the damage report, okay?"

"Yeah."

“I slid a damage report under your door last Thursday, didn’t I?”

“Yeah.”

“If I’m not in my room, just slide the damage report and the key under the door.”

“Okay.”

Rollins seized his hand and shook it twice, fast, pumppump. Rollins’s palm was dry, the skin grainy. Shaking hands with Rollins was like shaking hands with a fistful of salt.

“Have yourself a good summer, m’man.”

“Right.”

“Don’t work too hard.”

“No.”

“Use it, but don’t abuse it.”

“I will and I won’t.”

Rollins looked momentarily puzzled and then he laughed. “Take care, now.” He slapped Garrish’s shoulder and then walked back down the hall, pausing once to tell Ron Frane to turn down his stereo. Garrish could see Rollins lying dead in a ditch with maggots in his eyes. Rollins wouldn’t care. Neither would the maggots. You either ate the world or the world ate you and it was okay either way.

Garrish stood thoughtfully, watching until Rollins was out of sight, and then he let himself into his room.

With Pig Pen’s cyclonic clutter gone it looked barren and sterile. The swirled, heaped, drifted pile that had been Pig Pen’s bed was stripped down to the bare—if slightly comestained—mattress pad.

Two Playboy gatefolds looked down at him with frozen two-dimensional come-ons.

Not much change in Garrish's half of the room, which had always been barracks-neat. You could drop a quarter on the top blanket of Garrish's bed and it would bounce. All that neat had gotten on Piggy's nerves. He was an English major with a fine turn of phrase. He called Garrish a pigeonholer. The only thing on the wall above Garrish's bed was a huge blow-up of Humphrey Bogart that he had gotten in the college bookstore. Bogie had an automatic pistol in each hand and he was wearing suspenders. Pig Pen said pistols and braces were impotency symbols. Garrish doubted if Bogie had been impotent, although he had never read anything about him.

He went to the closet door, unlocked it, and brought out the big walnut-stocked .352 Magnum that his father, a Methodist minister, had bought him for Christmas. He had bought the telescopic sight himself last March.

You weren't supposed to have guns in your room, not even hunting rifles, but it hadn't been hard. He had signed it out of the university gun storage room the day before with a forged withdrawal slip. He put it in its waterproof leather scabbard, and left it in the woods behind the football field. Then, this morning around three A.M., he just went out and got it and brought it upstairs through the sleeping corridors.

He sat down on the bed with the gun across his knees and wept a little bit. The Thinker on the toilet seat was looking at him. Garrish put the gun on his bed, crossed the room, and slapped it off Piggy's table and onto the floor, where it shattered. There was a knock at the door.

Garrish put the rifle under his bed. "Come in."

It was Bailey, standing there in his skivvies. There was a puff of lint in his bellybutton. There was no future for Bailey. Bailey would marry a

stupid girl and they would have stupid kids. Later on he would die of cancer or maybe renal failure.

“How was the chem final, Curt?”

“All right.”

“I just wondered if I could borrow your notes. I’ve got it tomorrow. “

“I burned them with my trash this morning.”

“Oh. Hey, Jesus! Did Piggy go and do that?” He pointed at the remains of the Thinker.

“I guess so.”

“Why did he want to go and do that? I liked that thing. I was going to buy it off him.” Bailey had sharp, ratty little features. His skivvies were thready and saggy-seated. Garrish could see exactly how he would look, dying of emphysema or something in an oxygen tent. How he would look yellow. I could help you, Garrish thought.

“You think he’d mind if I scooped up those pinups?”

“I guess not.”

“Okay.” Bailey crossed the room, stepping his bare feet gingerly over the pottery shards, and untacked the Playmates. “That picture of Bogart is really sharp, too. No tits, but, hey! You know?” Bailey peered at Garrish to see if Garrish would smile. When Garrish did not, he said, “I don’t suppose you planned on throwing it away, or anything?”

“No. I was just getting ready to take a shower.”

“Okay. Have a good summer if I don’t see you again, Curt.”

“Thanks.”

Bailey went back to the door, the seat of his skivvies flapping. He paused at the door. "Another four-point this semester, Curt?"

"At least."

"Good deal. See you next year."

He went out and closed the door. Garrish sat on the bed for a little while, then took the gun out, stripped it, and cleaned it. He put the muzzle up to his eye and looked at the tiny circle of light at the far end. The barrel was clean. He reintegrated the gun.

In the third drawer of his bureau were three heavy boxes of Winchester ammunition. He laid these on the windowsill. He locked the room's door and went back to the window. He pulled the blinds up.

The mall was bright and green, peppered with strolling students. Quinn and his idiot friend had gotten up a raggle-taggle softball game. They scurried back and forth like crippled ants escaping a broken burrow.

"Let me tell you something," Garrish told Bogie. "God got mad at Cain because Cain had an idea God was a vegetarian. His brother knew better. God made the world in His image, and if you don't eat the world, the world eats you. So Cain says to his brother, 'Why didn't you tell me?' And his brother says, 'Why didn't you listen?' And Cain says, 'Okay, I'm listening now.' So he waxes his brother and says, 'Hey God! You want meat? Here it is! You want roast or ribs or Abelburgers or what?' And God told him to put on his boogie shoes. So ... what do you think?"

No reply from Bogie.

Garrish put the window up and rested his elbows on the ledge, not letting the barrel of the .352 project out into the sunlight. He looked into the sight.

He was centered on Carlton Memorial women's dormitory across the mall. Carlton was more popularly known as the dog kennels. He put the crosshairs on a big Ford wagon. A blond coed in jeans and a blue shell top was talking to her mother while her father, red-faced and balding, loaded suitcases into the back.

Someone knocked on the door.

Garrish waited.

The knock came again.

"Curt? I'll give you half a rock for the Bogart poster."

Bailey.

Garrish said nothing. The girl and her mother were laughing at something, not knowing there were microbes in their intestines, feeding, dividing, multiplying. The girl's father joined them and they stood in the sunlight together, a family portrait in the crosshairs.

"Damn it all," Bailey said. His feet padded down the hall.

Garrish squeezed the trigger.

The gun kicked hard against his shoulder, the good, padded kick you get when you have seated the gun in exactly the right place. The smiling girl's blond head sheared itself away.

Her mother went on smiling for a moment, and then her hand went to her mouth. She screamed through her hand. Garrish shot through it. Hand and head disappeared in a red spray. The man who had been loading the suitcases broke into a lumbering run.

Garrish tracked him and shot him in the back. He raised his head, looking out of the sight for a moment. Quinn was holding the softball and looking at the blond girl's brains, which were splattered on the NO PARKING sign behind her prone body. Quinn didn't move. All

across the mall people stood frozen, like children engaged in a game of statues.

Somebody pounded on the door, then rattled the handle. Bailey again. "Curt? You all right, Curt? I think somebody'—"

"Good drink, good meat, good God, let's eat!" Garrish exclaimed, and shot at Quinn. He pulled instead of squeezing and the shot went wide. Quinn was running. No problem. The second shot took Quinn in the neck and he flew maybe twenty feet.

"Curt Garrish is killing himself!" Bailey was screaming. "Rollins! Rollins! Come quick!"

His footsteps faded down the hall.

Now they were starting to run. Garrish could hear them screaming. Garrish could hear the faint smack-smack sound of their shoes on the walks.

He looked up at Bogie. Bogie held his two guns and looked beyond him. He looked at the shattered remnants of Piggy's Thinker and wondered what Piggy was doing today, if he was sleeping or watching TV or eating some great big wonderful meal. Eat the world, Piggy, Garrish thought. You gulp that sucker right down.

"Garrish!" It was Rollins now, pounding on the door. "Open up, Garrish!"

"It's locked," Bailey panted. "He looked lousy, he killed himself, I know it."

Garrish pushed the muzzle out of the window again. A boy in a madras shirt was crouched down behind a bush, scanning the dormitory windows with desperate intensity. He wanted to run for it, Garrish saw, but his legs were frozen.

“Good God, let’s eat,” Garrish murmured, and began to pull the trigger again.



Kat uit de hel

Stephen King
en anderen

Horroverhalen

THE CAT FROM HELL

Stephen King

Halston thought the old man in the wheelchair looked sick, terrified, and ready to die. He had experience in seeing such things. Death was Halston's business; he had brought it to eighteen men and six women in his career as an independent hitter. He knew the death look.

The house—mansion, actually—was cold and quiet. The only sounds were the low snap of the fire on the big stone hearth and the low whine of the November wind outside.

"I want you to make a kill," the old man said. His voice was quavery and high, peevish. "I understand that is what you do."

"Who did you talk to?" Halston asked.

"With a man named Saul Loggia. He says you know him."

Halston nodded. If Loggia was the go-between, it was all right. And if there was a bug in the room, anything the old man—Drogan—said was entrapment.

"Who do you want hit?"

Drogan pressed a button on the console built into the arm of his wheelchair and it buzzed forward. Close-up, Halston could smell the yellow odors of fear, age, and urine all mixed. They disgusted him, but he made no sign. His face was still and smooth.

"Your victim is right behind you," Drogan said softly.

Halston moved quickly. His reflexes were his life and they were always set on a filed pin. He was off the couch, falling to one knee, turning, hand inside his specially tailored sport coat, gripping the handle of the short-barrelled .45 hybrid that hung below his armpit in a spring-loaded holster that laid it in his palm at a touch. A moment later it was out and pointed at ... a cat.

For a moment Halston and the cat stared at each other. It was a strange moment for Halston, who was an unimaginative man with no superstitions. For that one moment as he knelt on the floor with the gun pointed, he felt that he knew this cat, although if he had ever seen one with such unusual markings he surely would have remembered.

Its face was an even split: half black, half white. The dividing line ran from the top of its flat skull and down its nose to its mouth, straight-arrow. Its eyes were huge in the gloom, and caught in each nearly circular black pupil was a prism of firelight, like a sullen coal of hate.

And the thought echoed back to Halston: We know each other, you and I.

Then it passed. He put the gun away and stood up. "I ought to kill you for that, old man. I don't take a joke."

"And I don't make them," Drogan said. "Sit down. Look in here." He had taken a fat envelope out from beneath the blanket that covered his legs.

Halston sat. The cat, which had been crouched on the back of the sofa, jumped lightly down into his lap. It looked up at Halston for a moment with those huge dark eyes, the pupils surrounded by thin green-gold rings, and then it settled down and began to purr.

Halston looked at Drogan questioningly.

"He's very friendly," Drogan said. "At first. Nice friendly pussy has killed three people in this household. That leaves only me. I am old, I am sick ... but I prefer to die in my own time."

"I can't believe this," Halston said. "You hired me to hit a cat?"

"Look in the envelope, please."

Halston did. It was filled with hundreds and fifties, all of them old.
“How much is it?”

“Six thousand dollars. There will be another six when you bring me proof that the cat is dead. Mr. Loggia said twelve thousand was your usual fee?”

Halston nodded, his hand automatically stroking the cat in his lap. It was asleep, still purring. Halston liked cats. They were the only animals he did like, as a matter of fact. They got along on their own. God—if there was one—had made them into perfect, aloof killing machines. Cats were the hitters of the animal world, and Halston gave them his respect.

“I need not explain anything, but I will,” Drogan said. “Forewarned is forearmed, they say, and I would not want you to go into this lightly. And I seem to need to justify myself. So you’ll not think I’m insane.”

Halston nodded again. He had already decided to make this peculiar hit, and no further talk was needed. But if Drogan wanted to talk, he would listen.

“First of all, you know who I am? Where the money comes from?”

“Drogan Pharmaceuticals.”

“Yes. One of the biggest drug companies in the world. And the cornerstone of our financial success has been this.” From the pocket of his robe he handed Halston a small, unmarked vial of pills. “Tri-Dormal-phenobarbin, compound G. Prescribed almost exclusively for the terminally ill. It’s extremely habit-forming, you see. It’s a combination pain-killer, tranquilizer, and mild hallucinogen. It is remarkable in helping the terminally ill face their conditions and adjust to them.”

“Do you take it?” Halston asked.

Drogan ignored the question. “It is widely prescribed throughout the world. It’s a synthetic, was developed in the fifties at our New Jersey labs. Our testing was confined almost solely to cats, because of the unique quality of the feline nervous system.”

“How many did you wipe out?”

Drogan stiffened. “That is an unfair and prejudicial way to put it.”

Halston shrugged.

“In the four-year testing period which led to FDA approval of Tri-Dormal-G, about fifteen thousand cats ... uh, expired.”

Halston whistled. About four thousand cats a year. “And now you think this one’s back to get you, huh?”

“I don’t feel guilty in the slightest,” Drogan said, but that quavering, petulant note was back in his voice. “Fifteen thousand test animals died so that hundreds of thousands of human beings—”

“Never mind that,” Halston said. Justifications bored him.

“That cat came here seven months ago. I’ve never liked cats. Nasty, disease-bearing animals ... always out in the fields ... crawling around in barns ... picking up God knows what germs in their fur ... always trying to bring something with its insides falling out into the house for you to look at ... it was my sister who wanted to take it in. She found out. She paid.” He looked at the cat sleeping on Halston’s lap with dead hate.

“You said the cat killed three people.”

Drogan began to speak. The cat dozed and purred on Halston’s lap under the soft, scratching strokes of Halston’s strong and expert killer’s fingers. Occasionally a pine knot would explode on the hearth, making it tense like a series of steel springs covered with hide and muscle. Outside the wind whined around the big stone

house far out in the Connecticut countryside. There was winter in that wind's throat. The old man's voice droned on and on.

Seven months ago there had been four of them here—Drogan, his sister Amanda, who at seventy-four was two years Drogan's elder, her lifelong friend Carolyn Broadmoor ("of the Westchester Broadmoors," Drogan said), who was badly afflicted with emphysema, and Dick Gage, a hired man who had been with the Drogan family for twenty years. Gage, who was past sixty himself, drove the big Lincoln Mark IV, cooked, served the evening sherry. A day-maid came in. The four of them had lived this way for nearly two years, a dull collection of old people and their family retainer. Their only pleasures were The Hollywood Squares and waiting to see who would outlive whom.

Then the cat had come.

"It was Gage who saw it first, whining and skulking around the house. He tried to drive it away. He threw sticks and small rocks at it, and hit it several times. But it wouldn't go. It smelled the food, of course. It was little more than a bag of bones. People put them out beside the road to die at the end of the summer season, you know. A terrible, inhumane thing."

"Better to fry their nerves?" Halston asked.

Drogan ignored that and went on. He hated cats. He always had. When the cat refused to be driven away, he had instructed Gage to put out poisoned food. Large, tempting dishes of Calo cat food spiked with Tri-Dormal-G, as a matter of fact. The cat ignored the food. At that point Amanda Drogan had noticed the cat and had insisted they take it in. Drogan had protested vehemently, but Amanda had gotten her way. She always did, apparently.

"But she found out," Drogan said. "She brought it inside herself, in her arms. It was purring, just as it is now. But it wouldn't come near me. It never has ... yet. She poured it a saucer of milk. 'Oh, look at the poor thing, it's starving,' she cooed. She and Carolyn both cooed

over it. Disgusting. It was their way of getting back at me, of course. They knew the way I've felt about felines ever since the Tri-Dormal-G testing program twenty years ago. They enjoyed teasing me, baiting me with it." He looked at Halston grimly. "But they paid."

In mid-May, Gage had gotten up to set breakfast and had found Amanda Drogan lying at the foot of the main stairs in a litter of broken crockery and Little Friskies. Her eyes bulged sightlessly up at the ceiling. She had bled a great deal from the mouth and nose. Her back was broken, both legs were broken, and her neck had been literally shattered like glass.

"It slept in her room," Drogan said. "She treated it like a baby ... 'Is oo hungry, darwing? Does oo need to go out and do poopos?' Obscene, coming from an old battle-axe like my sister. I think it woke her up, meowing. She got his dish. She used to say that Sam didn't really like his Friskies unless they were wetted down with a little milk. So she was planning to go downstairs. The cat was rubbing against her legs. She was old, not too steady on her feet. Half-asleep. They got to the head of the stairs and the cat got in front of her ... tripped her ..."

Yes, it could have happened that way, Halston thought. In his mind's eye he saw the old woman falling forward and outward, too shocked to scream. The Friskies spraying out as she tumbled head over heels to the bottom, the bowl smashing. At last she comes to rest at the bottom, the old bones shattered, the eyes glaring, the nose and ears trickling blood. And the purring cat begins to work its way down the stairs, contentedly munching Little Friskies ...

"What did the coroner say?" he asked Drogan.

"Death by accident, of course. But I knew."

"Why didn't you get rid of the cat then? With Amanda gone?"

Because Carolyn Broadmoor had threatened to leave if he did, apparently. She was hysterical, obsessed with the subject. She was

a sick woman, and she was nutty on the subject of spiritualism. A Hartford medium had told her (for a mere twenty dollars) that Amanda's soul had entered Sam's feline body. Sam had been Amanda's, she told Drogan, and if Sam went, she went.

Halston, who had become something of an expert at reading between the lines of human lives, suspected that Drogan and the old Broadmoor bird had been lovers long ago, and the old dude was reluctant to let her go over a cat.

"It would have been the same as suicide," Drogan said. "In her mind she was still a wealthy woman, perfectly capable of packing up that cat and going to New York or London or even Monte Carlo with it. In fact she was the last of a great family, living on a pittance as a result of a number of bad investments in the sixties. She lived on the second floor here in a specially controlled, super-humidified room. The woman was seventy, Mr. Halston. She was a heavy smoker until the last two years of her life, and the emphysema was very bad. I wanted her here, and if the cat had to stay ..."

Halston nodded and then glanced meaningfully at his watch.

"Near the end of June, she died in the night. The doctor seemed to take it as a matter of course ... just came and wrote out the death certificate and that was the end of it. But the cat was in the room. Gage told me."

"We all have to go sometime, man," Halston said.

"Of course. That's what the doctor said. But I knew. I remembered. Cats like to get babies and old people when they're asleep. And steal their breath."

"An old wives' tale."

"Based on fact, like most so-called old wives' tales," Drogan replied. "Cats like to knead soft things with their paws, you see. A pillow, a

thick shag rug ... or a blanket. A crib blanket or an old person's blanket. The extra weight on a person who's weak to start with ..."

Drogan trailed off, and Halston thought about it. Carolyn Broadmoor asleep in her bedroom, the breath rasping in and out of her damaged lungs, the sound nearly lost in the whisper of special humidifiers and air conditioners. The cat with the queer black-and-white markings leaps silently onto her spinster's bed and stares at her old and wrinkle-grooved face with those lambent, black-and-green eyes. It creeps onto her thin chest and settles its weight there, purring ... and the breathing slows ... and the cat purrs as the old woman slowly smothers beneath its weight on her chest.

He was not an imaginative man, but Halston shivered a little.

"Drogan," he said, continuing to stroke the purring cat. "Why don't you just have it put away? A vet would give it the gas for twenty dollars."

Drogan said, "The funeral was on the first of July. I had Carolyn buried in our cemetery plot next to my sister. The way she would have wanted it. Only July third I called Gage to this room and handed him a wicker basket ... a picnic hamper sort of thing. Do you know what I mean?"

Halston nodded.

"I told him to put the cat in it and take it to a vet in Milford and have it put to sleep. He said, 'Yes, sir,' took the basket, and went out. Very like him. I never saw him alive again. There was an accident on the turnpike. The Lincoln was driven into a bridge abutment at better than sixty miles an hour. Dick Gage was killed instantly. When they found him there were scratches on his face."

Halston was silent as the picture of how it might have been formed in his brain again. No sound in the room but the peaceful crackle of the fire and the peaceful purr of the cat in his lap. He and the cat together before the fire would make a good illustration for that Edgar

Guest poem, the one that goes: “The cat on my lap, the hearth’s good fire / ... A happy man, should you enquire.”

Dick Gage moving the Lincoln down the turnpike toward Milford, beating the speed limit by maybe five miles an hour. The wicker basket beside him—a picnic hamper sort of thing. The chauffeur is watching traffic, maybe he’s passing a big cab-over Jimmy and he doesn’t notice the peculiar black-on-one-side, white-on-the-other face that pokes out of one side of the basket. Out of the driver’s side. He doesn’t notice because he’s passing the big trailer truck and that’s when the cat jumps onto his face, spitting and clawing, its talons raking into one eye, puncturing it, deflating it, blinding it. Sixty and the hum of the Lincoln’s big motor and the other paw is hooked over the bridge of the nose, digging in with exquisite, damning pain—maybe the Lincoln starts to veer right, into the path of the Jimmy, and its airhorn blares ear-shatteringly, but Gage can’t hear it because the cat is yowling, the cat is spread-eagled over his face like some huge furry black spider, ears laid back, green eyes glaring like spotlights from hell, back legs jittering and digging into the soft flesh of the old man’s neck. The car veers wildly back the other way. The bridge abutment looms. The cat jumps down and the Lincoln, a shiny black torpedo, hits the cement and goes up like a bomb.

Halston swallowed hard and heard a dry click in his throat.

“And the cat came back?”

Drogan nodded. “A week later. On the day Dick Gage was buried, as a matter of fact. Just like the old song says. The cat came back.”

“It survived a car crash at sixty? Hard to believe.”

“They say each one has nine lives. When it comes back ... that’s when I started to wonder if it might not be a ... a ...”

“Hellcat?” Halston suggested softly.

“For want of a better word, yes. A sort of demon sent ...”

“To punish you.”

“I don’t know. But I’m afraid of it. I feed it, or rather, the woman who comes in to do for me feeds it. She doesn’t like it either. She says that face is a curse of God. Of course, she’s local.” The old man tried to smile and failed. “I want you to kill it. I’ve lived with it for the last four months. It skulks around in the shadows. It looks at me. It seems to be ... waiting. I lock myself in my room every night and still I wonder if I’m going to wake up one early morning and find it ... curled up on my chest ... and purring.”

The wind whined lonesomely outside and made a strange hooting noise in the stone chimney.

“At last I got in touch with Saul Loggia. He recommended you. He called you a stick, I believe.”

“A one-stick. That means I work on my own.”

“Yes. He said you’d never been busted, or even suspected. He said you always seem to land on your feet ... like a cat.”

Halston looked at the old man in the wheelchair. And suddenly his long-fingered, muscular hands were lingering just above the cat’s neck.

“I’ll do it now, if you want me to,” he said softly. “I’ll snap its neck. It won’t even know—”

“No!” Drogan cried. He drew in a long, shuddering breath. Color had come up in his sallow cheeks. “Not ... not here. Take it away.”

Halston smiled humorlessly. He began to stroke the sleeping cat’s head and shoulders and back very gently again. “All right,” he said. “I accept the contract. Do you want the body?”

“No. Kill it. Bury it.” He paused. He hunched forward in the wheelchair like some ancient buzzard. “Bring me the tail,” he said.

“So I can throw it in the fire and watch it burn.”

*

Halston drove a 1973 Plymouth with a custom Cyclone Spoiler engine. The car was jacked and blocked, and rode with the hood pointing down at the road at a twenty-degree angle. He had rebuilt the differential and the rear end himself. The shift was a Pensy, the linkage was Hearst. It sat on huge Bobby Unser Wide Ovals and had a top end of a little past one-sixty.

He left the Drogan house at a little past 9:30. A cold rind of crescent moon rode overhead through the tattering November clouds. He rode with all the windows open, because that yellow stench of age and terror seemed to have settled into his clothes and he didn't like it. The cold was hard and sharp, eventually numbing, but it was good. It was blowing that yellow stench away.

He got off the turnpike at Placer's Glen and drove through the silent town, which was guarded by a single yellow blinker at the intersection, at a thoroughly respectable thirty-five. Out of town, moving up S.R. 35, he opened the Plymouth up a little, letting her walk. The tuned Spoiler engine purred like the cat had purred on his lap earlier this evening. Halston grinned at the simile. They moved between frost-white November fields full of skeleton cornstalks at a little over seventy.

The cat was in a double-thickness shopping bag, tied at the top with heavy twine. The bag was in the passenger bucket seat. The cat had been sleepy and purring when Halston put it in, and it had purred through the entire ride. It sensed, perhaps, that Halston liked it and felt at home with it. Like himself, the cat was a one-stick.

Strange hit, Halston thought, and was surprised to find that he was taking it seriously as a hit. Maybe the strangest thing about it was that he actually liked the cat, felt a kinship with it. If it had managed to get rid of those three old crocks, more power to it ... especially Gage, who had been taking it to Milford for a terminal date with a

crewcut veterinarian who would have been more than happy to bundle it into a ceramic-lined gas chamber the size of a microwave oven. He felt a kinship, but no urge to renege on the hit. He would do it the courtesy of killing it quickly and well. He would park off the road beside one of these November-barren fields and take it out of the bag and stroke it and then snap its neck and sever its tail with his pocket knife. And, he thought, the body I'll bury honorably, saving it from the scavengers. I can't save it from the worms, but I can save it from the maggots.

He was thinking these things as the car moved through the night like a dark blue ghost and that was when the cat walked in front of his eyes, up on the dashboard, tail raised arrogantly, its black-and-white face turned toward him, its mouth seeming to grin at him.

“Sssshhhh—” Halston hissed. He glanced to his right and caught a glimpse of the double-thickness shopping bag, a hole chewed—or clawed—in its side. Looked ahead again ... and the cat lifted a paw and batted playfully at him. The paw skidded across Halston's forehead. He jerked away from it and the Plymouth's big tires wailed on the road as it swung erratically from one side of the narrow blacktop to the other.

Halston batted at the cat on the dashboard with his fist. It was blocking his field of vision. It spat at him, arching its back, but it didn't move. Halston swung again, and instead of shrinking away, it leaped at him.

Gage, he thought. Just like Gage—

He stamped the brake. The cat was on his head, blocking his vision with its furry belly, clawing at him, gouging at him. Halston held the wheel grimly. He struck the cat once, twice, a third time. And suddenly the road was gone, the Plymouth was running down into the ditch, thudding up and down on its shocks. Then, impact, throwing him forward against his seat belt, and the last sound he heard was the cat yowling inhumanly, the voice of a woman in pain or in the throes of sexual climax.

He struck it with his closed fist and felt only the springy, yielding flex of its muscles.

Then, second impact. And darkness.

*

The moon was down. It was an hour before dawn.

The Plymouth lay in a ravine curdled with groundmist. Tangled in its grille was a snarled length of barbed wire. The hood had come unlatched, and tendrils of steam from the breached radiator drifted out of the opening to mingle with the mist.

No feeling in his legs.

He looked down and saw that the Plymouth's firewall had caved in with the impact. The back of that big Cyclone Spoiler engine block had smashed into his legs, pinning them.

Outside, in the distance, the predatory squawk of an owl dropping onto some small, scurrying animal.

Inside, close, the steady purr of the cat.

It seemed to be grinning, like Alice's Cheshire had in Wonderland.

As Halston watched it stood up, arched its back, and stretched. In a sudden limber movement like rippled silk, it leaped to his shoulder. Halston tried to lift his hands to push it off.

His arms wouldn't move.

Spinal shock, he thought. Paralyzed. Maybe temporary. More likely permanent.

The cat purred in his ear like thunder.

“Get off me,” Halston said. His voice was hoarse and dry. The cat tensed for a moment and then settled back. Suddenly its paw batted Halston’s cheek, and the claws were out this time. Hot lines of pain down to his throat. And the warm trickle of blood.

Pain.

Feeling.

He ordered his head to move to the right, and it complied. For a moment his face was buried in smooth, dry fur. Halston snapped at the cat. It made a startled, disgruntled sound in its throat—yowk!—and leaped onto the seat. It stared up at him angrily, ears laid back.

“Wasn’t supposed to do that, was I?” Halston croaked.

The cat opened its mouth and hissed at him. Looking at that strange, schizophrenic face, Halston could understand how Drogon might have thought it was a hellcat. It—

His thoughts broke off as he became aware of a dull, tingling feeling in both hands and forearms.

Feeling. Coming back. Pins and needles.

The cat leaped at his face, claws out, spitting.

Halston shut his eyes and opened his mouth. He bit at the cat’s belly and got nothing but fur. The cat’s front claws were clasped on his ears, digging in. The pain was enormous, brightly excruciating. Halston tried to raise his hands. They twitched but would not quite come out of his lap.

He bent his head forward and began to shake it back and forth, like a man shaking soap out of his eyes. Hissing and squalling, the cat held on. Halston could feel blood trickling down his cheeks. It was hard to get his breath. The cat’s chest was pressed over his nose. It was possible to get some air in by mouth, but not much. What he did

get came through fur. His ears felt as if they had been doused with lighter fluid and then set on fire.

He snapped his head back, and cried out in agony—he must have sustained a whiplash when the Plymouth hit. But the cat hadn't been expecting the reverse and it flew off. Halston heard it thud down in the backseat.

A trickle of blood ran in his eye. He tried again to move his hands, to raise one of them and wipe the blood away.

They trembled in his lap, but he was still unable to actually move them. He thought of the .45 special in its holster under his left arm.

If I can get to my piece, kitty, the rest of your nine lives are going in a lump sum.

More tingles now. Dull throbs of pain from his feet, buried and surely shattered under the engine block, zips and tingles from his legs—it felt exactly the way a limb that you've slept on does when it's starting to wake up. At that moment Halston didn't care about his feet. It was enough to know that his spine wasn't severed, that he wasn't going to finish out his life as a dead lump of body attached to a talking head.

Maybe I had a few lives left myself.

Take care of the cat. That was the first thing. Then get out of the wreck—maybe someone would come along, that would solve both problems at once. Not likely at 4:30 in the morning on a back road like this one, but barely possible. And—

And what was the cat doing back there?

He didn't like having it on his face, but he didn't like having it behind him and out of sight, either. He tried the rear-view mirror, but that was useless. The crash had knocked it awry and all it reflected was the grassy ravine he had finished up in.

A sound from behind him, like low, ripping cloth.

Purring.

Hellcat my ass. It's gone to sleep back there.

And even if it hadn't, even if it was somehow planning murder, what could it do? It was a skinny little thing, probably weighed all of four pounds soaking wet. And soon ... soon he would be able to move his hands enough to get his gun. He was sure of it.

Halston sat and waited. Feeling continued to flood back into his body in a series of pins-and-needles incursions. Absurdly (or maybe in instinctive reaction to his close brush with death) he got an erection for a minute or so. Be kind of hard to beat off under present circumstances, he thought.

A dawn-line was appearing in the eastern sky. Somewhere a bird sang.

Halston tried his hands again and got them to move an eighth of an inch before they fell back.

Not yet. But soon.

A soft thud on the seatback beside him. Halston turned his head and looked into the black-white face, the glowing eyes with their huge dark pupils.

Halston spoke to it.

"I have never blown a hit once I took it on, kitty. This could be a first. I'm getting my hands back. Five minutes, ten at most. You want my advice? Go out the window. They're all open. Go out and take your tail with you."

The cat stared at him.

Halston tried his hands again. They came up, trembling wildly. Half an inch. An inch. He let them fall back limply. They slipped off his lap and thudded to the Plymouth's seat. They glimmered there palely, like large tropical spiders.

The cat was grinning at him.

Did I make a mistake? he wondered confusedly. He was a creature of hunch, and the feeling that he had made one was suddenly overwhelming. Then the cat's body tensed, and even as it leaped, Halston knew what it was going to do and he opened his mouth to scream.

The cat landed on Halston's crotch, claws out, digging.

At that moment, Halston wished he had been paralyzed. The pain was gigantic, terrible. He had never suspected that there could be such pain in the world. The cat was a spitting coiled spring of fury, clawing at his balls.

Halston did scream, his mouth yawning open, and that was when the cat changed direction and leaped at his face, leaped at his mouth. And at that moment Halston knew that it was something more than a cat. It was something possessed of a malign, murderous intent.

He caught one last glimpse of that black-and-white face below the flattened ears, its eyes enormous and filled with lunatic hate. It had gotten rid of the three old people and now it was going to get rid of John Halston.

It rammed into his mouth, a furry projectile. He gagged on it. Its front claws pinwheeled, tattering his tongue like a piece of liver. His stomach recoiled and he vomited. The vomit ran down into his windpipe, clogging it, and he began to choke.

In this extremity, his will to survive overcame the last of the impact paralysis. He brought his hands up slowly to grasp the cat. Oh my God, he thought.

The cat was forcing its way into his mouth, flattening its body, squirming, working itself further and further in. He could feel his jaws creaking wider and wider to admit it.

He reached to grab it, yank it out, destroy it ... and his hands clasped only the cat's tail.

Somehow it had gotten its entire body into his mouth. Its strange, black-and-white face must be crammed into his very throat.

A terrible thick gagging sound came from Halston's throat, which was swelling like a flexible length of garden hose.

His body twitched. His hands fell back into his lap and the fingers drummed senselessly on his thighs. His eyes sheened over, then glazed. They stared out through the Plymouth's windshield blankly at the coming dawn.

Protruding from his open mouth was two inches of bushy tail ... half-black, half-white. It switched lazily back and forth.

It disappeared.

A bird cried somewhere again. Dawn came in breathless silence then, over the frost-rimmed fields of rural Connecticut.

*

The farmer's name was Will Reuss.

He was on his way to Placer's Glen to get the inspection sticker renewed on his farm truck when he saw the late morning sun twinkle on something in the ravine beside the road. He pulled over and saw the Plymouth lying at a drunken, canted angle in the ditch, barbed wire tangled in its grille like a snarl of steel knitting.

He worked his way down, and then sucked in his breath sharply. "Holy moley," he muttered to the bright November day. There was a guy sitting bolt upright behind the wheel, eyes open and glaring

emptily into eternity. The Roper organization was never going to include him in its presidential poll again. His face was smeared with blood. He was still wearing his seat belt.

The driver's door had been crimped shut, but Reuss managed to get it open by yanking with both hands. He leaned in and unstrapped the seat belt, planning to check for ID. He was reaching for the coat when he noticed that the dead guy's shirt was rippling, just above the belt buckle. Rippling ... and bulging. Splotches of blood began to bloom there like sinister roses.

"What the Christ?" He reached out, grasped the dead man's shirt, and pulled it up.

Will Reuss looked—and screamed.

Above Halston's navel, a ragged hole had been clawed in his flesh. Looking out was the gore-streaked black-and-white face of a cat, its eyes huge and glaring.

Reuss staggered back, shrieking, hands clapped to his face. A score of crows took cawing wing from a nearby field.

The cat forced its body out and stretched in obscene languor.

Then it leaped out the open window. Reuss caught sight of it moving through the high dead grass and then it was gone.

It seemed to be in a hurry, he later told a reporter from the local paper.

As if it had unfinished business.

NIGHTMARES & DREAMSCAPES
CHATTERY TEETH



CHATTERY TEETH

Stephen King

Looking into the display case was like looking through a dirty pane of glass into the middle third of his boyhood, those years from seven to fourteen when he had been fascinated by stuff like this. Hogan leaned closer, forgetting the rising whine of the wind outside and the gritty spick-spock sound of sand hitting the windows. The case was full of fabulous junk, most of it undoubtedly made in Taiwan and Korea, but there was no doubt at all about the pick of the litter. They were the largest Chatterly Teeth he'd ever seen. They were also the only ones he'd ever seen with feet—big orange cartoon shoes with white spats. A real scream.

Hogan looked up at the fat woman behind the counter. She was wearing a tee-shirt that said NEVADA IS GOD'S COUNTRY on top (the words swelling and receding across her enormous breasts) and about an acre of jeans on the bottom. She was selling a pack of cigarettes to a pallid young man whose long blonde hair had been tied back in a ponytail with a sneaker shoelace. The young man, who had the face of an intelligent lab-rat, was paying in small change, counting it laboriously out of a grimy hand.

"Pardon me, ma'am?" Hogan asked.

She looked at him briefly, and then the back door banged open. A skinny man wearing a bandanna over his mouth and nose came in. The wind swirled desert grit around him in a cyclone and rattled the pin-up cutie on the Valvoline calendar thumbtacked to the wall. The newcomer was pulling a handcart. Three wire-mesh cages were stacked on it. There was a tarantula in the one on top. In the cages below it were a pair of rattlesnakes. They were coiling rapidly back and forth and shaking their rattles in agitation.

"Shut the damn door, Scooter, was you born in a barn?" the woman behind the counter bawled.

He glanced at her briefly, eyes red and irritated from the blowing sand. "Gimme a chance, woman! Can't you see I got my hands full here? Ain't you got eyes? Christ!" He reached over the dolly and

slammed the door. The dancing sand fell dead to the floor and he pulled the dolly toward the storeroom at the back, still muttering.

“That the last of em?” the woman asked.

“All but Wolf.” He pronounced it Woof. “I’m gonna stick him in the lean-to back of the gas-pumps.”

“You ain’t not!” the big woman retorted. “Wolf’s our star attraction, in case you forgot. You get him in here. Radio says this is gonna get worse before it gets better. A lot worse.”

“Just who do you think you’re foolin?” The skinny man (her husband, Hogan supposed) stood looking at her with a kind of weary truculence, his hands on his hips. “Damn thing ain’t nothin but a Minnesota coydog, as anyone who took more’n half a look could plainly see.”

The wind gusted, moaning along the eaves of Scooter’s Grocery & Roadside Zoo, throwing sheaves of dry sand against the windows. It was getting worse, and Hogan could only hope he would be able to drive out of it. He had promised Lita and Jack he’d be home by seven, eight at the latest, and he was a man who liked to keep his promises.

“Just take care of him,” the big woman said, and turned irritably back to the rat-faced boy.

“Ma’am?” Hogan said again.

“Just a minute, hold your water,” Mrs. Scooter said. She spoke with the air of one who is all but drowning in impatient customers, although Hogan and the rat-faced boy were in fact the only ones present.

“You’re a dime short, Sunny Jim,” she told the blonde kid after a quick glance at the coins on the counter-top.

The boy regarded her with wide, innocent eyes. “I don’t suppose you’d trust me for it?”

“I doubt if the Pope of Rome smokes Merit 100’s, but if he did, I wouldn’t trust him for it.”

The look of wide-eyed innocence disappeared. The rat-faced boy looked at her with an expression of sullen dislike for a moment (this expression looked much more at home on the kid’s face, Hogan thought), and then slowly began to investigate his pockets again.

Just forget it and get out of here, Hogan thought. You’ll never make it to L.A. by eight if you don’t get moving, windstorm or no windstorm. This is one of those places that have only two speeds—slow and stop. You got your gas and paid for it, so just count yourself ahead of the game and get back on the road before the storm gets any worse.

He almost followed his left brain’s good advice ... and then he looked at the Chatterry Teeth in the display case again, the Chatterry Teeth standing there on those big orange cartoon shoes. And white spats! They were the real killer. Jack would love them, his right brain told him. And tell the truth, Bill, old buddy; if it turns out Jack doesn’t want them, you do. You may see another set of Jumbo Chatterry Teeth at some point in your life, anything’s possible, but ones that also walk on big orange feet? Huh-uh. I really doubt it.

It was the right brain he listened to that time ... and everything else followed.

*

The kid with the ponytail was still going through his pockets; the sullen expression on his face deepened each time he came up dry. Hogan was no fan of smoking—his father, a two-pack-a-day man, had died of lung cancer—but he had visions of still waiting to be waited on an hour from now. “Hey! Kid!”

The kid looked around and Hogan flipped him a quarter.

“Hey! Thanks, m’man!”

“Think nothing of it.”

The kid concluded his transaction with the beefy Mrs. Scooter, put the cigarettes in one pocket, and dropped the remaining fifteen cents in another. He made no offer of the change to Hogan, who hadn’t really expected it. Boys and girls like this were legion these days—they cluttered the highways from coast to coast, blowing along like tumbleweeds. Perhaps they had always been there, but to Hogan the current breed seemed both unpleasant and a little scary, like the rattlers Scooter was now storing in the back room.

The snakes in pissant little roadside menageries like this one couldn’t kill you; their venom was milked twice a week and sold to clinics that made drugs with it. You could count on that just as you could count on the winos to show up at the local plasma bank every Tuesday and Thursday. But the snakes could still give you one hell of a painful bite if you got too close and then made them mad. That, Hogan thought, was what the current breed of road-kids had in common with them.

Mrs. Scooter came drifting down the counter, the words on her tee-shirt drifting up and down and side to side as she did. “What-cha need?” she asked. Her tone was still truculent. The West had a reputation for friendliness, and during the twenty years he had spent selling there Hogan had come to feel the reputation was more often than not deserved, but this woman had all the charm of a Brooklyn shopkeeper who has been stuck up three times in the last two weeks. Hogan supposed that her kind was becoming as much a part of the scene in the New West as the road-kids. Sad but true.

“How much are these?” Hogan asked, pointing through the dirty glass at what the sign identified as JUMBO CHATTERY TEETH—THEY WALK! The case was filled with novelty items—Chinese finger-pullers, Pepper Gum, Dr. Wacky’s Sneezing Powder, cigarette loads (A Laff Riot! according to the package—Hogan guessed they

were more likely a great way to get your teeth knocked out), X-ray glasses, plastic vomit (So Realistic!), joy-buzzers.

“I dunno,” Mrs. Scooter said. “Where’s the box, I wonder?”

The teeth were the only item in the case that wasn’t packaged, but they certainly were jumbo, Hogan thought—super-jumbo, in fact, five times the size of the sets of wind-up teeth which had so amused him as a kid growing up in Maine. Take away the joke feet and they would look like the teeth of some fallen Biblical giant—the cuspids were big white blocks and the canine teeth looked like tent-pegs sunk in the improbably red plastic gums. A key jutted from one gum. The teeth were held together in a clench by a thick rubber band.

Mrs. Scooter blew the dust from the Chatterry Teeth, then turned them over, looking on the soles of the orange shoes for a price sticker. She didn’t find one. “I don’t know,” she said crossly, eyeing Hogan as if he might have taken the sticker off himself. “Only Scooter’d buy a piece of trash like this here. Been around since Noah got off the boat. I’ll have to ask him.”

Hogan was suddenly tired of the woman and of Scooter’s Grocery & Roadside Zoo. They were great Chatterry Teeth, and Jack would undoubtedly love them, but he had promised—eight at the latest.

“Never mind,” he said. “It was just an—”

“Them teeth was supposed to go for \$15.95, if you c’n believe it,” Scooter said from behind them. “They ain’t just plastic—those’re metal teeth painted white. They could give you a helluva bite if they worked... but she dropped em on the floor two-three years ago when she was dustin the inside of the case and they’re busted.”

“Oh,” Hogan said, disappointed. “That’s too bad. I never saw a pair with, you know, feet.”

“There are lots of em like that now,” Scooter said. “They sell em at the novelty stores in Vegas and Dry Springs. But I never saw a set

as big as those. It was funnier'n hell to watch em walk across the floor, snappin like a crocodile. Shame the old lady dropped em."

Scooter glanced at her, but his wife was looking out at the blowing sand. There was an expression on her face which Hogan couldn't quite decipher—was it sadness, or disgust, or both?

Scooter looked back at Hogan. "I could let em go for three-fifty, if you wanted em. We're gettin rid of the novelties, anyway. Gonna put rental videotapes in that counter." He closed the storeroom door. The bandanna was now pulled down, lying on the dusty front of his shirt. His face was haggard and too thin. Hogan saw what might have been the shadow of serious illness lurking just beneath his desert tan.

"You could do no such a thing, Scooter!" the big woman snapped, and turned toward him ... almost turned on him.

"Shutcha head," Scooter replied. "You make my fillins ache."

"I told you to get Wolf—"

"Myra, if you want him back there in the storeroom, go get him yourself." He began to advance on her, and Hogan was surprised—almost wonder-struck, in fact—when she gave ground. "Ain't nothin but a Minnesota coydog anyway. Three dollars even, friend, and those Chatterry Teeth are yours. Throw in another buck and you can take Myra's Woof, too. If you got five, I'll deed the whole place to you. Ain't worth a dogfart since the turnpike went through, anyway."

The long-haired kid was standing by the door, tearing the top from the pack of cigarettes Hogan had helped buy and watching this small comic opera with an expression of mean amusement. His small gray-green eyes gleamed, flicking back and forth between Scooter and his wife.

"Hell with you," Myra said gruffly, and Hogan realized she was close to tears. "If you won't get my sweet baby, I will." She stalked past

him, almost striking him with one boulder-sized breast. Hogan thought it would have knocked the little man flat if it had connected.

“Look,” Hogan said, “I think I’ll just shove along.”

“Aw, hell,” Scooter said. “Don’t mind Myra. I got cancer and she’s got the change, and it ain’t my problem she’s havin the most trouble livin with. Take the darn teeth. Bet you got a boy might like em. Besides, it’s probably just a cog knocked a little off-track. I bet a man who was handy could get em walkin and chompin again.”

He looked around, his expression helpless and musing. Outside, the wind rose to a brief, thin shriek as the kid opened the door and slipped out. He had decided the show was over, apparently. A cloud of fine grit swirled down the middle aisle, between the canned goods and the dog food.

“I was pretty handy myself, at one time,” Scooter confided.

Hogan did not reply for a long moment. He could not think of anything—quite literally not one single thing—to say. He looked down at the Jumbo Chatterly Teeth standing on the scratched and cloudy display case, nearly desperate to break the silence (now that Scooter was standing right in front of him, he could see that the man’s eyes were huge and dark, glittering with pain and some heavy dope ... Darvon, or perhaps morphine), and he spoke the first words that popped into his head: “Gee, they don’t look broken.”

He picked the teeth up. They were metal, all right—too heavy to be anything else—and when he looked through the slightly parted jaws, he was surprised at the size of the mainspring that ran the thing. He supposed it would take one that size to make the teeth not only chatter but walk, as well. What had Scooter said? They could give you a helluva bite if they worked. Hogan gave the thick rubber band an experimental tweak, then stripped it off. He was still looking at the teeth so he wouldn’t have to look into Scooter’s dark, pain-haunted eyes. He grasped the key and at last he risked a look up. He was relieved to see that now the thin man was smiling a little.

“Do you mind?” Hogan asked.

“Not me, pilgrim—let er rip.”

Hogan grinned and turned the key. At first it was all right; there was a series of small, ratcheting clicks, and he could see the mainspring winding up. Then, on the third turn, there was a spronk! noise from inside, and the key simply slid bonelessly around in its hole.

“See?”

“Yes,” Hogan said. He set the teeth down on the counter. They stood there on their unlikely orange feet and did nothing.

Scooter poked the clenched molars on the lefthand side with the tip of one horny finger. The jaws of the teeth opened. One orange foot rose and took a dreamy half-step forward. Then the teeth stopped moving and the whole rig fell sideways. The Chatterly Teeth came to rest on the wind-up key, a slanted, disembodied grin out here in the middle of no-man’s-land. After a moment or two, the big teeth came together again with a slow click. That was all.

Hogan, who had never had a premonition in his life, was suddenly filled with a clear certainty that was both eerie and sickening. A year from now, this man will have been eight months in his grave, and if someone exhumed his coffin and pried off the lid, they’d see teeth just like these poking out of his dried-out dead face like an enamel trap.

He glanced up into Scooter’s eyes, glittering like dark gems in tarnished settings, and suddenly it was no longer a question of wanting to get out of here; he had to get out of here.

“Well,” he said (hoping frantically that Scooter would not stick out his hand to be shaken), “gotta go. Best of luck to you, sir.”

Scooter did put his hand out, but not to be shaken. Instead, he snapped the rubber band back around the Chatterly Teeth (Hogan

had no idea why, since they didn't work), set them on their funny cartoon feet, and pushed them across the scratched surface of the counter. "Thank you kindly," he said. "And take these teeth. No charge."

"Oh... well, thanks, but I couldn't ..."

"Sure you can," Scooter said. "Take em and give em to your boy. He'll get a kick out of em standin on the shelf in his room even if they don't work. I know a little about boys. Raised up three of em."

"How did you know I had a son?" Hogan asked.

Scooter winked. The gesture was terrifying and pathetic at the same time. "Seen it in your face," he said. "Go on, take em."

The wind gusted again, this time hard enough to make the boards of the building moan. The sand hitting the windows sounded like fine snow. Hogan picked the teeth up by the plastic feet, surprised all over again by how heavy they were.

"Here." Scooter produced a paper bag, almost as wrinkled and crumpled about the edges as his own face, from beneath the counter. "Stick em in here. That's a real nice sportcoat you got there. If you carry them choppers in the pocket, it'll get pulled out of shape."

He put the bag on the counter as if he understood how little Hogan wanted to touch him.

"Thanks," Hogan said. He put the Chatterly Teeth in the bag and rolled down the top. "Jack thanks you, too—he's my son."

Scooter smiled, revealing a set of teeth just as false (but nowhere near as large) as the ones in the paper bag. "My pleasure, mister. You drive careful until you get out of the blow. You'll be fine once you get in the foothills."

“I know.” Hogan cleared his throat “Thanks again. I hope you... uh... recover soon.”

“That’d be nice,” Scooter said evenly, “but I don’t think it’s in the cards, do you?”

“Uh. Well.” Hogan realized with dismay that he didn’t have the slightest idea how to conclude this encounter. “Take care of yourself.”

Scooter nodded. “You too.”

Hogan retreated toward the door, opened it, and had to hold on tight as the wind tried to rip it out of his hand and bang the wall. Fine sand scoured his face and he slitted his eyes against it.

He stepped out, closed the door behind him, and pulled the lapel of his real nice sportcoat over his mouth and nose as he crossed the porch, descended the steps, and headed toward the customized Dodge camper-van parked just beyond the gas-pumps. The wind pulled his hair and the sand stung his cheeks. He was going around to the driver’s-side door when someone tugged his arm.

“Mister! Hey, mister!”

He turned. It was the blonde-haired boy with the pale, ratty face. He hunched against the wind and blowing sand, wearing nothing but a tee-shirt and a pair of faded 501 jeans. Behind him, Mrs. Scooter was dragging a mangy beast on a choke-chain toward the back door of the store. Wolf the Minnesota coydog looked like a half-starved German shepherd pup—and the runt of the litter, at that.

“What?” Hogan shouted, knowing very well what.

“Can I have a ride?” the kid shouted back over the wind.

Hogan did not ordinarily pick up hitchhikers—not since one afternoon five years ago. He had stopped for a young girl on the outskirts of

Tonopah. Standing by the side of the road, the girl had resembled one of those sad-eyed waifs in the UNICEF posters, a kid who looked like her mother and her last friend had both died in the same housefire about a week ago. Once she was in the car, however, Hogan had seen the bad skin and mad eyes of the long-time junkie. By then it was too late. She'd stuck a pistol in his face and demanded his wallet. The pistol was old and rusty. Its grip was wrapped in tattered electrician's tape. Hogan had doubted that it was loaded, or that it would fire if it was ... but he had a wife and a kid back in L.A., and even if he had been single, was a hundred and forty bucks worth risking your life over? He hadn't thought so even then, when he had just been getting his feet under him in his new line of work and a hundred and forty bucks had seemed a lot more important than it did these days. He gave the girl his wallet. By then her boyfriend had been parked beside the van (in those days it had been a Ford Econoline, nowhere near as nice as the custom Dodge XRT) in a dirty blue Chevy Nova. Hogan asked the girl if she would leave him his driver's license, and the pictures of Lita and Jack. "Fuck you, sugar," she said, and slapped him across the face, hard, with his own wallet before getting out and running to the blue car.

Hitchhikers were trouble.

But the storm was getting worse, and the kid didn't even have a jacket. What was he supposed to tell him? Fuck you, sugar, crawl under a rock with the rest of the lizards until the wind drops?

"Okay," Hogan said.

"Thanks, man! Thanks a lot!"

The kid ran toward the passenger door, tried it, found it locked, and just stood there, waiting to be let in, hunching his shoulders up around his ears. The wind billowed out the back of his shirt like a sail, revealing glimpses of his thin, pimple-studded back.

Hogan glanced back at Scooter's Grocery & Roadside Zoo as he went around to the driver's door. Scooter was standing at the

window, looking out at him. He raised his hand, solemnly, palm out. Hogan raised his own in return, then slipped his key into the lock and turned it. He opened the door, pushed the unlock button next to the power window switch, and motioned for the kid to get in.

He did, then had to use both hands to pull the door shut again. The wind howled around the van, actually making it rock a little from side to side.

“Wow!” the kid gasped, and rubbed his fingers briskly through his hair (he’d lost the sneaker lace and the hair now lay on his shoulders in lank clots). “Some storm, huh? Big-time!”

“Yeah,” Hogan said. There was a console between the two front seats—the kind of seats the brochures liked to call “captain’s chairs”—and Hogan placed the paper bag in one of the cup-holders. Then he turned the ignition key. The engine started at once with a good-tempered rumble.

The kid twisted around in his seat and looked appreciatively into the back of the van. There was a bed (now folded back into a couch), a small LP gas stove, several storage compartments where Hogan kept his various sample cases, and a toilet cubicle at the rear.

“Not too tacky, m’man!” the kid said. “All the comforts.” He glanced back at Hogan. “Where you headed?”

“Los Angeles.”

The kid grinned. “Hey, great! So’m I!” He took out his just-purchased pack of Merits and tapped one loose.

Hogan had put on his headlights and dropped the transmission into drive. Now he shoved the gearshift back into park and turned to the kid. “Let’s get a couple of things straight,” he said.

The kid gave Hogan his wide-eyed innocent look. “Sure, dude—no prob.”

“First, I don’t pick up hitchhikers as a rule. I had a bad experience with one a few years back. It vaccinated me, you might say. I’ll take you through the Santa Clara foothills, but that’s all. There’s a truckstop on the other side—Sammy’s. It’s close to the turnpike. That’s where we part company. Okay?”

“Okay. Sure. You bet.” Still with the wide-eyed look.

“Second, if you really have to smoke, we part company right now. That okay?”

For just a moment Hogan saw the kid’s other look (and even on short acquaintance, Hogan was almost willing to bet he only had two): the mean, watchful look. Then he was all wide-eyed innocence again, just a harmless refugee from Wayne’s World. He tucked the cigarette behind his ear and showed Hogan his empty hands. As he raised them, Hogan noticed the hand-lettered tattoo on the kid’s left bicep: DEFLEPPARD 4-EVER.

“No cigs,” the kid said. “I got it.”

“Fine. Bill Hogan.” He held out his hand.

“Bryan Adams,” the kid said, and shook Hogan’s hand briefly.

Hogan dropped the transmission into drive again and began to roll slowly toward Route 46. As he did, his eyes dropped briefly to a cassette box lying on the dashboard. It was Reckless, by Bryan Adams.

Sure, he thought. You’re Bryan Adams and I’m really Don Henley. We just stopped by Scooter’s Grocery & Roadside Zoo to get a little material for our next albums, right, dude?

As he pulled out onto the highway, already straining to see through the blowing dust, he found himself thinking of the girl again, the one outside of Tonopah who had slapped him across the face with his

own wallet before fleeing. He was starting to get a very bad feeling about this.

Then a hard gust of wind tried to push him into the eastbound lane, and he concentrated on his driving.

*

They rode in silence for awhile. When Hogan glanced once to his right he saw the kid was lying back with his eyes closed—maybe asleep, maybe dozing, maybe just pretending because he didn't want to talk. That was okay; Hogan didn't want to talk, either. For one thing, he didn't know what he might have to say to Mr. Bryan Adams from Nowhere, U.S.A. It was a cinch young Mr. Adams wasn't in the market for labels or Universal Product Code readers, which was what Hogan sold. For another, just keeping the van on the road had become something of a challenge.

As Mrs. Scooter had warned, the storm was intensifying. The road was a dim phantom crossed at irregular intervals by tan ribs of sand. These drifts were like speed-bumps, and they forced Hogan to creep along at no more than twenty-five. He could live with that. At some points, however, the sand had spread more evenly across the road's surface, camouflaging it, and then Hogan had to drop down to fifteen miles an hour, navigating by the dim bounceback of his headlights from the reflector-posts which marched along the side of the road.

Every now and then an approaching car or truck would loom out of the blowing sand like a prehistoric phantom with round blazing eyes. One of these, an old Lincoln Mark IV as big as a cabin cruiser, was driving straight down the center of 46. Hogan hit the horn and squeezed right, feeling the suck of the sand against his tires, feeling his lips peel away from his teeth in a helpless snarl. Just as he became sure the oncomer was going to force him into the ditch, the Lincoln swerved back onto its own side just enough for Hogan to make it by. He thought he heard the metallic click of his bumper kissing off the Mark IV's rear bumper, but given the steady shriek of the wind, that was almost certainly his own imagination. He did catch

just a glimpse of the driver—an old bald-headed man sitting bolt-upright behind the wheel, peering into the blowing sand with a concentrated glare that was almost maniacal. Hogan shook his fist at him, but the old codger did not so much as glance at him. Probably didn't even realize I was there, Hogan thought, let alone how close he came to hitting me.

For a few seconds he was very close to going off the road anyway. He could feel the sand sucking harder at the rightside wheels, felt the van trying to tip. His instinct was to twist the wheel hard to the left. Instead, he fed the van gas and only urged it in that direction, feeling sweat dampen his last good shirt at the armpits. At last the suck on the tires diminished and he began to feel in control of the van again. Hogan blew his breath out in a long sigh.

“Good piece of driving, man.”

His attention had been so focused he had forgotten his passenger, and in his surprise he almost twisted the wheel all the way to the left, which would have put them in trouble again. He looked around and saw the blonde kid watching him. His gray-green eyes were unsettlingly bright; there was no sign of sleepiness in them.

“It was really just luck,” Hogan said. “If there was a place to pull over, I would ... but I know this piece of road. It's Sammy's or bust. Once we're in the foothills, it'll get better.”

He did not add that it might take them three hours to cover the seventy miles between here and there.

“You're a salesman, right?”

“As rain.”

He wished the kid wouldn't talk. He wanted to concentrate on his driving. Up ahead, fog-lights loomed out of the murk like yellow ghosts. They were followed by an Iroc Z with California plates. The van and the Z crept past each other like old ladies in a nursing-home

corridor. In the corner of his eye, Hogan saw the kid take the cigarette from behind his ear and begin to play with it. Bryan Adams indeed. Why had the kid given him a false name? It was like something out of an old Republic movie, the kind of thing you could still see on the late-late show, a black-and-white crime movie where the travelling salesman (probably played by Ray Milland) picks up the tough young con (played by Nick Adams, say) who has just broken out of jail in Gabbs or Deeth or some place like that—

“What do you sell, dude?”

“Labels.”

“Labels?”

“That’s right. The ones with the Universal Product Code on them. It’s a little block with a pre-set number of black bars in it.”

The kid surprised Hogan by nodding. “Sure—they whip em over an electric-eye gadget in the supermarket and the price shows up on the cash register like magic, right?”

“Yes. Except it’s not magic, and it’s not an electric eye. It’s a laser reader. I sell those, too. Both the big ones and the portables.”

“Far out, dude-mar.” The tinge of sarcasm in the kid’s voice was faint ... but it was there.

“Bryan?”

“Yeah?”

“The name’s Bill, not m’man, not dude, and most certainly not dude-mar.”

He found himself wishing more and more strongly that he could roll back in time to Scooter’s, and just say no when the kid asked him for a ride. The Scooters weren’t bad sorts; they would have let the kid stay until the storm blew itself out this evening. Maybe Mrs. Scooter

would even have given him five bucks to babysit the tarantula, the rattlers, and Woof, the Amazing Minnesota Coydog. Hogan found himself liking those gray-green eyes less and less. He could feel their weight on his face, like small stones.

“Yeah—Bill. Bill the Label Dude.”

Bill didn't reply. The kid laced his fingers together and bent his hands backward, cracking the knuckles.

“Well, it's like my old mamma used to say—it may not be much, but it's a living. Right, Label Dude?”

Hogan grunted something noncommittal and concentrated on his driving. The feeling that he had made a mistake had grown to a certainty. When he'd picked up the girl that time, God had let him get away with it. Please, he prayed. One more time, okay, God? Better yet, let me be wrong about this kid—let it just be paranoia brought on by low barometer, high winds, and the coincidence of a name that can't, after all, be that uncommon.

Here came a huge Mack truck from the other direction, the silver bulldog atop the grille seeming to peer into the flying grit. Hogan squeezed right until he felt the sand piled up along the edge of the road grabbing greedily at his tires again. The long silver box the Mack was pulling blotted out everything on Hogan's left side. It was six inches away—maybe even less—and it seemed to pass forever.

When it was finally gone, the blonde kid asked: “You look like you're doin pretty well, Bill—rig like this must have set you back at least thirty big ones. So why—”

“It was a lot less than that.” Hogan didn't know if “Bryan Adams” could hear the edgy note in his voice, but he sure could. “I did a lot of the work myself.”

“All the same, you sure ain't staggerin around hungry. So why aren't you up above all this shit, flyin the friendly skies?”

It was a question Hogan sometimes asked himself in the long empty miles between Tempe and Tucson or Las Vegas and Los Angeles, the kind of question you had to ask yourself when you couldn't find anything on the radio but crappy synthpop or threadbare oldies and you'd listened to the last cassette of the current best-seller from Recorded Books, when there was nothing to look at but miles of gullywashes and scrubland, all of it owned by Uncle Sam.

He could say that he got a better feel for his customers and their needs by travelling through the country where they lived and sold their goods, and it was true, but it wasn't the reason. He could say that checking his sample cases, which were much too bulky to fit under an airline seat, was a pain in the ass and waiting for them to show up on the conveyor belt at the other end was always an adventure (he'd once had a packing case filled with five thousand soft-drink labels show up in Hilo, Hawaii, instead of Hillside, Arizona). That was also true, but it also wasn't the reason.

The reason was that in 1982 he had been on board a Western Pride commuter flight which had crashed in the high country seventeen miles north of Reno. Six of the nineteen passengers on board and both crew-members had been killed. Hogan had suffered a broken back. He had spent four months in bed and another ten in a heavy brace his wife Lita called the Iron Maiden. They (whoever they were) said that if you got thrown from a horse, you should get right back on. William I. Hogan said that was bullshit, and with the exception of a white-knuckle, two-Valium flight to attend his father's funeral in New York, he had never been on a plane since.

He came out of these thoughts all at once, realizing two things: he had had the road to himself since the passage of the Mack, and the kid was still looking at him with those unsettling eyes, waiting for him to answer the question.

"I had a bad experience on a commuter flight once," he said. "Since then, I've pretty much stuck to transport where you can coast into the breakdown lane if your engine quits."

“You sure have had a lot of bad experiences, Bill-dude,” the kid said. A tone of bogus regret crept into his voice. “And now, so sorry, you’re about to have another one.” There was a sharp metallic click. Hogan looked over and was not very surprised to see the kid was holding a switchknife with a glittering eight-inch blade.

Oh shit, Hogan thought. Now that it was here, now that it was right in front of him, he didn’t feel very scared. Only tired. Oh shit, and only four hundred miles from home. Goddam.

“Pull over, Bill-dude. Nice and slow.”

“What do you want?”

“If you really don’t know the answer to that one, you’re even dumber than you look.” A little smile played around the corners of the kid’s mouth. The homemade tattoo on the kid’s arm rippled as the muscle beneath it twitched. “I want your dough, and I guess I want your rolling whorehouse too, at least for awhile. But don’t worry—there’s this little truckstop not too far from here. Sammy’s. Close to the turnpike. Someone’ll give you a ride. The people who don’t stop will look at you like you’re dogshit they found on their shoes, of course, and you might have to beg a little, but I’m sure you’ll get a ride in the end. Now pull over.”

Hogan was a little surprised to find that he felt angry as well as tired. Had he been angry that other time, when the road-girl had stolen his wallet? He couldn’t honestly remember.

“Don’t pull that shit on me,” he said, turning to the kid. “I gave you a ride when you needed one, and I didn’t make you beg for it. If it wasn’t for me, you’d still be eating sand with your thumb out. So why don’t you just put that thing away. We’ll—”

The kid suddenly lashed forward with the knife, and Hogan felt a thread of burning pain across his right hand. The van swerved, then shuddered as it passed over another of those sandy speed-bumps.

“Pull over, I said. You’re either walking, Label Dude, or you’re lying in the nearest gully with your throat cut and one of your own price-reading gadgets jammed up your ass. And you wanna know something? I’m gonna chain-smoke all the way to Los Angeles, and every time I finish a cigarette I’m gonna butt it out on your fuckin dashboard.”

Hogan glanced down at his hand and saw a diagonal line of blood which stretched from the last knuckle of his pinky to the base of his thumb. And here was the anger again ... only now it was really rage, and if the tiredness was still there, it was buried somewhere in the middle of that irrational red eye. He tried to summon a mental picture of Lita and Jack to damp that feeling down before it got the better of him and made him do something crazy, but the images were fuzzy and out of focus. There was a clear image in his mind, but it was the wrong one—it was the face of the girl outside of Tonopah, the girl with the snarling mouth below the sad poster-child eyes, the girl who had said Fuck you, sugar before slapping him across the face with his own wallet.

He stepped down on the gaspedal and the van began to move faster. The red needle moved past thirty.

The kid looked surprised, then puzzled, then angry. “What are you doing? I told you to pull over! Do you want your guts in your lap, or what?”

“I don’t know,” Hogan said. He kept his foot on the gas. Now the needle was trembling just above forty. The van ran across a series of dunelets and shivered like a dog with a fever. “What do you want, kid? How about a broken neck? All it takes is one twist of the wheel. I fastened my seatbelt. I notice you forgot yours.”

The kid’s gray-green eyes were huge now, glittering with a mixture of fear and fury. You’re supposed to pull over, those eyes said. That’s the way it’s supposed to work when I’m holding a knife on you—don’t you know that?

“You won’t wreck us,” the kid said, but Hogan thought he was trying to convince himself.

“Why not?” Hogan turned toward the kid again. “After all, I’m pretty sure I’ll walk away, and the van’s insured. You call the play, asshole. What about that?”

“You—” the kid began, and then his eyes widened and he lost all interest in Hogan. “Look out!” he screamed.

Hogan snapped his eyes forward and saw four huge white headlamps bearing down on him through the flying wrack outside. It was a tanker truck, probably carrying gasoline or propane. An air-horn beat the air like the cry of a gigantic, enraged goose: WHONK! WHONK! WHONNNK!

The van had drifted while Hogan was trying to deal with the kid; now he was the one halfway across the road. He yanked the wheel hard to the right, knowing it would do no good, knowing it was already too late. But the approaching truck was also moving, squeezing over just as Hogan had tried to squeeze over in order to accommodate the Mark IV. The two vehicles danced past each other through the blowing sand with less than a gasp between them. Hogan felt his rightside wheels bite into the sand again and knew that this time he didn’t have a chance in hell of holding the van on the road—not at forty-plus miles an hour. As the dim shape of the big steel tank (CARTER’S FARM SUPPLIES & ORGANIC FERTILIZER was painted along the side) slid from view, he felt the steering wheel go mushy in his hands, dragging farther to the right. And from the corner of his eye, he saw the kid leaning forward with his knife.

What’s the matter with you, are you crazy? he wanted to scream at the kid, but it would have been a stupid question even if he’d had time enough to articulate it. Sure the kid was crazy—you only had to take a good look into those gray-green eyes to see it. Hogan must have been crazy himself to give the kid a ride in the first place, but none of that mattered now; he had a situation to cope with here, and if he allowed himself the luxury of believing this couldn’t be

happening to him—if he allowed himself to think that for even a single second—he would probably be found tomorrow or the next day with his throat cut and his eyes nibbled out of their sockets by the buzzards. This was really happening; it was a true thing.

The kid tried his level best to plant the blade in Hogan's neck, but the van had begun to tilt by then, running deeper and deeper into the sand-choked gully. Hogan recoiled back from the blade, letting go of the wheel entirely, and thought he had gotten clear until he felt the wet warmth of blood drench the side of his neck. The knife had unzipped his right cheek from jaw to temple. He flailed with his right hand, trying to get the kid's wrist, and then the van's left front wheel struck a rock the size of a pay telephone and the van flipped high and hard, like a stunt vehicle in one of those movies this rootless kid undoubtedly loved. It rolled in mid-air, all four wheels turning, still doing thirty miles an hour according to the speedometer, and Hogan felt his seatbelt lock painfully across his chest and belly. It was like reliving the plane-crash—now, as then, he could not get it through his head that this was really happening.

The kid was thrown upward and forward, still holding onto the knife. His head bounced off the roof as the van's top and bottom swapped places. Hogan saw his left hand waving wildly, and realized with amazement that the kid was still trying to stab him. He was a rattler, all right, Hogan had been right about that, but no one had milked his poison sacs.

Then the van struck the desert hardpan, peeling off the luggage racks, and the kid's head connected with the roof again, much harder this time. The knife was jolted from his hand. The cabinets at the rear of the van sprang open, spraying sample-books and laser label-readers everywhere. Hogan was dimly aware of an inhuman screaming sound—the long, drawn-out squall of the XRT's roof sliding across the gravelly desert surface on the far side of the gully—and thought: So this is what it would be like to be inside a tin can when someone was using the opener.

The windshield shattered, blowing inward in a sagging shield clouded by a million zig-zagging cracks. Hogan shut his eyes and threw his hands up to shield his face as the van continued to roll, thumping down on Hogan's side long enough to shatter the driver's-side window and admit a rattle of rocks and dusty earth before staggering upright again. It rocked as if meaning to go over on the kid's side ... and then came to rest.

Hogan sat where he was without moving for perhaps five seconds, eyes wide, hands gripping the armrests of his chair, feeling a little like Captain Kirk in the aftermath of a Klingon attack. He was aware there was a lot of dirt and crumbled glass in his lap, and something else as well, but not what the something else was. He was also aware of the wind, blowing more dirt through the van's broken windows.

Then his vision was temporarily blocked by a swiftly moving object. The object was a mottle of white skin, brown dirt, raw knuckles, and red blood. It was a fist, and it struck Hogan squarely in the nose. The agony was immediate and intense, as if someone had fired a flare-gun directly into his brain. For a moment his vision was gone, swallowed in a vast white flash. It had just begun to come back when the kid's hands suddenly clamped around his neck and he could no longer breathe.

The kid, Mr. Bryan Adams from Nowhere, U.S.A., was leaning over the console between the front seats. Blood from perhaps half a dozen different scalp-wounds had flowed over his cheeks and forehead and nose like warpaint. His gray-green eyes stared at Hogan with fixed, lunatic fury.

"Look what you did, you fuck!" the kid shouted. "Look what you did to me!"

Hogan tried to pull back, and got half a breath when the kid's hold slipped momentarily, but with his seatbelt still buckled—and still locked down as well, from the feel—there was really nowhere he

could go. The kid's hands were back almost at once, and this time his thumbs were pressing into his windpipe, pinching it shut.

Hogan tried to bring his own hands up, but the kid's arms, as rigid as prison bars, blocked him. He tried to knock the kid's arms away, but they wouldn't budge. Now he could hear another wind—a high, roaring wind inside his own head.

“Look what you did, you stupid shit! I'm bleedin!”

The kid's voice, but farther away than it had been.

He's killing me, Hogan thought, and a voice replied: Right—fuck you, sugar.

That brought the anger back. He groped in his lap for whatever was there besides dirt and glass. It was a paper bag with some bulky object—Hogan couldn't remember exactly what—inside it. Hogan closed his hand around it and pistoned his fist upward toward the shelf of the kid's jaw. It connected with a heavy thud. The kid screamed in surprised pain, and his grip on Hogan's throat was suddenly gone as he fell over backward.

Hogan pulled in a deep, convulsive breath and heard a sound like a teakettle howling to be taken off the burner. Is that me, making that sound? My God, is that me?

He dragged in another breath. It was full of flying dust, it hurt his throat and made him cough, but it was heaven all the same. He looked down at his fist and saw the shape of the Chatterer Teeth clearly outlined against the brown bag.

And suddenly felt them move.

There was something so shockingly human in this movement that Hogan shrieked and dropped the bag at once; it was as if he had picked up a human jawbone which had tried to speak to his hand.

The bag hit the kid's back and then tumbled to the van's carpeted floor as "Bryan Adams" pushed himself groggily to his knees. Hogan heard the rubber band snap ... and then the unmistakable click-and-chutter of the teeth themselves, opening and closing.

It's probably just a cog knocked a little off-track, Scooter had said. I bet a man who was handy could get em walkin and chompin again.

Or maybe just a good knock would do it, Hogan thought. If I live through this and ever get back that way, I'll have to tell Scooter that all you have to do to fix a pair of malfunctioning Chatterly Teeth is roll your van over and then use them to hit a psychotic hitchhiker who's trying to strangle you: so simple even a child could do it.

The teeth clattered and smacked inside the torn brown bag; the sides fluttered, making it look like an amputated lung which refused to die. The kid crawled away from the bag without even looking at it—crawled toward the back of the van, shaking his head from side to side, trying to clear it. Blood flew from the clots of his hair in a fine spray.

Hogan found the clasp of his seatbelt and pushed the pop-release. Nothing happened. The square in the center of the buckle did not give even a little and the belt itself was still locked as tight as a cramp, cutting into the middle-aged roll of fat above the waistband of his trousers and pushing a hard diagonal across his chest. He tried rocking back and forth in the seat, hoping that would unlock the belt. The flow of blood from his face increased, and he could feel his cheek flapping back and forth like a strip of dried wallpaper, but that was all. He felt panic struggling to break through amazed shock, and twisted his head over his right shoulder to see what the kid was up to.

It turned out to be no good. He had spotted his knife at the far end of the van, lying atop a litter of instructional manuals and brochures. He grabbed it, flicked his hair away from his face, and peered back over his own shoulder at Hogan. He was grinning, and there was something in that grin that made Hogan's balls simultaneously

tighten and shrivel until it felt as if someone had tucked a couple of peach-pits into his Jockey shorts.

Ah, here it is! the kid's grin said. For a minute or two there I was worried—quite seriously worried—but everything is going to come out all right after all. Things got a little improvisational there for awhile, but now we're back to the script.

“You stuck, Label Dude?” the kid asked over the steady shriek of the wind. “You are, ain't you? Good thing you buckled your belt, right? Good thing for me.”

The kid tried to get up, almost made it, and then his knees gave way. An expression of surprise so magnified it would have been comic under other circumstances crossed his face. Then he flicked his blood-greasy hair out of his face again and began to crawl toward Hogan, his left hand wrapped around the imitation-bone handle of the knife. The Def Leppard tattoo ebbed and flowed with each flex of his impoverished bicep, making Hogan think of the way the words on Myra's tee-shirt—NEVADA IS GOD'S COUNTRY—had rippled when she moved.

Hogan grasped the seatbelt buckle with both hands and drove his thumbs against the pop-release as enthusiastically as the kid had driven his into Hogan's windpipe. There was absolutely no response. The belt was frozen. He craned his neck to look at the kid again.

The kid had made it as far as the fold-up bed and then stopped. That expression of large, comic surprise had resurfaced on his face. He was staring straight ahead, which meant he was looking at something on the floor, and Hogan suddenly remembered the teeth. They were still chattering away.

He looked down in time to see the Jumbo Chatterery Teeth march from the open end of the torn paper bag on their funny orange shoes. The molars and the canines and the incisors chopped rapidly up and down, producing a sound like ice in a cocktail-shaker. The shoes, dressed up in their tony white spats, almost seemed to bounce along

the gray carpet. Hogan found himself thinking of Fred Astaire tap-dancing his way across a stage and back again, Fred Astaire with a cane tucked under his arm and a straw boater tipped saucily forward over one eye.

“Oh shit!” the kid said, half-laughing. “Is that what you were dickerin for back there? Oh, man! I kill you, Label Dude, I’m gonna be doin the world a favor.”

The key, Hogan thought. The key on the side of the teeth, the one you use to wind them up ... it isn’t turning.

And he suddenly had another of those precognitive flashes; he understood exactly what was going to happen. The kid was going to reach for them.

The teeth abruptly stopped walking and chattering. They simply stood there on the slightly tilted floor of the van, jaws slightly agape. Eyeless, they still seemed to peer quizzically up at the kid.

“Chatterry Teeth,” Mr. Bryan Adams, from Nowhere, U.S.A., marvelled. He reached out and curled his right hand around them, just as Hogan had known he would.

“Bite him!” Hogan shrieked. “Bite his fucking fingers right off!”

The kid’s head snapped up, the gray-green eyes wide with startlement. He gaped at Hogan for a moment—that big expression of totally dumb surprise—and then he began to laugh. His laughter was high and shrieky, a perfect complement to the wind howling through the van and billowing the curtains like long ghost-hands.

“Bite me! Bite me! Biiiiite me!” the kid chanted, as if it were the punchline to the funniest joke he’d ever heard. “Hey, Label Dude! I thought I was the one who bumped my head!”

The kid clamped the handle of the switchblade in his own teeth and stuck the forefinger of his left hand between the Jumbo Chatterry

Teeth. “Ite ee!” he said around the knife. He giggled and wiggled his finger between the oversized jaws. “Ite ee! Oh on, ite ee!”

The teeth didn’t move. Neither did the orange feet. Hogan’s premonition collapsed around him the way dreams do upon waking. The kid wiggled his finger between the Chatterly Teeth one more time, began to pull it out ... then began screaming at the top of his lungs. “Oh shit! SHIT! Mother FUCKER!”

For a moment Hogan’s heart leaped in his chest, and then he realized that, although the kid was still screaming, what he was really doing was laughing. Laughing at him. The teeth had remained perfectly still the whole time.

The kid lifted the teeth up for a closer look as he grasped his knife again. He shook the long blade at the Chatterly Teeth like a teacher shaking his pointer at a naughty student. “You shouldn’t bite,” he said. “That’s very bad behav—”

One of the orange feet took a sudden step forward on the grimy palm of the kid’s hand. The jaws opened at the same time, and before Hogan was fully aware of what was happening, the Chatterly Teeth had closed on the kid’s nose.

This time Bryan Adams’s scream was real—a thing of agony and ultimate surprise. He flailed at the teeth with his right hand, trying to bat them away, but they were locked on his nose as tightly as Hogan’s seatbelt was locked around his middle. Blood and filaments of torn gristle burst out between the canines in red strings. The kid jackknifed backward and for a moment Hogan could see only his flailing body, lashing elbows, and kicking feet. Then he saw the glitter of the knife.

The kid screamed again and bolted into a sitting position. His long hair had fallen over his face in a curtain; the clamped teeth stuck out like the rudder of some strange boat. The kid had somehow managed to insert the blade of his knife between the teeth and what remained of his nose.

“Kill him!” Hogan shouted hoarsely. He had lost his mind; on some level he understood that he must have lost his mind, but for the time being, that didn’t matter. “Go on, kill him!”

The kid shrieked—a long, piercing firewhistle sound—and twisted the knife. The blade snapped, but not before it had managed to pry the disembodied jaws at least partway open. The teeth fell off his face and into his lap. Most of the kid’s nose fell off with them.

The kid shook his hair back. His gray-green eyes were crossed, trying to look down at the mangled stump in the middle of his face. His mouth was drawn down in a rictus of pain; the tendons in his neck stood out like pulley-wires.

The kid reached for the teeth. The teeth stepped nimbly backward on their orange cartoon feet. They were nodding up and down, marching in place, grinning at the kid, who was now sitting with his ass on his calves. Blood drenched the front of his tee-shirt.

The kid said something then that confirmed Hogan’s belief that he, Hogan, had lost his mind; only in a fantasy born of delirium would such words be spoken.

“Give bme bag by dose, you sud-of-a-bidtch!”

The kid reached for the teeth again and this time they ran forward, under his snatching hand, between his spread legs, and there was a meaty chump! sound as they closed on the bulge of faded blue denim just below the place where the zipper of the kid’s jeans ended.

Bryan Adams’s eyes flew wide open. So did his mouth. His hands rose to the level of his shoulders, springing wide open, and for a moment he looked like some strange Al Jolson imitator preparing to sing “Mammy.” The switchknife flew over his shoulder to the back of the van.

“Jesus! Jesus! Jeeeeeee—”

The orange feet were pumping rapidly, as if doing a Highland Fling. The pink jaws of the Jumbo Chatter Teeth nodded rapidly up and down, as if saying yes! yes! yes! and then shook back and forth, just as rapidly, as if saying no! no! no!

“—eeeeeeEEEEEEEE—”

As the cloth of the kid’s jeans began to rip—and that was not all that was ripping, by the sound—Bill Hogan passed out.

*

He came to twice. The first time must have been only a short while later, because the storm was still howling through and around the van, and the light was about the same. He started to turn around, but a monstrous bolt of pain shot up his neck. Whiplash, of course, and probably not as bad as it could have been... or would be tomorrow, for that matter.

Always supposing he lived until tomorrow.

The kid. I have to look and make sure he’s dead.

No, you don’t. Of course he’s dead. If he wasn’t, you would be.

Now he began to hear a new sound from behind him—the steady chutter-click-chutter of the teeth.

They’re coming for me. They’ve finished with the kid, but they’re still hungry, so they’re coming for me.

He placed his hands on the seatbelt buckle again, but the pop-release was still hopelessly jammed, and his hands seemed to have no strength, anyway.

The teeth grew steadily closer—they were right in back of his seat, now, from the sound—and Hogan’s confused mind read a rhyme into their ceaseless chomping: Clickety-clickety-clickety-clack! We are

the teeth, and we're coming back! Watch us walk, watch us chew, we ate him, now we'll eat you!

Hogan closed his eyes.

The clittering sound stopped.

Now there was only the ceaseless whine of the wind and the spick-spock of sand striking the dented side of the XRT van.

Hogan waited. After a long, long time, he heard a single click, followed by the minute sound of tearing fibers. There was a pause, then the click and the tearing sound was repeated.

What's it doing?

The third time the click and the small tearing sound came, he felt the back of his seat moving a little and understood. The teeth were pulling themselves up to where he was. Somehow they were pulling themselves up to him.

Hogan thought of the teeth closing on the bulge below the zipper of the kid's jeans and willed himself to pass out again. Sand flew in through the broken windshield, tickled his cheeks and forehead.

Click... rip. Click ... rip. Click ... rip.

The last one was very close. Hogan didn't want to look down, but he was unable to help himself. And beyond his right hip, where the seat-cushion met the seat's back, he saw a wide white grin. It moved upward with agonizing slowness, pushing with the as-yet-unseen orange feet as it nipped a small fold of gray seat-cover between its incisors ... then the jaws let go and it lurched convulsively upward.

This time what the teeth fastened on was the pocket of Hogan's slacks, and he passed out again.

*

When he came to the second time, the wind had dropped and it was almost dark; the air had taken on a queer purple shade Hogan could not remember ever having seen in the desert before. The skirts of sand running across the desert floor beyond the sagging ruin of the windshield looked like fleeing ghost-children.

For a moment he could remember nothing at all of what had happened to land him here; the last clear memory he could touch was of looking at his gas-gauge, seeing it was down to an eighth, then looking up and seeing a sign at the side of the road which said **SCOOTER'S GROCERY & ROADSIDE ZOO GAS SNAX COLD BEER SEE LIVE RATLLESNAKE'S!**

He understood that he could hold onto this amnesia for awhile, if he wanted to; given a little time, his subconscious might even be able to wall off certain dangerous memories permanently. But it could also be dangerous not to remember. Very dangerous. Because—

The wind gusted. Sand rattled against the badly dented driver's side of the van. It sounded almost like

(teeth! teeth! teeth!)

The fragile surface of his amnesia shattered, letting everything pour through, and all the heat fell from the surface of Hogan's skin. He uttered a rusty squawk as he remembered the sound

(chump!)

the Chatterly Teeth had made as they closed on the kid's balls, and he closed his hands over his own crotch, eyes rolling fearfully in their sockets as he looked for the runaway teeth.

He didn't see them, but the ease with which his shoulders followed the movement of his hands was new. He looked down at his lap and slowly removed his hands from his crotch. His seatbelt was no longer holding him prisoner. It lay on the gray carpet in two pieces. The metal tongue of the pull-up section was still buried inside the

buckle, but beyond it there was only ragged red fabric. The belt had not been cut; it had been gnawed through.

He looked up into the rear-view mirror and saw something else: the back doors of the van were standing open, and there was only a vague, man-shaped red outline on the gray carpet where the kid had been. Mr. Bryan Adams, from Nowhere, U.S.A., was gone.

So were the Chatterly Teeth.

*

Hogan got out of the van slowly, like an old man afflicted with a terrible case of arthritis. He found that if he held his head perfectly level, it wasn't too bad ... but if he forgot and moved it in any direction, a series of exploding bolts went off in his neck, shoulders, and upper back. Even the thought of allowing his head to roll backward was unbearable.

He walked slowly to the rear of the van, running his hand lightly over the dented, paint-peeled surface, hearing and feeling the glass as it crunched under his feet. He stood at the far end of the driver's side for a long time. He was afraid to turn the corner. He was afraid that, when he did, he would see the kid squatting on his hunkers, holding the knife in his left hand and grinning that empty grin. But he couldn't just stand here, holding his head on top of his strained neck like a big bottle of nitroglycerine, while it got dark around him, so at last Hogan went around.

Nobody. The kid was really gone. Or so it seemed at first.

The wind gusted, blowing Hogan's hair around his bruised face, then dropped away completely. When it did, he heard a harsh scraping noise coming from about twenty yards beyond the van. He looked in that direction and saw the soles of the kid's sneakers just disappearing over the top of a dry-wash. The sneakers were spread in a limp V. They stopped moving for a moment, as if whatever was

hauling the kid's body needed a few moments' rest to recoup its strength, and then they began to move again in little jerks.

A picture of terrible, unendurable clarity suddenly rose in Hogan's mind. He saw the Jumbo Chatterly Teeth standing on their funny orange feet just over the edge of that wash, standing there in spats so cool they made the coolest of the California Raisins look like hicks from Fargo, North Dakota, standing there in the electric purple light which had overspread these empty lands west of Las Vegas. They were clamped shut on a thick wad of the kid's long blonde hair.

The Chatterly Teeth were backing up.

The Chatterly Teeth were dragging Mr. Bryan Adams away to Nowhere, U.S.A.

Hogan turned in the other direction and walked slowly toward the road, holding his nitro head straight and steady on top of his neck. It took him five minutes to negotiate the ditch and another fifteen to flag a ride, but he eventually managed both things. And during that time, he never looked back once.

*

Nine months later, on a clear hot summer day in June, Bill Hogan happened by Scooter's Grocery & Roadside Zoo again... except the place had been renamed. MYRA'S PLACE, the sign now said. GAS COLD BEER VIDEO'S. Below the words was a picture of a wolf—or maybe just a Woof—snarling at the moon. Wolf himself, the Amazing Minnesota Coydog, was lying in a cage in the shade of the porch overhang. His back legs were sprawled extravagantly, and his muzzle was on his paws. He did not get up when Hogan got out of his car to fill the tank. Of the rattlesnakes and the tarantula there was no sign.

"Hi, Woof," he said as he went up the steps. The cage's inmate rolled over onto his back and allowed his long red tongue to dangle enticingly from the side of his mouth as he stared up at Hogan.

The store looked bigger and cleaner inside. Hogan guessed this was partly because the day outside was not so threatening, but that wasn't all; the windows had been washed, for one thing, and that made a big difference. The board walls had been replaced with pine-panelling that still smelled fresh and sappy. A snackbar with five stools had been added at the back. The novelty case was still there, but the cigarette loads, the joy-buzzers, and Dr. Wacky's Sneezing Powder were gone. The case was filled with videotape boxes. A hand-lettered sign read X-RATED IN BACK ROOM * "B 18 OR B GONE."

The woman at the cash register was standing in profile to Hogan, looking down at a calculator and running numbers on it. For a moment Hogan was sure this was Mr. and Mrs. Scooter's daughter—the female complement to those three boys Scooter had talked about raising. Then she lifted her head and Hogan saw it was Mrs. Scooter herself. It was hard to believe this could be the woman whose mammoth bosom had almost burst the seams of her NEVADA IS GOD'S COUNTRY tee-shirt, but it was. Mrs. Scooter had lost at least fifty pounds and dyed her hair a sleek and shiny walnut-brown. Only the sun-wrinkles around the eyes and mouth were the same.

"Getcha gas?" she asked.

"Yep. Fifteen dollars' worth." He handed her a twenty and she rang it up. "Place looks a lot different from the last time I was in."

"Been a lot of changes since Scooter died, all right," she agreed, and pulled a five out of the register. She started to hand it over, really looked at him for the first time, and hesitated. "Say... ain't you the guy who almost got killed the day we had that storm last year?"

He nodded and stuck out his hand. "Bill Hogan."

She didn't hesitate; simply reached over the counter and gave his hand a single strong pump. The death of her husband seemed to

have improved her disposition ... or maybe it was just that her change of life was finally over.

“I’m sorry about your husband. He seemed like a good sort.”

“Scoot? Yeah, he was a fine fella before he took ill,” she agreed. “And what about you? You all recovered?”

Hogan nodded. “I wore a neck-brace for about six weeks—not for the first time, either—but I’m okay.”

She was looking at the scar which twisted down his right cheek. “He do that? That kid?”

“Yeah.”

“Stuck you pretty bad.”

“Yeah.”

“I heard he got busted up in the crash, then crawled into the desert to die.” She was looking at Hogan shrewdly. “That about right?”

Hogan smiled a little. “Near enough, I guess.”

“J.T.—he’s the State Bear around these parts—said the animals worked him over pretty good. Desert rats are awful impolite that way.”

“I don’t know anything about that part.”

“J.T. said the kid’s own mother wouldn’t have reckonized him.” She put a hand on her reduced bosom and looked at him earnestly. “If I’m lyin, I’m dyin.”

Hogan laughed out loud. In the weeks and months since the day of the storm, this was something he found himself doing more often. He had come, it sometimes seemed to him, to a slightly different arrangement with life since that day.

“Lucky he didn’t kill you,” Mrs. Scooter said. “You had a helluva narrow excape. God musta been with you.”

“That’s right,” Hogan agreed. He looked down at the video case. “I see you took out the novelties.”

“Them nasty old things? You bet! That was the first thing I did after —” Her eyes suddenly widened. “Oh, say! Jeepers! I got sumpin belongs to you! If I was to forget, I reckon Scooter’d come back and haunt me!”

Hogan frowned, puzzled, but the woman was already going behind the counter. She stood on tiptoe and brought something down from a high shelf above the rack of cigarettes. It was, Hogan saw with absolutely no surprise at all, the Jumbo Chatterry Teeth. The woman set them down beside the cash register.

Hogan stared at that frozen, insouciant grin with a deep sense of deja vu. There they were, the world’s biggest set of Chatterry Teeth, standing on their funny orange shoes beside the Slim Jim display, cool as a mountain breeze, grinning up at him as if to say, Hello, there! Did you forget me? I didn’t forget YOU, my friend. Not at all.

“I found em on the porch the next day, after the storm blew itself out,” Mrs. Scooter said. She laughed. “Just like old Scoot to give you somethin for free, then stick it in a bag with a hole in the bottom. I was gonna throw em out, but he said he give em to you, and I should stick em on a shelf someplace. He said a travelling man who came in once’d most likely come in again... and here you are.”

“Yes,” Hogan agreed. “Here I am.”

He picked up the teeth and slipped his finger between the slightly gaping jaws. He ran the pad of the finger along the molars at the back, and in his mind he heard the kid, Mr. Bryan Adams from Nowhere, U.S.A., chanting Bite me! Bite me! Biiiiite me!

Were the back teeth still streaked with the dull rust of the boy's blood? Hogan thought he could see something way back in there, but perhaps it was only a shadow.

"I saved it because Scooter said you had a boy."

Hogan nodded. "I do." And, he thought, the boy still has a father. I'm holding the reason why. The question is, did they walk all the way back here on their little orange feet because this was home ... or because they somehow knew what Scooter knew? That sooner or later, a travelling man always comes back to where he's been, the way a murderer is supposed to revisit the scene of his crime?

"Well, if you still want em, they're still yours," she said. For a moment she looked solemn ... and then she laughed. "Shit, I probably would have throwed em out anyway, except I forgot about em. Course, they're still broken."

Hogan turned the key jutting out of the gum. It went around twice, making little wind-up clicks, then simply turned uselessly in its socket. Broken. Of course they were. And would be until they decided they didn't want to be broken for awhile. And the question wasn't how they had gotten back here, and the question wasn't even why.

The question was this: What did they want?

He poked his finger into the white steel grin again and whispered, "Bite me—do you want to?"

The teeth only stood there on their supercool orange feet and grinned.

"They ain't talking, seems like," Mrs. Scooter said.

"No," Hogan said, and suddenly he found himself thinking of the kid. Mr. Bryan Adams, from Nowhere, U.S.A. A lot of kids like him now. A lot of grownups, too, blowing along the highways like tumbleweed,

always ready to take your wallet, say Fuck you, sugar, and run. You could stop picking up hitchhikers (he had), and you could put a burglar-alarm system in your home (he'd done that, too), but it was still a hard world where planes sometimes fell out of the sky and the crazies were apt to turn up anyplace and there was always room for a little more insurance. He had a wife, after all.

And a son.

It might be nice if Jack had a set of Jumbo Chatterly Teeth sitting on his desk. Just in case something happened.

Just in case.

“Thank you for saving them,” he said, picking the Chatterly Teeth up carefully by the feet. “I think my kid will get a kick out of them even if they are broken.”

“Thank Scoot, not me. You want a bag?” She grinned. “I got a plastic one—no holes, guaranteed.”

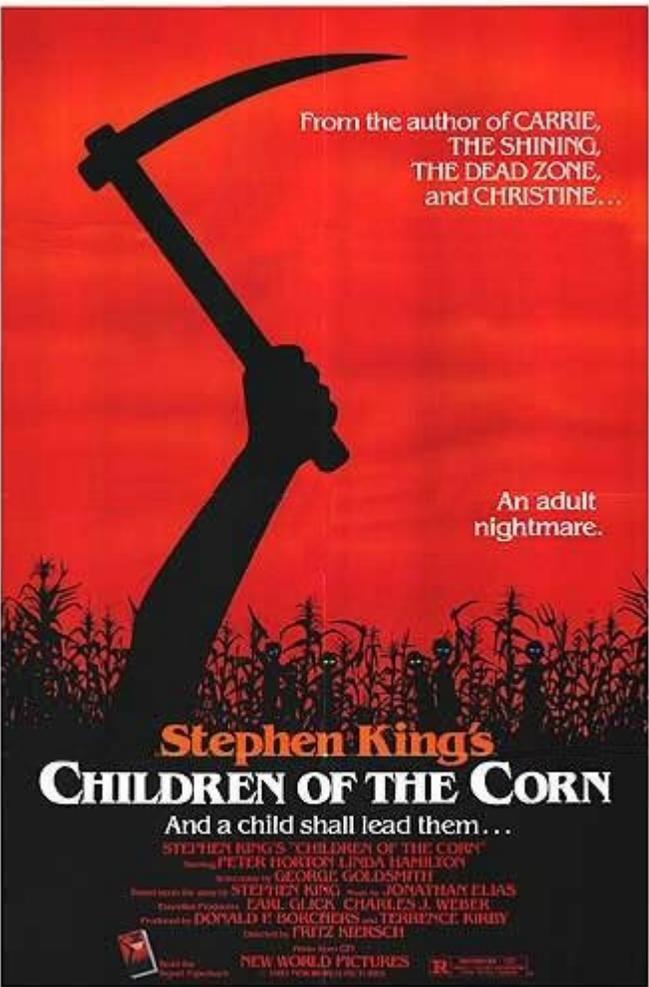
Hogan shook his head and slipped the Chatterly Teeth into his sportcoat pocket. “I’ll carry them this way,” he said, and grinned right back at her. “Keep them handy.”

“Suit yourself.” As he started for the door, she called after him: “Stop back again! I make a damn good chicken salad sandwich!”

“I’ll bet you do, and I will,” Hogan said. He went out, down the steps, and stood for a moment in the hot desert sunshine, smiling. He felt good—he felt good a lot these days. He had come to think that was just the way to be.

To his left, Woof the Amazing Minnesota Coydog got to his feet, poked his snout through the crisscross of wire on the side of his cage, and barked. In Hogan’s pocket, the Chatterly Teeth clicked together once. The sound was soft, but Hogan heard it ... and felt them move. He patted his pocket. “Easy, big fella,” he said softly.

He walked briskly across the yard, climbed behind the wheel of his new Chevrolet van, and drove away toward Los Angeles. He had promised Lita and Jack he would be home by seven, eight at the latest, and he was a man who liked to keep his promises.



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nightmare.

Stephen King's
CHILDREN OF THE CORN

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CHILDREN OF THE CORN

Stephen King

Burt turned the radio on too loud and didn't turn it down because they were on the verge of another argument and he didn't want it to happen. He was desperate for it not to happen.

Vicky said something.

"What?" he shouted.

"Turn it down! Do you want to break my eardrums?"

He bit down hard on what might have come through his mouth and turned it down.

Vicky was fanning herself with her scarf even though the T-Bird was air-conditioned. "Where are we, anyway?"

"Nebraska."

She gave him a cold, neutral look. "Yes, Burt. I know we're in Nebraska, Burt. But where the hell are we?"

"You've got the road atlas. Look it up. Or can't you read?"

"Such wit. This is why we got off the turnpike. So we could look at three hundred miles of corn. And enjoy the wit and wisdom of Burt Robeson."

He was gripping the steering wheel so hard his knuckles were white. He decided he was holding it that tightly because if he loosened up, why, one of those hands might just fly off and hit the ex-Prom Queen beside him right in the chops. We're saving our marriage, he told himself. Yes. We're doing it the same way us grunts went about saving villages in the war.

"Vicky," he said carefully. "I have driven fifteen hundred miles on turnpikes since we left Boston. I did all that driving myself because you refused to drive. Then—"

“I did not refuse!” Vicky said hotly. “Just because I get migraines when I drive for a long time—”

“Then when I asked you if you’d navigate for me on some of the secondary roads, you said sure, Burt. Those were your exact words. Sure, Burt. Then—”

“Sometimes I wonder how I ever wound up married to you.”

“By saying two little words.”

She stared at him for a moment, white-lipped, and then picked up the road atlas. She turned the pages savagely.

It had been a mistake leaving the turnpike, Burt thought morosely. It was a shame, too, because up until then they had been doing pretty well, treating each other almost like human beings. It had sometimes seemed that this trip to the coast, ostensibly to see Vicky’s brother and his wife but actually a last-ditch attempt to patch up their own marriage, was going to work.

But since they left the pike, it had been bad again. How bad? Well, terrible, actually.

“We left the turnpike at Hamburg, right?”

“Right.”

“There’s nothing more until Gatlin,” she said. “Twenty miles. Wide place in the road. Do you suppose we could stop there and get something to eat? Or does your almighty schedule say we have to go until two o’clock like we did yesterday?”

He took his eyes off the road to look at her. “I’ve about had it, Vicky. As far as I’m concerned, we can turn around right here and go home and see that lawyer you wanted to talk to. Because this isn’t working at—”

She had faced forward again, her expression stonily set. It suddenly turned to surprise and fear. “Burt look out you’re going to—”

He turned his attention back to the road just in time to see something vanish under the T-Bird’s bumper. A moment later, while he was only beginning to switch from gas to brake, he felt something thump sickeningly under the front and then the back wheels. They were thrown forward as the car braked along the centerline, decelerating from fifty to zero along black skidmarks.

“A dog,” he said. “Tell me it was a dog, Vicky.”

Her face was a pallid, cottage-cheese color. “A boy. A little boy. He just ran out of the corn and ... congratulations, tiger.”

She fumbled the car door open, leaned out, threw up.

Burt sat straight behind the T-Bird’s wheel, hands still gripping it loosely. He was aware of nothing for a long time but the rich, dark smell of fertilizer.

Then he saw that Vicky was gone and when he looked in the outside mirror he saw her stumbling clumsily back toward a heaped bundle that looked like a pile of rags. She was ordinarily a graceful woman but now her grace was gone, robbed.

It’s manslaughter. That’s what they call it. I took my eyes off the road.

He turned the ignition off and got out. The wind rustled softly through the growing man-high corn, making a weird sound like respiration. Vicky was standing over the bundle of rags now, and he could hear her sobbing.

He was halfway between the car and where she stood and something caught his eye on the left, a gaudy splash of red amid all the green, as bright as barn paint.

He stopped, looking directly into the corn. He found himself thinking (anything to untrack from those rags that were not rags) that it must have been a fantastically good growing season for corn. It grew close together, almost ready to bear. You could plunge into those neat, shaded rows and spend a day trying to find your way out again. But the neatness was broken here. Several tall cornstalks had been broken and leaned askew. And what was that further back in the shadows?

“Burt!” Vicky screamed at him. “Don’t you want to come see? So you can tell all your poker buddies what you bagged in Nebraska? Don’t you—” But the rest was lost in fresh sobs. Her shadow was puddled starkly around her feet. It was almost noon.

Shade closed over him as he entered the corn. The red barn paint was blood. There was a low, somnolent buzz as flies lit, tasted, and buzzed off again ... maybe to tell others. There was more blood on the leaves further in. Surely it couldn’t have splattered this far? And then he was standing over the object he had seen from the road. He picked it up.

The neatness of the rows was disturbed here. Several stalks were canted drunkenly, two of them had been broken clean off. The earth had been gouged. There was blood. The corn rustled. With a little shiver, he walked back to the road.

Vicky was having hysterics, screaming unintelligible words at him, crying, laughing. Who would have thought it could end in such a melodramatic way? He looked at her and saw he wasn’t having an identity crisis or a difficult life transition or any of those trendy things. He hated her. He gave her a hard slap across the face.

She stopped short and put a hand against the reddening impression of his fingers. “You’ll go to jail, Burt,” she said solemnly.

“I don’t think so,” he said, and put the suitcase he had found in the corn at her feet.

“What—?”

“I don’t know. I guess it belonged to him.” He pointed to the sprawled, face-down body that lay in the road. No more than thirteen, from the look of him.

The suitcase was old. The brown leather was battered and scuffed. Two hanks of clothesline had been wrapped around it and tied in large, clownish grannies. Vicky bent to undo one of them, saw the blood greased into the knot, and withdrew.

Burt knelt and turned the body over gently.

“I don’t want to look,” Vicky said, staring down helplessly anyway. And when the staring, sightless face flopped up to regard them, she screamed again. The boy’s face was dirty, his expression a grimace of terror. His throat had been cut.

Burt got up and put his arms around Vicky as she began to sway. “Don’t faint,” he said very quietly. “Do you hear me, Vicky? Don’t faint.”

He repeated it over and over and at last she began to recover and held him tight. They might have been dancing, there on the noon-struck road with the boy’s corpse at their feet.

“Vicky?”

“What?” Muffled against his shirt.

“Go back to the car and put the keys in your pocket. Get the blanket out of the back seat, and my rifle. Bring them here.”

“The rifle?”

“Someone cut his throat. Maybe whoever is watching us.”

Her head jerked up and her wide eyes considered the corn. It marched away as far as the eye could see, undulating up and down

small dips and rises of land.

“I imagine he’s gone. But why take chances? Go on. Do it.”

She walked stiltedly back to the car, her shadow following, a dark mascot who stuck close at this hour of the day. When she leaned into the back seat, Burt squatted beside the boy. White male, no distinguishing marks. Run over, yes, but the T-Bird hadn’t cut the kid’s throat. It had been cut raggedly and inefficiently—no army sergeant had shown the killer the finer points of hand-to-hand assassination—but the final effect had been deadly. He had either run or been pushed through the last thirty feet of corn, dead or mortally wounded. And Burt Robeson had run him down. If the boy had still been alive when the car hit him, his life had been cut short by thirty seconds at most.

Vicky tapped him on the shoulder and he jumped.

She was standing with the brown army blanket over her left arm, the cased pump shotgun in her right hand, her face averted. He took the blanket and spread it on the road. He rolled the body onto it. Vicky uttered a desperate little moan.

“You okay?” He looked up at her. “Vicky?”

“Okay,” she said in a strangled voice.

He flipped the sides of the blanket over the body and scooped it up, hating the thick, dead weight of it. It tried to make a U in his arms and slither through his grasp. He clutched it tighter and they walked back to the T-Bird.

“Open the trunk,” he grunted.

The trunk was full of travel stuff, suitcases and souvenirs. Vicky shifted most of it into the back seat and Burt slipped the body into the made space and slammed the trunklid down. A sigh of relief escaped him.

Vicky was standing by the driver's side door, still holding the cased rifle.

"Just put it in the back and get in."

He looked at his watch and saw only fifteen minutes had passed. It seemed like hours.

"What about the suitcase?" she asked.

He trotted back down the road to where it stood on the white line, like the focal point in an Impressionist painting. He picked it up by its tattered handle and paused for a moment. He had a strong sensation of being watched. It was a feeling he had read about in books, mostly cheap fiction, and he had always doubted its reality. Now he didn't. It was as if there were people in the corn, maybe a lot of them, coldly estimating whether the woman could get the gun out of the case and use it before they could grab him, drag him into the shady rows, cut his throat—

Heart beating thickly, he ran back to the car, pulled the keys out of the trunk lock, and got in.

Vicky was crying again. Burt got them moving, and before a minute had passed, he could no longer pick out the spot where it had happened in the rearview mirror.

"What did you say the next town was?" he asked.

"Oh." She bent over the road atlas again. "Gatlin. We should be there in ten minutes."

"Does it look big enough to have a police station?"

"No. It's just a dot."

"Maybe there's a constable."

They drove in silence for a while. They passed a silo on the left. Nothing else but corn. Nothing passed them going the other way, not even a farm truck.

“Have we passed anything since we got off the turnpike, Vicky?”

She thought about it. “A car and a tractor. At that intersection.”

“No, since we got on this road. Route 17.”

“No. I don’t think we have.” Earlier this might have been the preface to some cutting remark. Now she only stared out of her half of the windshield at the unrolling road and the endless dotted line.

“Vicky? Could you open the suitcase?”

“Do you think it might matter?”

“Don’t know. It might.”

While she picked at the knots (her face was set in a peculiar way—expressionless but tight-mouthed—that Burt remembered his mother wearing when she pulled the innards out of the Sunday chicken), Burt turned on the radio again.

The pop station they had been listening to was almost obliterated in static and Burt switched, running the red marker slowly down the dial. Farm reports. Buck Owens. Tammy Wynette. All distant, nearly distorted into babble. Then, near the end of the dial, one single word blared out of the speaker, so loud and clear that the lips which uttered it might have been directly beneath the grill of the dashboard speaker.

“ATONEMENT!” this voice bellowed.

Burt made a surprised grunting sound. Vicky jumped.

“ONLY BY THE BLOOD OF THE LAMB ARE WE SAVED!” the voice roared, and Burt hurriedly turned the sound down. This station was

close, all right. So close that ... yes, there it was. Poking out of the corn at the horizon, a spidery red tripod against the blue. The radio tower.

“Atonement is the word, brothers ‘n’ sisters,” the voice told them, dropping to a more conversational pitch. In the background, offmike, voices murmured amen. “There’s some that thinks it’s okay to get out in the world, as if you could work and walk in the world without being smirched by the world. Now is that what the word of God teaches us?”

Offmike but still loud: “No!”

“HOLY JESUS!” the evangelist shouted, and now the words came in a powerful, pumping cadence, almost as compelling as a driving rock-and-roll beat: “When they gonna know that way is death? When they gonna know that the wages of the world are paid on the other side? Huh? Huh? The Lord has said there’s many mansions in His house. But there’s no room for the fornicator. No room for the coveter. No room for the defiler of the corn. No room for the hommasexshul. No room—”

Vicky snapped it off. “That drivel makes me sick.”

“What did he say?” Burt asked her. “What did he say about corn?”

“I didn’t hear it.” She was picking at the second clothesline knot.

“He said something about corn. I know he did.”

“I got it!” Vicky said, and the suitcase fell open in her lap. They were passing a sign that said: GATLIN 5 MI. DRIVE CAREFULLY PROTECT OUR CHILDREN. The sign had been put up by the Elks. There were .22 bullet holes in it.

“Socks,” Vicky said. “Two pairs of pants ... a shirt ... a belt ... a string tie with a—” She held it up, showing him the peeling gilt neck clasp. “Who’s that?”

Burt glanced at it. "Hopalong Cassidy, I think."

"Oh." She put it back. She was crying again.

After a moment, Burt said; "Did anything strike you funny about that radio sermon?"

"No. I heard enough of that stuff as a kid to last me forever. I told you about it."

"Didn't you think he sounded kind of young? That preacher?"

She uttered a mirthless laugh. "A teen-ager, maybe, so what? That's what's so monstrous about that whole trip. They like to get hold of them when their minds are still rubber. They know how to put all the emotional checks and balances in. You should have been at some of the tent meetings my mother and father dragged me to ... some of the ones I was 'saved' at.

"Let's see. There was Baby Hortense, the Singing Marvel. She was eight. She'd come on and sing 'Leaning on the Ever-lasting Arms' while her daddy passed the plate, telling everybody to 'dig deep, now, let's not let this little child of God down.' Then there was Norman Staunton. He used to preach hellfire and brimstone in this Little Lord Fauntleroy suit with short pants. He was only seven."

She nodded at his look of unbelief.

"They weren't the only two, either. There were plenty of them on the circuit. They were good draws." She spat the word. "Ruby Stampnell. She was a ten-year-old faith healer. The Grace Sisters. They used to come out with little tin-foil haloes over their heads and—oh!"

"What is it?" He jerked around to look at her, and what she was holding in her hands. Vicky was staring at it raptly. Her slowly seining hands had snagged it on the bottom of the suitcase and had brought it up as she talked. Burt pulled over to take a better look. She gave it to him wordlessly.

It was a crucifix that had been made from twists of corn husk, once green, now dry. Attached to this by woven cornsilk was a dwarf corncob. Most of the kernels had been carefully removed, probably dug out one at a time with a pocketknife. Those kernels remaining formed a crude cruciform figure in yellowish bas-relief. Corn-kernel eyes, each slit longways to suggest pupils. Outstretched kernel arms, the legs together, terminating in a rough indication of bare feet. Above, four letters also raised from the bone-white cob: I N R I.

*

“That’s a fantastic piece of workmanship,” he said.

“It’s hideous,” she said in a flat, strained voice. “Throw it out.”

“Vicky, the police might want to see it.”

“Why?”

“Well, I don’t know why. Maybe—”

“Throw it out. Will you please do that for me? I don’t want it in the car.”

“I’ll put it in back. And as soon as we see the cops, we’ll get rid of it one way or the other. I promise. Okay?”

“Oh, do whatever you want with it!” she shouted at him. “You will anyway!”

Troubled, he threw the thing in back, where it landed on a pile of clothes. Its corn-kernel eyes stared raptly at the T-Bird’s dome light. He pulled out again, gravel splurting from beneath the tires.

“We’ll give the body and everything that was in the suitcase to the cops,” he promised. “Then we’ll be shut of it.”

Vicky didn’t answer. She was looking at her hands.

A mile further on, the endless cornfields drew away from the road, showing farmhouses and outbuildings. In one yard they saw dirty chickens pecking listlessly at the soil. There were faded cola and chewing-tobacco ads on the roofs of barns. They passed a tall billboard that said: ONLY JESUS SAVES. They passed a cafe with a Conoco gas island, but Burt decided to go on into the center of town, if there was one. If not, they could come back to the cafe. It only occurred to him after they had passed it that the parking lot had been empty except for a dirty old pickup that had looked like it was sitting on two flat tires.

Vicky suddenly began to laugh, a high, giggling sound that struck Burt as being dangerously close to hysteria.

“What’s so funny?”

“The signs,” she said, gasping and hiccupping. “Haven’t you been reading them? When they called this the Bible Belt, they sure weren’t kidding. Oh Lordy, there’s another bunch.” Another burst of hysterical laughter escaped her, and she clapped both hands over her mouth.

Each sign had only one word. They were leaning on whitewashed sticks that had been implanted in the sandy shoulder, long ago by the looks; the whitewash was flaked and faded. They were coming up at eighty-foot intervals and Burt read:

A ... CLOUD ... BY ... DAY ... A ... PILLAR ... OF ... FIRE ... BY ... NIGHT

“They only forgot one thing,” Vicky said, still giggling helplessly.

“What?” Burt asked, frowning.

“Burma Shave.” She held a knuckled fist against her open mouth to keep in the laughter, but her semi-hysterical giggles flowed around it like effervescent ginger-ale bubbles.

“Vicky, are you all right?”

“I will be. Just as soon as we’re a thousand miles away from here, in sunny sinful California with the Rockies between us and Nebraska.”

Another group of signs came up and they read them silently.

TAKE ... THIS ... AND ... EAT ... SAITH ... THE ... LORD ... GOD

Now why, Burt thought, should I immediately associate that indefinite pronoun with corn? Isn’t that what they say when they give you communion? It had been so long since he had been to church that he really couldn’t remember. He wouldn’t be surprised if they used cornbread for holy wafer around these parts. He opened his mouth to tell Vicky that, and then thought better of it.

They breasted a gentle rise and there was Gatlin below them, all three blocks of it, looking like a set from a movie about the Depression.

“There’ll be a constable,” Burt said, and wondered why the sight of that hick one-timetable town dozing in the sun should have brought a lump of dread into his throat.

They passed a speed sign proclaiming that no more than thirty was now in order, and another sign, rust-flecked, which said: YOU ARE NOW ENTERING GATLIN, NICEST LITTLE TOWN IN NEBRASKA —OR ANYWHERE ELSE! POP. 5431.

Dusty elms stood on both sides of the road, most of them diseased. They passed the Gatlin Lumberyard and a 76 gas station, where the price signs swung slowly in a hot noon breeze: REG 35.9 HI-TEST 38.9, and another which said: HI TRUCKERS DIESEL FUEL AROUND BACK.

They crossed Elm Street, then Birch Street, and came up on the town square. The houses lining the streets were plain wood with screened porches. Angular and functional. The lawns were yellow and dispirited. Up ahead a mongrel dog walked slowly out into the

middle of Maple Street, stood looking at them for a moment, then lay down in the road with its nose on its paws.

“Stop,” Vicky said. “Stop right here.”

Burt pulled obediently to the curb.

“Turn around. Let’s take the body to Grand Island. That’s not too far, is it? Let’s do that.”

“Vicky, what’s wrong?”

“What do you mean, what’s wrong?” she asked, her voice rising thinly. “This town is empty, Burt. There’s nobody here but us. Can’t you feel that?”

He had felt something, and still felt it. But—

“It just seems that way,” he said. “But it sure is a one-hydrant town. Probably all up in the square, having a bake sale or a bingo game.”

“There’s no one here” She said the words with a queer, strained emphasis. “Didn’t you see that 76 station back there?”

“Sure, by the lumberyard, so what?” His mind was elsewhere, listening to the dull buzz of a cicada burrowing into one of the nearby elms. He could smell corn, dusty roses, and fertilizer—of course. For the first time they were off the turnpike and in a town. A town in a state he had never been in before (although he had flown over it from time to time in United Airlines 747s) and somehow it felt all wrong but all right. Somewhere up ahead there would be a drugstore with a soda fountain, a movie house named the Bijou, a school named after JFK.

“Burt, the prices said thirty-five-nine for regular and thirty-eight-nine for high octane. Now how long has it been since anyone in this country paid those prices?”

“At least four years,” he admitted. “But, Vicky—”

“We’re right in town, Burt, and there’s not a car! Not one car!”

“Grand Island is seventy miles away. It would look funny if we took him there.”

“I don’t care.”

“Look, let’s just drive up to the courthouse and—”

“No!”

There, damn it, there. Why our marriage is falling apart, in a nutshell. No I won’t. No sir. And furthermore, I’ll hold my breath till I turn blue if you don’t let me have my way.

“Vicky,” he said.

“I want to get out of here, Burt.”

“Vicky, listen to me.”

“Turn around. Let’s go.”

“Vicky, will you stop a minute?”

“I’ll stop when we’re driving the other way. Now let’s go.”

“We have a dead child in the trunk of our car!” he roared at her, and took a distinct pleasure at the way she flinched, the way her face crumbled. In a slightly lower voice he went on: “His throat was cut and he was shoved out into the road and I ran him over. Now I’m going to drive up to the courthouse or whatever they have here, and I’m going to report it. If you want to start walking back toward the pike, go to it. I’ll pick you up. But don’t you tell me to turn around and drive seventy miles to Grand Island like we had nothing in the trunk but a bag of garbage. He happens to be some mother’s son, and I’m going to report it before whoever killed him gets over the hills and far away.”

“You bastard,” she said, crying. “What am I doing with you?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “I don’t know anymore. But the situation can be remedied, Vicky.”

He pulled away from the curb. The dog lifted its head at the brief squeal of the tires and then lowered it to its paws again.

They drove the remaining block to the square. At the corner of Main and Pleasant, Main Street split in two. There actually was a town square, a grassy park with a bandstand in the middle. On the other end, where Main Street became one again, there were two official-looking buildings. Burt could make out the lettering on one: GATLIN MUNICIPAL CENTER.

“That’s it,” he said. Vicky said nothing.

Halfway up the square, Burt pulled over again. They were beside a lunch room, the Gatlin Bar and Grill.

“Where are you going?” Vicky asked with alarm as he opened his door.

“To find out where everyone is. Sign in the window there says ‘open.’”

“You’re not going to leave me here alone.”

“So come. Who’s stopping you?”

She unlocked her door and stepped out as he crossed in front of the car. He saw how pale her face was and felt an instant of pity. Hopeless pity.

“Do you hear it?” she asked as he joined her.

“Hear what?”

“The nothing. No cars. No people. No tractors. Nothing.”

And then, from a block over, they heard the high and joyous laughter of children.

“I hear kids,” he said. “Don’t you?”

She looked at him, troubled.

He opened the lunchroom door and stepped into dry, antiseptic heat. The floor was dusty. The sheen on the chrome was dull. The wooden blades of the ceiling fans stood still. Empty tables. Empty counter stools. But the mirror behind the counter had been shattered and there was something else ... in a moment he had it. All the beer taps had been broken off. They lay along the counter like bizarre party favors.

Vicky’s voice was gay and near to breaking. “Sure. Ask anybody. Pardon me, sir, but could you tell me—”

“Oh, shut up.” But his voice was dull and without force. They were standing in a bar of dusty sunlight that fell through the lunchroom’s big plate-glass window and again he had that feeling of being watched and he thought of the boy they had in their trunk, and of the high laughter of children. A phrase came to him for no reason, a legal-sounding phrase, and it began to repeat mystically in his mind: Sight unseen. Sight unseen. Sight unseen.

His eyes traveled over the age-yellowed cards thumbtacked up behind the counter: CHEESEBURG 35C/ WORLD’S BEST JOE 10C/ STRAWBERRY RHUBARB PIE 25C/ TODAY’S SPECIAL HAM & RED EYE GRAVY W/ MASHED POT 80C/.

How long since he had seen lunchroom prices like that?

Vicky had the answer. “Look at this,” she said shrilly. She was pointing at the calendar on the wall. “They’ve been at that bean supper for twelve years, I guess.” She uttered a grinding laugh.

He walked over. The picture showed two boys swimming in a pond while a cute little dog carried off their clothes. Below the picture was the legend: COMPLIMENTS OF GATLIN LUMBER & HARDWARE You Breakum, We Fixum. The month on view was August 1964.

“I don’t understand,” he faltered, “but I’m sure—”

“You’re sure!” she cried hysterically. “Sure, you’re sure! That’s part of your trouble, Burt, you’ve spent your whole life being sure!”

He turned back to the door and she came after him.

“Where are you going?”

“To the Municipal Center.”

“Burt, why do you have to be so stubborn? You know something’s wrong here. Can’t you just admit it?”

“I’m not being stubborn. I just want to get shut of what’s in that trunk.”

They stepped out onto the sidewalk, and Burt was struck afresh with the town’s silence, and with the smell of fertilizer. Somehow you never thought of that smell when you buttered an ear and salted it and bit in. Compliments of sun, rain, all sorts of man-made phosphates, and a good healthy dose of cow shit. But somehow this smell was different from the one he had grown up with in rural upstate New York. You could say whatever you wanted to about organic fertilizer, but there was something almost fragrant about it when the spreader was laying it down in the fields. Not one of your great perfumes, God no, but when the late-afternoon spring breeze would pick up and waft it over the freshly turned fields, it was a smell with good associations. It meant winter was over for good. It meant that school doors were going to bang closed in six weeks or so and spill everyone out into summer. It was a smell tied irrevocably in his mind with other aromas that were perfume: timothy grass, clover, fresh earth, hollyhocks, dogwood.

But they must do something different out here, he thought. The smell was close but not the same. There was a sickish-sweet undertone. Almost a death smell. As a medical orderly in Vietnam, he had become well versed in that smell.

Vicky was sitting quietly in the car, holding the corn crucifix in her lap and staring at it in a rapt way Burt didn't like.

"Put that thing down," he said.

"No," she said without looking up. "You play your games and I'll play mine."

He put the car in gear and drove up to the corner. A dead stoplight hung overhead, swinging in a faint breeze. To the left was a neat white church. The grass was cut. Neatly kept flowers grew beside the flagged path up to the door. Burt pulled over.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm going to go in and take a look," Burt said. "It's the only place in town that looks as if there isn't ten years' dust on it. And look at the sermon board."

She looked. Neatly pegged white letters under glass read: THE POWER AND GRACE OF HE WHO WALKS BEHIND THE ROWS. The date was July 24, 1976—the Sunday before.

"He Who Walks Behind the Rows," Burt said, turning off the ignition. "One of the nine thousand names of God only used in Nebraska, I guess. Coming?"

She didn't smile. "I'm not going in with you."

"Fine. Whatever you want."

"I haven't been in a church since I left home and I don't want to be in this church and I don't want to be in this town, Burt. I'm scared out of my mind, can't we just go?"

“I’ll only be a minute.”

“I’ve got my keys, Burt. If you’re not back in five minutes, I’ll just drive away and leave you here.”

“Now just wait a minute, lady.”

“That’s what I’m going to do. Unless you want to assault me like a common mugger and take my keys. I suppose you could do that.”

“But you don’t think I will.”

“No.”

Her purse was on the seat between them. He snatched it up. She screamed and grabbed for the shoulder strap. He pulled it out of her reach. Not bothering to dig, he simply turned the bag upside down and let everything fall out. Her keyring glittered amid tissues, cosmetics, change, old shopping lists. She lunged for it but he beat her again and put the keys in his own pocket.

“You didn’t have to do that,” she said, crying. “Give them to me.”

“No,” he said, and gave her a hard, meaningless grin. “No way.”

“Please, Burt! I’m scared!” She held her hand out, pleading now.

“You’d wait two minutes and decide that was long enough.”

“I wouldn’t—”

“And then you’d drive off laughing and saying to yourself, That’ll teach Burt to cross me when I want something.’ Hasn’t that pretty much been your motto during our married life? That’ll teach Burt to cross me?”

He got out of the car.

“Please, Burt!” she screamed, sliding across the seat. “Listen ... I know ... we’ll drive out of town and call from a phone booth, okay? I’ve got all kinds of change. I just ... we can ... don’t leave me alone, Burt, don’t leave me out here alone!”

He slammed the door on her cry and then leaned against the side of the T-Bird for a moment, thumbs against his closed eyes. She was pounding on the driver’s side window and calling his name. She was going to make a wonderful impression when he finally found someone in authority to take charge of the kid’s body. Oh yes.

He turned and walked up the flagstone path to the church doors. Two or three minutes, just a look-around, and he would be back out. Probably the door wasn’t even unlocked.

But it pushed in easily on silent, well-oiled hinges (reverently oiled, he thought, and that seemed funny for no really good reason) and he stepped into a vestibule so cool it was almost chilly. It took his eyes a moment to adjust to the dimness.

The first thing he noticed was a pile of wooden letters in the far corner, dusty and jumbled indifferently together. He went to them, curious. They looked as old and forgotten as the calendar in the bar and grill, unlike the rest of the vestibule, which was dust-free and tidy. The letters were about two feet high, obviously part of a set. He spread them out on the carpet—there were eighteen of them—and shifted them around like anagrams, HURT BITE CRAG CHAP CS. Nope, CRAP TARGET CHIBS HUC. That wasn’t much good either. Except for the CH in CHIBS. He quickly assembled the word CHURCH and was left looking at RAP TAGET CIBS. Foolish. He was squatting here playing idiot games with a bunch of letters while Vicky was going nuts out in the car. He started to get up, and then saw it. He formed BAPTIST, leaving RAG EC—and by changing two letters he had GRACE. GRACE BAPTIST CHURCH. The letters must have been out front. They had taken them down and had thrown them indifferently in the corner, and the church had been painted since then so that you couldn’t even see where the letters had been.

Why?

It wasn't the Grace Baptist Church anymore, that was why. So what kind of church was it? For some reason that question caused a trickle of fear and he stood up quickly, dusting his fingers. So they had taken down a bunch of letters, so what? Maybe they had changed the place into Flip Wilson's Church of What's Happening Now.

But what had happened then?

He shook it off impatiently and went through the inner doors. Now he was standing at the back of the church itself, and as he looked toward the nave, he felt fear close around his heart and squeeze tightly. His breath drew in, loud in the pregnant silence of this place.

The space behind the pulpit was dominated by a gigantic portrait of Christ, and Burt thought: If nothing else in this town gave Vicky the screaming meemies, this would.

The Christ was grinning, vulpine. His eyes were wide and staring, reminding Burt uneasily of Lon Chaney in *The Phantom of the Opera*. In each of the wide black pupils someone (a sinner, presumably) was drowning in a lake of fire. But the oddest thing was that this Christ had green hair ... hair which on closer examination revealed itself to be a twining mass of early-summer corn. The picture was crudely done but effective. It looked like a comic-strip mural done by a gifted child—an Old Testament Christ, or a pagan Christ that might slaughter his sheep for sacrifice instead of leading them.

At the foot of the left-hand rank of pews was a pipe organ, and Burt could not at first tell what was wrong with it. He walked down the left-hand aisle and saw with slowly dawning horror that the keys had been ripped up, the stops had been pulled out... and the pipes themselves filled with dry cornhusks. Over the organ was a carefully lettered plaque which read: MAKE NO MUSIC EXCEPT WITH HUMAN TONGUE SAITH THE LORD GOD.

Vicky was right. Something was terribly wrong here. He debated going back to Vicky without exploring any further, just getting into the car and leaving town as quickly as possible, never mind the Municipal Building. But it grated on him. Tell the truth, he thought. You want to give her Ban 5000 a workout before going back and admitting she was right to start with.

He would go back out in a minute or so.

He walked toward the pulpit, thinking: People must go through Gatlin all the time. There must be people in the neighboring towns who have friends and relatives here. The Nebraska SP must cruise through from time to time. And what about the power company? The stoplight had been dead. Surely they'd know if the power had been off for twelve long years. Conclusion: What seemed to have happened in Gatlin was impossible.

Still, he had the creeps.

He climbed the four carpeted steps to the pulpit and looked out over the deserted pews, glimmering in the half-shadows. He seemed to feel the weight of those eldritch and decidedly unchristian eyes boring into his back.

There was a large Bible on the lectern, opened to the thirty-eighth chapter of Job. Burt glanced down at it and read: "Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind, and said, Who is this that darkeneth counsel by words without knowledge? ... Where wast thou when I laid the foundations of the earth? declare, if thou hast understanding." The lord. He Who Walks Behind the Rows. Declare if thou hast understanding. And please pass the corn.

He fluttered the pages of the Bible, and they made a dry whispering sound in the quiet—the sound that ghosts might make if there really were such things. And in a place like this you could almost believe it. Sections of the Bible had been chopped out. Mostly from the New Testament, he saw. Someone had decided to take on the job of amending Good King James with a pair of scissors.

But the Old Testament was intact.

He was about to leave the pulpit when he saw another book on a lower shelf and took it out, thinking it might be a church record of weddings and confirmations and burials.

He grimaced at the words stamped on the cover, done inexpertly in gold leaf: **THUS LET THE INIQUITOUS BE CUT DOWN SO THAT THE GROUND MAY BE FERTILE AGAIN SAITH THE LORD GOD OF HOSTS.**

There seemed to be one train of thought around here, and Burt didn't care much for the track it seemed to ride on.

He opened the book to the first wide, lined sheet. A child had done the lettering, he saw immediately. In places an ink eraser had been carefully used, and while there were no misspellings, the letters were large and childishly made, drawn rather than written. The first column read:

Amos Deigan (Richard), b. Sept. 4, 1945 Sept. 4, 1964

Isaac Renfrew (William), b. Sept. 19, 1945 Sept. 19, 1964

Zepheniah Kirk (George), b. Oct. 14, 1945 Oct. 14, 1964

Mary Wells (Roberta), b. Nov. 12, 1945 Nov. 12, 1964

Yemen Hollis (Edward), b. Jan. 5, 1946 Jan. 5, 1965

Frowning, Burt continued to turn through the pages. Three-quarters of the way through, the double columns ended abruptly:

Rachel Stigman (Donna), b. June 21, 1957 June 21, 1976

Moses Richardson (Henry), b. July 29, 1957

Malachi Boardman (Craig), b. August 15, 1957

The last entry in the book was for Ruth Clawson (Sandra), b. April 30, 1961. Burt looked at the shelf where he had found this book and came up with two more. The first had the same INIQUITOUS BE CUT DOWN logo, and it continued the same record, the single column tracing birth dates and names. In early September of 1964 he found Job Gilman (Clayton), b. September 6, and the next entry was Eve Tobin, b. June 16, 1965. No second name in parentheses.

The third book was blank.

Standing behind the pulpit, Burt thought about it.

Something had happened in 1964. Something to do with religion, and corn ... and children.

Dear God we beg thy blessing on the crop. For Jesus' sake, amen.

And the knife raised high to sacrifice the lamb—but had it been a lamb? Perhaps a religious mania had swept them. Alone, all alone, cut off from the outside world by hundreds of square miles of the rustling secret corn. Alone under seventy million acres of blue sky. Alone under the watchful eye of God, now a strange green God, a God of corn, grown old and strange and hungry. He Who Walks Behind the Rows.

Burt felt a chill creep into his flesh.

Vicky, let me tell you a story. It's about Amos Deigan, who was born Richard Deigan on September 4, 1945. He took the name Amos in 1964, fine Old Testament name, Amos, one of the minor prophets. Well, Vicky, what happened—don't laugh—is that Dick Deigan and his friends—Billy Renfrew, George Kirk, Roberta Wells, and Eddie Hollis among others—they got religion and they killed off their parents. All of them. Isn't that a scream? Shot them in their beds, knifed them in their bathtubs, poisoned their suppers, hung them, or disemboweled them, for all I know.

Why? The corn. Maybe it was dying. Maybe they got the idea somehow that it was dying because there was too much sinning. Not enough sacrifice. They would have done it in the corn, in the rows.

And somehow, Vicky, I'm quite sure of this, somehow they decided that nineteen was as old as any of them could live. Richard "Amos" Deigan, the hero of our little story, had his nineteenth birthday on September 4, 1964—the date in the book. I think maybe they killed him. Sacrificed him in the corn. Isn't that a silly story?

But let's look at Rachel Stigman, who was Donna Stigman until 1964. She turned nineteen on June 21, just about a month ago. Moses Richardson was born on July 29—just three days from today he'll be nineteen. Any idea what's going to happen to ole Mose on the twenty-ninth?

I can guess.

Burt licked his lips, which felt dry.

One other thing, Vicky. Look at this. We have Job Gilman (Clayton) born on September 6, 1964. No other births until June 16, 1965. A gap of ten months. Know what I think? They killed all the parents, even the pregnant ones, that's what I think. And one of them got pregnant in October of 1964 and gave birth to Eve. Some sixteen-or-seventeen-year-old girl. Eve. The first woman.

He thumbed back through the book feverishly and found the Eve Tobin entry. Below it: "Adam Greenlaw, b. July 11, 1965."

They'd be just eleven now, he thought, and his flesh began to crawl. And maybe they're out there. Someplace.

But how could such a thing be kept secret? How could it go on?

How unless the God in question approved?

“Oh Jesus,” Burt said into the silence, and that was when the T-Bird’s horn began to blare into the afternoon, one long continuous blast.

Burt jumped from the pulpit and ran down the center aisle. He threw open the outer vestibule door, letting in hot sunshine, dazzling. Vicky was bolt upright behind the steering wheel, both hands plastered on the horn ring, her head swiveling wildly. From all around the children were coming. Some of them were laughing gaily. They held knives, hatchets, pipes, rocks, hammers. One girl, maybe eight, with beautiful long blond hair, held a jackhandle. Rural weapons. Not a gun among them. Burt felt a wild urge to scream out: Which of you is Adam and Eve? Who are the mothers? Who are the daughters? Fathers? Sons?

Declare, if thou hast understanding.

They came from the side streets, from the town green, through the gate in the chain-link fence around the school playground a block further west. Some of them glanced indifferently at Burt, standing frozen on the church steps, and some nudged each other and pointed and smiled ... the sweet smiles of children.

The girls were dressed in long brown wool and faded sunbonnets. The boys, like Quaker parsons, were all in black and wore round-crowned flat-brimmed hats. They streamed across the town square toward the car, across lawns, a few came across the front yard of what had been the Grace Baptist Church until 1964. One or two of them almost close enough to touch.

“The shotgun!” Burt yelled. “Vicky, get the shotgun!”

But she was frozen in her panic, he could see that from the steps. He doubted if she could even hear him through the closed windows.

They converged on the Thunderbird. The axes and hatchets and chunks of pipe began to rise and fall. My God, am I seeing this? he thought frozenly. An arrow of chrome fell off the side of the car. The

hood ornament went flying. Knives scrawled spirals through the sidewalls of the tires and the car settled. The horn blared on and on. The windshield and side windows went opaque and cracked under the onslaught ... and then the safety glass sprayed inward and he could see again. Vicky was crouched back, only one hand on the horn ring now, the other thrown up to protect her face. Eager young hands reached in, fumbling for the lock/unlock button. She beat them away wildly. The horn became intermittent and then stopped altogether.

The beaten and dented driver's side door was hauled open. They were trying to drag her out but her hands were wrapped around the steering wheel. Then one of them leaned in, knife in hand, and—

His paralysis broke and he plunged down the steps, almost falling, and ran down the flagstone walk, toward them. One of them, a boy of about sixteen with long red hair spilling out from beneath his hat, turned toward him, almost casually, and something flicked through the air. Burt's left arm jerked backward, and for a moment he had the absurd thought that he had been punched at long distance. Then the pain came, so sharp and sudden that the world went gray.

He examined his arm with a stupid sort of wonder. A buck and a half Pensy jackknife was growing out of it like a strange tumor. The sleeve of his J. C. Penney sport shirt was turning red. He looked at it for what seemed like forever, trying to understand how he could have grown a jackknife ... was it possible?

When he looked up, the boy with the red hair was almost on top of him. He was grinning, confident.

"Hey, you bastard," Burt said. His voice was creaking, shocked.

"Remand your soul to God, for you will stand before His throne momentarily," the boy with the red hair said, and clawed for Burt's eyes.

Burt stepped back, pulled the Pency out of his arm, and stuck it into the red-haired boy's throat. The gush of blood was immediate, gigantic. Burt was splashed with it. The red-haired boy began to gobble and walk in a large circle. He clawed at the knife, trying to pull it free, and was unable. Burt watched him, jaw hanging agape. None of this was happening. It was a dream. The red-haired boy gobbled and walked. Now his sound was the only one in the hot early afternoon. The others watched, stunned.

This part of it wasn't in the script, Burt thought numbly. Vicky and I, we were in the script. And the boy in the corn, who was trying to run away. But not one of their own. He stared at them savagely, wanting to scream, How do you like it?

The red-haired boy gave one last weak gobble, and sank to his knees. He stared up at Burt for a moment, and then his hands dropped away from the haft of the knife, and he fell forward.

A soft sighing sound from the children gathered around the Thunderbird. They stared at Burt. Burt stared back at them, fascinated ... and that was when he noticed that Vicky was gone.

"Where is she?" he asked. "Where did you take her?"

One of the boys raised a blood-streaked hunting knife toward his throat and made a sawing motion there. He grinned. That was the only answer.

From somewhere in back, an older boy's voice, soft: "Get him."

The boys began to walk toward him. Burt backed up. They began to walk faster. Burt backed up faster. The shotgun, the goddamned shotgun! Out of reach. The sun cut their shadows darkly on the green church lawn ... and then he was on the sidewalk. He turned and ran.

"Kill him!" someone roared, and they came after him.

He ran, but not quite blindly. He skirted the Municipal Building—no help there, they would corner him like a rat—and ran on up Main Street, which opened out and became the highway again two blocks further up. He and Vicky would have been on that road now and away, if he had only listened.

His loafers slapped against the sidewalk. Ahead of him he could see a few more business buildings, including the Gatlin Ice Cream Shoppe and—sure enough—the Bijou Theater. The dust-clotted marquee letters read NOW HOWING L MITED EN AGEMEN ELI A TH TAYLOR CLEOPA RA. Beyond the next cross street was a gas station that marked the edge of town. And beyond that the corn, closing back in to the sides of the road. A green tide of corn.

Burt ran. He was already out of breath and the knife wound in his upper arm was beginning to hurt. And he was leaving a trail of blood. As he ran he yanked his handkerchief from his back pocket and stuck it inside his shirt.

He ran. His loafers pounded the cracked cement of the sidewalk, his breath rasped in his throat with more and more heat. His arm began to throb in earnest. Some mordant part of his brain tried to ask if he thought he could run all the way to the next town, if he could run twenty miles of two-lane blacktop.

He ran. Behind him he could hear them, fifteen years younger and faster than he was, gaining. Their feet slapped on the pavement. They whooped and shouted back and forth to each other. They're having more fun than a five-alarm fire, Burt thought disjointedly. They'll talk about it for years.

Burt ran.

He ran past the gas station marking the edge of town. His breath gasped and roared in his chest. The sidewalk ran out under his feet. And now there was only one thing to do, only one chance to beat them and escape with his life. The houses were gone, the town was gone. The corn had surged in a soft green wave back to the edges of

the road. The green, swordlike leaves rustled softly. It would be deep in there, deep and cool, shady in the rows of man-high corn.

He ran past a sign that said: YOU ARE NOW LEAVING GATLIN, NICEST LITTLE TOWN IN NEBRASKA—OR ANYWHERE ELSE! DROP IN ANYTIME!

I'll be sure to do that, Burt thought dimly.

He ran past the sign like a sprinter closing on the tape and then swerved left, crossing the road, and kicked his loafers away. Then he was in the corn and it closed behind him and over him like the waves of a green sea, taking him in. Hiding him. He felt a sudden and wholly unexpected relief sweep him, and at the same moment he got his second wind. His lungs, which had been shallowing up, seemed to unlock and give him more breath.

He ran straight down the first row he had entered, head ducked, his broad shoulders swiping the leaves and making them tremble. Twenty yards in he turned right, parallel to the road again, and ran on, keeping low so they wouldn't see his dark head of hair bobbing amid the yellow corn tassels. He doubled back toward the road for a few moments, crossed more rows, and then put his back to the road and hopped randomly from row to row, always delving deeper and deeper into the corn.

At last, he collapsed onto his knees and put his forehead against the ground. He could only hear his own taxed breathing, and the thought that played over and over in his mind was: Thank God I gave up smoking, thank God I gave up smoking, thank God—

Then he could hear them, yelling back and forth to each other, in some cases bumping into each other ("Hey, this is my row!"), and the sound heartened him. They were well away to his left and they sounded very poorly organized.

He took his handkerchief out of his shirt, folded it, and stuck it back in after looking at the wound. The bleeding seemed to have stopped

in spite of the workout he had given it.

He rested a moment longer, and was suddenly aware that he felt good, physically better than he had in years ... excepting the throb of his arm. He felt well exercised, and suddenly grappling with a clearcut (no matter how insane) problem after two years of trying to cope with the incubotic gremlins that were sucking his marriage dry.

It wasn't right that he should feel this way, he told himself. He was in deadly peril of his life, and his wife had been carried off. She might be dead now. He tried to summon up Vicky's face and dispel some of the odd good feeling by doing so, but her face wouldn't come. What came was the red-haired boy with the knife in his throat.

He became aware of the corn fragrance in his nose now, all around him. The wind through the tops of the plants made a sound like voices. Soothing. Whatever had been done in the name of this corn, it was now his protector.

But they were getting closer.

Running hunched over, he hurried up the row he was in, crossed over, doubled back, and crossed over more rows. He tried to keep the voices always on his left, but as the afternoon progressed, that became harder and harder to do. The voices had grown faint, and often the rustling sound of the corn obscured them altogether. He would run, listen, run again. The earth was hard-packed, and his stockinged feet left little or no trace.

When he stopped much later the sun was hanging over the fields to his right, red and inflamed, and when he looked at his watch he saw that it was quarter past seven. The sun had stained the corntops a reddish gold, but here the shadows were dark and deep. He cocked his head, listening. With the coming of sunset the wind had died entirely and the corn stood still, exhaling its aroma of growth into the warm air. If they were still in the corn they were either far away or just hunkered down and listening. But Burt didn't think a bunch of kids, even crazy ones, could be quiet for that long. He suspected

they had done the most kidlike thing, regardless of the consequences for them: they had given up and gone home.

He turned toward the setting sun, which had sunk between the raftered clouds on the horizon, and began to walk. If he cut on a diagonal through the rows, always keeping the setting sun ahead of him, he would be bound to strike Route 17 sooner or later.

The ache in his arm had settled into a dull throb that was nearly pleasant, and the good feeling was still with him. He decided that as long as he was here, he would let the good feeling exist in him without guilt. The guilt would return when he had to face the authorities and account for what had happened in Gatlin. But that could wait.

He pressed through the corn, thinking he had never felt so keenly aware. Fifteen minutes later the sun was only a hemisphere poking over the horizon and he stopped again, his new awareness clicking into a pattern he didn't like. It was vaguely ... well, vaguely frightening.

He cocked his head. The corn was rustling.

Burt had been aware of that for some time, but he had just put it together with something else. The wind was still. How could that be?

He looked around warily, half expecting to see the smiling boys in their Quaker coats creeping out of the corn, their knives clutched in their hands. Nothing of the sort. There was still that rustling noise. Off to the left.

He began to walk in that direction, not having to bull through the corn anymore. The row was taking him in the direction he wanted to go, naturally. The row ended up ahead. Ended? No, emptied out into some sort of clearing. The rustling was there.

He stopped, suddenly afraid.

The scent of the corn was strong enough to be cloying. The rows held onto the sun's heat and he became aware that he was plastered with sweat and chaff and thin spider strands of cornsilk. The bugs ought to be crawling all over him ... but they weren't.

He stood still, staring toward that place where the corn opened out onto what looked like a large circle of bare earth.

There were no minges or mosquitoes in here, no blackflies or chiggers—what he and Vicky had called “drive-in bugs” when they had been courting, he thought with sudden and unexpectedly sad nostalgia. And he hadn't seen a single crow. How was that for weird, a cornpatch with no crows?

In the last of the daylight he swept his eyes closely over the row of corn to his left. And saw that every leaf and stalk was perfect, which was just not possible. No yellow blight. No tattered leaves, no caterpillar eggs, no burrows, no—

His eyes widened.

My God, there aren't any weeds!

Not a single one. Every foot and a half the corn plants rose from the earth. There was no witchgrass, jimson, pikeweed, whore's hair, or poke salad. Nothing.

Burt stared up, eyes wide. The light in the west was fading. The raftered clouds had drawn back together. Below them the golden light had faded to pink and ocher. It would be dark soon enough.

It was time to go down to the clearing in the corn and see what was there—hadn't that been the plan all along? All the time he had thought he was cutting back to the highway, hadn't he been being led to this place?

Dread in his belly, he went on down to the row and stood at the edge of the clearing. There was enough light left for him to see what was

here. He couldn't scream. There didn't seem to be enough air left in his lungs. He tottered in on legs like slats of splintery wood. His eyes bulged from his sweaty face.

"Vicky," he whispered. "Oh, Vicky, my God—"

She had been mounted on a crossbar like a hideous trophy, her arms held at the wrists and her legs at the ankles with twists of common barbed wire, seventy cents a yard at any hardware store in Nebraska. Her eyes had been ripped out. The sockets were filled with the moonflax of cornsilk. Her jaws were wrenched open in a silent scream, her mouth filled with cornhusks.

On her left was a skeleton in a moldering surplice. The nude jawbone grinned. The eye sockets seemed to stare at Burt jocularly, as if the onetime minister of the Grace Baptist Church was saying: It's not so bad, being sacrificed by pagan devil-children in the corn is not so bad, having your eyes ripped out of your skull according to the Laws of Moses is not so bad—

To the left of the skeleton in the surplice was a second skeleton, this one dressed in a rotting blue uniform. A hat hung over the skull, shading the eyes, and on the peak of the cap was a greenish-tinged badge reading POLICE CHIEF.

That was when Burt heard it coming: not the children but something much larger, moving through the corn and toward the clearing. Not the children, no. The children wouldn't venture into the corn at night. This was the holy place, the place of He Who Walks Behind the Rows.

Jerkily Burt turned to flee. The row he had entered the clearing by was gone. Closed up. All the rows had closed up. It was coming closer now and he could hear it, pushing through the corn. He could hear it breathing. An ecstasy of superstitious terror seized him. It was coming. The corn on the far side of the clearing had suddenly darkened, as if a gigantic shadow had blotted it out.

Coming.

He Who Walks Behind the Rows.

It began to come into the clearing. Burt saw something huge, bulking up to the sky ... something green with terrible red eyes the size of footballs.

Something that smelled like dried cornhusks years in some dark barn.

He began to scream. But he did not scream long.

Some time later, a bloated orange harvest moon came up.

The children of the corn stood in the clearing at midday, looking at the two crucified skeletons and the two bodies ... the bodies were not skeletons yet, but they would be. In time. And here, in the heartland of Nebraska, in the corn, there was nothing but time.

“Behold, a dream came to me in the night, and the Lord did shew all this to me.”

They all turned to look at Isaac with dread and wonder, even Malachi. Isaac was only nine, but he had been the Seer since the corn had taken David a year ago. David had been nineteen and he had walked into the corn on his birthday, just as dusk had come drifting down the summer rows.

Now, small face grave under his round-crowned hat, Isaac continued:

“And in my dream the Lord was a shadow that walked behind the rows, and he spoke to me in the words he used to our older brothers years ago. He is much displeased with this sacrifice.”

They made a sighing, sobbing noise and looked at the surrounding walls of green.

“And the Lord did say: Have I not given you a place of killing, that you might make sacrifice there? And have I not shewn you favor? But this man has made a blasphemy within me, and I have completed this sacrifice myself. Like the Blue Man and the false minister who escaped many years ago.”

“The Blue Man ... the false minister,” they whispered, and looked at each other uneasily.

“So now is the Age of Favor lowered from nineteen plantings and harvestings to eighteen,” Isaac went on relentlessly. “Yet be fruitful and multiply as the corn multiplies, that my favor may be shewn you, and be upon you.”

Isaac ceased.

The eyes turned to Malachi and Joseph, the only two among this party who were eighteen. There were others back in town, perhaps twenty in all.

They waited to hear what Malachi would say, Malachi who had led the hunt for Japheth, who evermore would be known as Ahaz, cursed of God. Malachi had cut the throat of Ahaz and had thrown his body out of the corn so the foul body would not pollute it or blight it.

“I obey the word of God,” Malachi whispered.

The corn seemed to sigh its approval.

In the weeks to come the girls would make many corncob crucifixes to ward off further evil.

And that night all of those now above the Age of Favor walked silently into the corn and went to the clearing, to gain the continued favor of He Who Walks Behind the Rows.

“Goodbye, Malachi,” Ruth called. She waved disconsolately. Her belly was big with Malachi’s child and tears coursed silently down her cheeks. Malachi did not turn. His back was straight. The corn swallowed him.

Ruth turned away, still crying. She had conceived a secret hatred for the corn and sometimes dreamed of walking into it with a torch in each hand when dry September came and the stalks were dead and explosively combustible. But she also feared it. Out there, in the night, something walked, and it saw everything ... even the secrets kept in human hearts.

Dusk deepened into night. Around Gatlin the corn rustled and whispered secretly. It was well pleased.

CHINGA

Stephen King

THE TRUTH IS OUT THERE

SCENE 1 (Car with Maine license plate # 384M 95 . MELISSA TURNER walks to the passenger side of the car and opens the door for her young daughter POLLY who is holding a large doll.)

MELISSA: Okay, sweetheart. We're just going in for a few things. We won't be long, okay. Polly? Mommy needs some groceries, okay?

(POLLY does not respond. MELISSA unbuckles the seatbelt and helps her out. As they enter the grocery store, an older woman, JANE FROELICH glares at them. MELISSA ignores her. POLLY looks back at her.)

(Inside the store, MELISSA wheels the cart quickly and nervously down the aisle. POLLY sits in the child seat of the cart with her doll. People watch them suspiciously. They pass by the butcher's counter. DAVE, the butcher watches them pass.)

POLLY: I don't like this store, Mommy.

MELISSA: We're only going to be a minute.

POLLY: I want to go home.

(The doll's eyes open.)

DOLL: (high-pitched creepy voice) Let's have fun.

(As they pass the refrigerated section, MELISSA sees an image of DAVE in the glass. He has a knife through his right eye.)

DAVE'S IMAGE: Help, Melissa.

(MELISSA quickly wheels the cart to the front of the store. The cart has a bad wheel.)

MELISSA: (picking up POLLY) We're going home, Polly. Please, don't do this to Mommy.

(Nearby, there is the sound of breaking glass as a woman drops her basket and begins clawing at her eyes. MELISSA runs out of the store with POLLY as everyone in the store begins clawing at their eyes. DAVE comes out of the back of the store and sees what is happening. He suddenly claws at his eyes, then runs back to his phone and dials 911.)

DAVE: It's Dave, down at the Super Saver. Send whoever you got on duty.

(Dave sees a fuzzy reflection of the doll in the metal door of a meat locker.)

DOLL'S IMAGE: I want to play.

(DAVE pulls out a knife as if to attack the doll, but then aims the knife at his own eye. He is struggling against himself, but the knife moves closer to his right eye. The camera cuts away just as we hear him scream. Doll is still reflected on locker, watching.)

Opening Credits

SCENE 2 (A convertible drives down a street in the small Maine harbor town. SCULLY pulls the convertible into a gas station, gets out and begins filling the tank <litres, not gallons>. She is wearing a Maine tourist T-shirt <The Way Life Should Be> and jeans and very cool shades. She hears her cell phone ringing. She gets the keys out of the ignition, opens the trunk of the car and pulls out her phone.)

SCULLY: (on phone) Scully.

(MULDER is in the office rocking on the back of a chair, obviously very bored.) MULDER: (on phone) Hey, Scully, it's me.

SCULLY: (on phone, voice) Mulder, I thought we had an agreement. We were both going to take the weekend off.

MULDER: (on phone) Right, right. I know. But I - I just received some information about - about a case. A classic X-files - classic. I wanted to share it with you.

SCULLY: (on phone) Mulder, I'm on vacation. The weather is clear. I'm looking forward to hitting the road and breathing in some of this fine New England air.

MULDER: (on phone) You didn't rent a convertible, did you?

SCULLY: (on phone) Why?

MULDER: (on phone) Are you aware of the statistics of decapitation?

SCULLY: (on phone) Mulder, I'm hanging up. I'm turning off my cell phone. I'm back in the office on Monday.

MULDER: (on phone) You shouldn't talk and drive at the same time. Are you aware of the statistics? Hello?

(SCULLY has hung up. She drives the car into the grocery store lot, almost hitting MELISSA'S car as MELISSA speeds away. SCULLY looks slightly disgusted. Then she sees an OLD MAN staggering out of the store with bloody eyes. She gets out of the car.)

SCULLY: Sir ... Sir, what happened?

OLD MAN: (disoriented) I .. I think we need a doctor.

(SCULLY walks into store. People are moaning and crying and have horribly scratched eyes)

STORE MANAGER: (in pain) Who are you?

SCULLY: I'm .. my name is Scully. I'm an FBI agent. What happened to you?

STORE MANAGER: I don't know. But Dave, the butcher .. I think he's dead.

(SCULLY goes to the back and looks at DAVE'S body, knife sticking out of his eye socket.)

SCENE 3 (X-Files office. Mulder is eating sunflower seeds and watching television. Lots of groaning and moaning from a male and a female voice. Empty video cassette box on MULDER'S desk reads "Alien Probe." Phone rings.)

MULDER: (on phone) Mulder.

SCULLY: (on phone, voice) Mulder, it's me.

MULDER: (on phone) I thought you said you were on vacation.

SCULLY: (on phone, voice) I am. I'm up in Maine.

MULDER: (on phone) I thought you said you didn't want to be disturbed. You wanted to get out of your head for a few days.

SCULLY: (on phone, voice) I don't ... I mean, I do. I (moaning from TV is loud) What are you watching, Mulder?

MULDER: (on phone) It's the World's Deadliest Swarms. (Fumbles with remote to stop the tape.) Um .. you said you were going to be unreachable. What's going on?

SCULLY: (on phone) I, uh ... I'm at a market here. I'm just trying to give the local PD a handle here.

MULDER: (on phone, voice) A handle on what?

(SCULLY is in store office watching security tape footage of people clawing at their eyes.)

SCULLY: (on phone) Well, I'm not quite sure how to describe it, Mulder. I didn't witness it myself but there seems to be some kind of an outbreak of people acting in a violent, involuntary way.

MULDER: (on phone) Towards who?

(MULDER switches off TV, which now shows man being attacked by bugs. Remember, tape has already been stopped.)

SCULLY: (on phone, voice) Toward themselves.

MULDER: (on phone) Themselves?

SCULLY: (on phone) Yeah. Beating at their faces, clawing at their eyes. One man is dead.

MULDER: (on phone, voice) Dead? How?

SCULLY: (on phone) Self-inflicted, it appears.

MULDER: (on phone) Huh ... it sounds to me like that's witchcraft or maybe some sorcery that you're looking for there.

(Local PD Captain, JACK BONSAINT watches SCULLY strangely throughout conversation with MULDER.)

SCULLY: (on phone) No, I don't think it's witchcraft, Mulder, or sorcery. I've had a look around and I don't see any evidence that warrants that kind of suspicion.

MULDER: (on phone) Maybe you don't know what you're looking for.

SCULLY: (on phone) Like evidence of conjury or the black arts or shamanism, divination, Wicca or any kind of pagan or neo-Pagan practice. Charms, cards

(MULDER is listening, spellbound.)

SCULLY: (on phone) ... familiars, bloodstones, or hex signs or any of the ritual tableaux associated with the occult, Santeria, Voudoun, Macumba, or any high or low magic?

MULDER: (on phone) Scully ...

SCULLY: (on phone) Yes?

MULDER: (on phone) Marry me.

SCULLY: (on phone) I was hoping for something a little more helpful.

MULDER: (on phone) Well, you know, short of looking for a lady wearing a pointy hat riding a broomstick, I think you pretty much got it covered there.

SCULLY: (on phone) Thanks anyway. (hangs up, looks at tape again) (to OFFICER BUDDY RIGGS) Who's that woman right there?

BUDDY: Melissa Turner.

SCULLY: She's the only one I've seen who looks unaffected.

BUDDY: What's your point?

SCULLY: You might want to talk to her.

(SCULLY leaves the store office. Captain JACK BONSAINT follows her.)

BONSAINT: (smiling, very friendly) Ms. Scully ... you staying in town?

SCULLY: Yes. I'm on vacation. Why?

BONSAINT: Well, what you said back there about Melissa Turner kind of put a spin on this whole business here today.

SCULLY: How's that?

BONSAINT: Well, Melissa's caused some stir. People here say she's a witch.

SCULLY: Well, that's not the first time for that accusation in these parts.

BONSAINT: Ayuh.

SCULLY: Look, to be honest with you, Captain Bonsaint, um, I'm not much of a believer in witchcraft.

BONSAINT: Well, you know, I'm not either. I used to just think it's 'cause Melissa was pretty and single. Threatening, you know?

SCULLY: But now you're not convinced?

BONSAINT: Well, you know, I appreciate the trouble you went to, and I sure do hope there's a reasonable explanation like you said - just this one thing going to make it hard to persuade folks to your thinking.

SCULLY: What one thing is that?

BONSAINT: Who she's been carrying on with.

SCULLY: Who she's been carrying on with?

BONSAINT: Ayuh. With Dave, the butcher.

SCENE 4 (Back in store office, OFFICER BUDDY RIGGS calls MELISSA.)

MELISSA: (on phone) Hello?

(At MELISSA'S house, the HOKEY POKEY song is playing on POLLY'S record player. POLLY, holding her doll, watches MELISSA.)

BUDDY: (on phone) Hey. It's Buddy.

MELISSA: Oh, hi.

BUDDY: (on phone) Are you okay, Melissa?

MELISSA: (on phone) I'm fine. Why do you ask?

POLLY: Who's that, Mommy?

BUDDY: (on phone) I know you were here, Melissa. Down at the Super Saver.

MELISSA: (on phone) I don't know what you're talking about, Buddy.

POLLY: Hang up. Mommy.

BUDDY: (on phone) Melissa, turn the music down. There's some talk that you're involved in what happened here today.

MELISSA: (on phone, going downstairs and outside) I'm not involved in anything.

BUDDY: (on phone) I know that. Would you listen to me? I'm not saying that you are.

MELISSA: (on phone) What are you saying?

POLLY: (from inside) Mommy!

BUDDY: (on phone) I want to help you, but you've got to keep it a secret or we're both going to be answering questions. Now, I've got something to tell you.

MELISSA: (on phone) What?

BUDDY: (on phone) Something bad.

MELISSA: (on phone) What is it, Buddy?

BUDDY: (on phone) Dave's dead.

MELISSA: (on phone) Oh, my God!

BUDDY: (on phone) I've got to see you right away, Melissa.

MELISSA: (on phone) I can't.

BUDDY: (on phone) You need a friend more than ever.

(Upstairs, POLLY sits with the doll, listening to the Hokey Pokey. Doll's eyes open.)

DOLL: Let's have fun.

MELISSA: (on phone) You can't come here, Buddy.

BUDDY: (on phone) Why? Tell me why?

MELISSA: (on phone) I can't explain it to you now.

BUDDY: (on phone) I'm coming over there, Melissa. You shouldn't be alone.

(Behind MELISSA outside, we see the shadow of the doll on a sheet hanging to dry on a clothesline. Its eyes blink.)

(Commercial 1.)

SCENE 5 MELISSA TURNER RESIDENCE 2:08 PM

(BONSAINT and SCULLY drive up in a patrol car and get out. BONSAINT knocks on front door. No answer. SCULLY looks in a window.)

SCULLY: Back door's wide open.

(They go around to back.)

BONSAINT: Melissa! (to SCULLY) Sheets are still wet.

(SCULLY enters house, goes up to POLLY'S room and looks at windows which are nailed shut.)

SCULLY: Chief? Take a look at this.

BONSAINT: What the devil's this for?

SCULLY: It looks like she was afraid of something.

BONSAINT: Whatever it is, she's run off in a hurry. Laundry's out. Door's unlocked. Beats me.

SCULLY: You know her?

BONSAINT: Melissy Turner?

SCULLY: Mm-hmm.

BONSAINT: About as local as you can get. Born and raised here. Married a fisherman. Widowed last year after a boating accident. Don't know if the little girl, Polly ever really understood. Toys in the attic.

SCULLY: The daughter's autistic?

BONSAINT: That's what they say. There was the incident last year over at the daycare center? Proprietor slapped Polly across the face.

SCULLY: Slapped her? What for?

BONSAINT: Well, she said Polly threw a tantrum so fierce there was nothing else she could do. Next thing she knew, she's on the ground. Little girl knocked her silly.

SCULLY: The little girl did?

BONSAINT: Well, that's her story. Polly never touched her, far as I could figure. Oh, it was a real drama, though. The lady who ran the school lost her license. People calling the kid all manner of names

saying Melissa's a witch. Polly never went back to school a day since.

SCULLY: This ah, this affair that the mother was having with the butcher ...?

BONSAINT: Dave. Oh, I might have given you the wrong impression. That wasn't really an affair. Although Dave did make quite a fool of himself and his wife.

SCULLY: So, it was unrequited.

BONSAINT: You could say that.

SCULLY: To the extent that she'd have to nail her windows shut?

BONSAINT: Oh, he wasn't that big a fool. You know, maybe she wasn't afraid of something getting in. Maybe she's afraid of something getting out.

SCULLY: Like what?

BONSAINT: Just a thought.

SCENE 6 (Fast food restaurant. OFFICER BUDDY RIGGS sets a chocolate sundae in front of POLLY who is holding her doll.)

BUDDY: What do you think of that, huh?

(POLLY does not answer. She eats the cherry, then begins eating the sundae. OFFICER BRIGGS pats her on the head and goes to sit with MELISSA. They talk quietly.)

BUDDY: Why don't you leave town?

MELISSA: I've got nowhere to go, Buddy. I live on a shoestring as it is.

BUDDY: Listen to me. I've got some money put away.

MELISSA: Buddy, I can't!

BUDDY: I've had my eye on you, Melissa, for more years than I care to remember. You know, I missed my chance the first time around. I've been waiting in the wings. Now, I'm sorry about things, truly I am, but you need somebody who can provide.

MELISSA: Don't, Buddy, please!

BUDDY: "Don't" because you don't want to, or just because you're too proud?

MELISSA: You don't understand!

(They watch POLLY take her sundae up to the counter.)

BUDDY: What don't I understand?

MELISSA: What happened in the Super Saver, what happened to Dave ... I couldn't stop it.

BUDDY: What do you mean?

MELISSA: I've seen things.

(POLLY has gone up to the counter.)

POLLY: I want more cherries.

(WAITRESS with really long ponytail answers her.)

WAITRESS: What's that, sweetie?

POLLY: (not sweet) I want more cherries!

(MELISSA and OFFICER BRIGGS still talking at table.)

MELISSA: I saw Dave dead. Before he was dead. I saw him in frozen foods all cut and bloody and it's not the first time. My husband

... I saw him in a window dead before it happened. You know, with a hook?

(At counter)

POLLY: I want more cherries, now!

WAITRESS: You'll have to go ask your Mommy for some more money, hon. I just can't give them away.

WAITER: Window order.

(Doll's eyes open.)

DOLL: Let's have fun.

POLLY: Mommy, I want more cherries.

MELISSA: We got to go now, Polly.

OFFICER BRIGGS: (holding up a key) Take this, Melissa. It's a place we use for hunting up near Schoodic Lake ...

POLLY: Mommy!

OFFICER BRIGGS: ...or else there's going to be trouble. More than you need.

POLLY: Mommy! Mommy!

(WAITRESS' long hair gets caught in the milkshake mixing machine. She begins screaming as blood appears at her hairline. OFFICER BRIGGS rushes to help her. MELISSA and POLLY run out the door.)

SCENE 7 (JANE FROELICH'S house. JANE looks through door window.)

JANE: Is that you, Jack?

BONSAINT: Uh, yeah, it's me, Jane. Come in?

JANE: (opens door, hostile) Who've you got with you?

SCULLY: Miss Froelich, my name's Dana Scully. I'm with the FBI. I just happen to be here on vacation , and uh ...

JANE: So?

SCULLY: So, I just am helping out the chief here.

JANE: You talked to her?

SCULLY: Who?

JANE: Oh, please. Melissa Turner. That whore's a witch sure as I'm standing here. She's descended from the Hawthornes in Salem and the Englishes, too. She comes from a cursed lineage and now she's passing it on to the whelp. God save that little girl if somebody don't do something. Lord knows I tried.

BONSAINT: Jane, if we could just come in for a few minutes and talk.

JANE: I found out last year how much good talking to you does, Jack Bonsaint. I explained everything and the city closed me down anyway. Our great-great-grandfathers knew how to treat witches. They would have driven the demon out of that little girl and given that slattern of a mother just what she's got coming! (slams door)

SCULLY: New England hospitality. Heard about it my whole life. Finally got a chance to experience it for myself.

(JANE watches them walk to the car.)

BONSAINT: Well, you see what I'm up against here, public sentiment and all.

SCULLY: This family tree of Melissa Turner's...

BONSAINT: Ayuh..

SCULLY: It's all talk, isn't it?

BONSAINT: Oh, I never really asked. Why?

SCULLY: Well, I think you need to bring her in to straighten this out.

BONSAINT: Under what pretext?

SCULLY: That she might know something.

BONSAINT: About what?

SCULLY: Well, about what I'm sure is a perfectly reasonable explanation for all of this.

BONSAINT: Ayuh.

SCULLY: Well, I wish I could help you out. You know, I'm just ... on vacation.

(They get in car. SCULLY watches JANE standing in the window, watching them.)

SCENE 8 SHOODIC LAKE RANGER'S STATION 11:06 PM
(MELISSA drives up to the ranger's station. POLLY is asleep beside her. RANGER comes out to greet them.)

MELISSA: Hi.

RANGER: Where are you headed this time of night?

MELISSA: We were invited up to a place near the lake.

RANGER: Uh-huh.

MELISSA: A friend gave us the key.

RANGER: You got gear? Food and water?

MELISSA: We'll be all right.

RANGER: I just want to make sure of that, ma'am. Winter's in full force up there. Power's iffy. Just you and the little one?

MELISSA: For now.

POLLY: I want to go home, Mommy.

MELISSA: We're going to go camping, Polly.

POLLY: I want my bed! I want my records!

(Doll's eyes open.)

DOLL: Let's have fun.

RANGER: I'll just take your license number, then.

(RANGER walks around back. MELISSA looks at rear window and sees reflection of JANE FROELICH, throat slit.)

JANE'S IMAGE: Help me

(MELISSA accelerates quickly, forcing RANGER to jump out of the way, then she speeds back the way she came.)

SCENE 9 (JANE FROELICH'S house. Hokey Pokey is playing. JANE is dressed in bathrobe. She turns on light and starts down hall toward sound of the music.)

JANE: Hello?

(She enters living room.)

JANE: Who's there? Is there anyone there?

(Light switch doesn't work. 45s are spread around the floor next to an old record player. JANE raises plastic covering the record player and lifts needle off the record. Music stops. Shadow moves behind JANE.)

DOLL'S VOICE: I want to play.

(JANE drops needle and music starts again. JANE'S hand begins to shake. She bends down and picks up a broken record that she just stepped on. Hokey Pokey begins skipping - "That's what it's all about" over and over. JANE holds broken record in front of her.)

JANE: I'm not afraid of you.

(She tries to resist, but brings the broken record to her neck. Camera pans away just before she cuts herself. We hear her gurgle in pain. Hokey Pokey stops skipping and finishes the song.)

(Commercial 2.)

SCENE 10 (SCULLY'S hotel room. Classical music. SCULLY is in a bubble bath, very relaxed. Hotel phone rings. SCULLY opens one eye, sighs, then reaches a bubbly leg out of the tub to slam the bathroom door. Camera pans across room showing used room service tray and CD boom box playing the classical music. SCULLY comes out of the bathroom wearing a black velour lounging outfit and a towel around her head. She turns down the CD player. Beside the phone is a copy of Affirmations for Women Who Do Too Much. The message light on the phone is blinking. SCULLY sighs, probably thinking "Mulder," and ignores the flashing light. She goes to the window and flings open the curtain obviously expecting sunshine and escapism.. Outside, CAPTAIN JACK BONSAINT gets out of his patrol car and smiles and waves at her. SCULLY smiles tightly, then heads for the door with a resigned expression.)

SCENE 11 (Coroners wheel JANE'S body out of her house. BONSAINT and SCULLY drive up and enter the house.)

BONSAINT: Looks like she died by her own hand. A big slice under the chin opened up the artery.

SCULLY: With what?

BONSAINT: Buddy, show her the thing.

(A cell phone begins ringing.)

(OFFICER BUDDY RIGGS shows her a bloody broken record in an evidence bag.)

BONSAINT: (on phone) Jack Bonsaint.... Ayuh. ... Who? ... Oh, okay. Put him through. (to SCULLY) It's for you.

(SCULLY is surprised.)

SCULLY: (on phone) Hello?

MULDER: (on phone, voice) Hey, morning, sunshine.

(There is a repetitive banging sound from MULDER'S end. He speaks loudly to compensate.)

SCULLY: (on phone) Mulder?

MULDER: (on phone, voice) Yeah. I was a little worried about you. I was wondering if you needed my help up there.

SCULLY: (on phone) Needed your help on what?

MULDER: (on phone, voice) I left you a message at the motel. You didn't get it?

SCULLY: (on phone) I was up and out this morning. Mulder?

MULDER: (on phone, voice) Yeah?

SCULLY: (on phone) What's that noise? Where are you?

MULDER: (on phone) I'm at home. They're doing construction right out the window. Hold on a second. (to imaginary construction workers) Hey fellas! Can you just keep it down for a second, maybe? (He bounces his basketball twice more and tosses it away from him. It crashes into some piece of furniture. MULDER pauses then picks up phone again.) Thank you. (to SCULLY) Yeah, hey. I was - I was thinking about this case. You know, maybe it's not witchcraft after all. Maybe there's a scientific explanation.

SCULLY: (on phone) A scientific explanation? MULDER: (on phone) Yeah, a medical cause. Something called chorea.

SCULLY: (on phone) Dancing sickness.

MULDER: (on phone) Yeah, St. Vitus's dance.

(MULDER opens his refrigerator. It contains absolutely nothing besides a jug of orange juice.)

MULDER: (on phone) It affect groups of people causing unexplained outbursts of uncontrollable jerks and spasms.

(MULDER takes a swig of the juice straight from the bottle.)

SCULLY: (on phone) Yeah, and hasn't been diagnosed since the Middle Ages.

(MULDER makes a face at the taste of the juice and looks at the date on the bottle. OCT. 97)

MULDER: (on phone) Oh. (Spits juice back into bottle.) You're obviously not a fan of American Bandstand, Scully.

SCULLY: (on phone) Mulder?

MULDER: (on phone) Yeah?

SCULLY: (on phone) Thanks for the help. (Hangs up.)

MULDER: (on phone) Hello?

BONSAINT: That your partner?

SCULLY: Yep.

BONSAINT: I'm sorry for eavesdropping but has he maybe got some insight on this?

SCULLY: (definitive) No.

BONSAINT: I see.

(OFFICER RIGGS plays the record that was on the player - Hokey Pokey. Privately, RIGGS seems to remember it was playing in the background when he last spoke on the phone to MELISSA. He turns it off.)

SCULLY: You know, Chief Bonsaint - Jack - can I call you Jack? I've been thinking that maybe ... maybe we need to explore other possibilities.

BONSAINT: I'm not sure I understand.

SCULLY: Well, maybe we need to keep our minds open to ... extreme possibilities.

BONSAINT: Okay, but aren't you on vacation?

(SCULLY sort of nods, then looks away.)

SCENE 12 (Turner house. Hokey Pokey is playing. Polly is napping with the doll. As song ends, MELISSA enters and begins to take doll away from POLLY. Doll's eyes open.)

DOLL: Let's have fun.

(MELISSA backs away in horror. Record player starts over on its own. MELISSA goes back down stairs to kitchen and begins crying.)

She looks up and sees reflection of OFFICER BUDDY RIGGS in her kitchen window holding his bloody nightstick.)

BUDDY'S IMAGE: Melissa ... help me.

MELISSA: No!

SCENE 13 (Restaurant. SCULLY and BONSAINT at a table. Waitress places a very large lobster in front of them. BONSAINT sighs with pleasure.)

SCULLY: Oh, my god! That looks like something out of Jules Verne. We're supposed to eat that?

BONSAINT: (ripping off a piece) A little late for anything else. You said you had some other directions you were looking at?

SCULLY: I've been thinking about Melissa Turner. Now, you said that her husband died in a boating accident?

BONSAINT: (eating lobster with much cracking) Ayuh.

SCULLY: Well, was there anything strange about that? About the way that it happened?

BONSAINT: Well... it was never quite explained to anyone's satisfaction, actually.

SCULLY: How's that?

BONSAINT: (rips off more lobster) How the man got a grappling hook poked clean through his skull.

SCULLY: Was Melissa ever questioned about that?

BONSAINT: Melissa? No. I don't see how she'd be involved. The boat he died on is right over there if you're at all wondering.

(They look out window and see the OLD MAN on a small fishing boat, named "Working Girl".)

SCULLY: I saw that man at the market.

(Outside, OLD MAN throws a bucket of water over the side of the boat.)

SCENE 14 (Turner house. POLLY, holding her doll, puts a record on her record player.)

POLLY: I want popcorn, Mommy.

(MELISSA looks in the room as POLLY starts her record player. Hokey Pokey.)

MELISSA: Okay.

(MELISSA turns and is started to see OFFICER BUDDY RIGGS.)

BUDDY: What are you doing here?

MELISSA: Buddy!

BUDDY: How come you're back in town?

MELISSA: You've got to get out of here, Buddy.

BUDDY: You know, I called the rangers. They said you tried to kill a man. You almost ran him over. You came back to kill her, too, didn't you?

MELISSA: I didn't try to kill anybody.

BUDDY: Jane Froelich.

MELISSA: It isn't me, Buddy.

BUDDY: Well, we're going to see about that. You're coming in with me. You and your little brat.

(POLLY turns the doll to face BUDDY. Doll's eyes open.)

DOLL: I want to play.

SCENE 15 (Night. On the boat, SCULLY and BONSAINT interviewing the OLD MAN. OLD MAN still has scratches around his eyes.)

OLD MAN: What happened? You ask that question around here, you get as many stories as ... as fishermen.

SCULLY: You were on board the night that he died. What do you think?

OLD MAN: I told my story to the Chief.

SCULLY: People's stories change.

OLD MAN: Folks blame the widow.

SCULLY: Who do you blame?

OLD MAN: He was wild for her.

CUT TO: (Flashback, before the father died. As OLD MAN tells the story, FATHER pulls up a trap and finds the doll.)

OLD MAN: (voiceover) He worked very hard to build that little house for her and when that daughter came, you'd need a mop to wipe that smile off his face. We'd set out to sea on the girl's last birthday. He was counting the hours before he'd be home again.

FATHER: Hey, look what Davy Jones sent my little Polly. Catch of the day.

OLD MAN: Ayuh.

CUT TO: (Present.)

OLD MAN: Three days later, he was dead.

SCULLY: And you know what killed him.

OLD MAN: The eyes play tricks at night, water up against the hull making noises.

CUT TO: (Night FATHER died. FATHER is alone on deck.)

OLD MAN: (voiceover) Sometimes you hear things.

DOLL'S VOICE: Let's have fun.

FATHER: What the hell was that?

(FATHER picks up a long curved grappling hook. He opens cabin door, waking the OLD MAN.)

OLD MAN: What is it?

(FATHER doesn't answer, just goes back outside. OLD MAN hears the voice.)

DOLL'S VOICE: I want to play.

(OLD MAN gets up and goes outside. He sees the FATHER with the hook through his head.)

OLD MAN: Oh, my God.

CUT TO: (Present.)

OLD MAN: Like I said, the eyes play tricks.

SCULLY: But you saw something in that grocery store. That little girl and her dolly.

OLD MAN: Moment I saw them, I knew.

SCENE 16 (SCULLY and BONSAINT are getting back in the car.
SCULLY'S phone rings.)

SCULLY: (on phone) Scully.

MULDER: (on phone) Hey. I thought you weren't answering your cell phone.

(MULDER, tie undone, is sitting at a desk <SCULLY'S?!> which has an upside down map of Kentucky behind it. He is playing with the phone cord. Still bored.)

SCULLY: (on phone) Then why'd you call?

MULDER: (on phone) I, uh, I had a new thought about this case you're on. There's a viral infection that's spread by simple touch ...

SCULLY: (on phone) Mulder, are there any references in occult literature to objects that have the power to direct human behavior?

(BONSAINT gives SCULLY an odd look.)

MULDER: (on phone) What types of objects?

SCULLY: (on phone) Um, like a doll, for instance.

MULDER: (on phone) You mean like Chuckie?

SCULLY: (on phone) Yeah, kind of like that. (MULDER gets up and crosses to his desk)

MULDER: (on phone) Yeah, the talking doll myth is well established in literature, especially in New England. The-the fetish or Juju is believed to pass on magical powers onto its possessor. Some of the early witches were condemned for little more than proclaiming that these objects existed. The supposed witch having premonitory visions and things Why do you ask?

SCULLY: (on phone) I was just curious.

MULDER: (on phone) You didn't find a talking doll, did you, Scully?

SCULLY: (on phone) No, no. Of course not.

MULDER: (on phone) I would suggest that you check the back of the doll for a - a plastic ring with a string on it.

(SCULLY shakes her head and hangs up.)

MULDER: (on phone) That would be my first Hello?

SCULLY: Let's go talk to Melissa Turner.

SCENE 17 (Turner house. Sound of metal scraping.)

POLLY: (in her room, yelling) Where's my popcorn?!

(MELISSA is in the kitchen making popcorn on the stove. She is very upset.)

MELISSA: It's coming, Polly.

(Camera shows that OFFICER BUDDY RIGGS is dead. In his hand is his bloody nightstick.)

POLLY: Where's my popcorn?!

MELISSA: (crying) It's coming.

(Commercial 3.)

SCENE 18 (POLLY is in bed sleeping with the doll. MELISSA looks in the room, then goes to a cabinet and gets a hammer and a handful of nails. Later, MELISSA is frantically hammering nails into all the door frames and windows.)

POLLY: (calling from upstairs) Mommy ... I can't sleep.

MELISSA: You go back to bed, Polly. It's way past your bedtime.

POLLY: No more pounding.

MELISSA: Go back to bed, sweetheart.

(Doll's eyes pop open.)

DOLL: Let's have fun.

(MELISSA sees her own image in the window, a hammer stuck in her bloody forehead.)

MELISSA'S IMAGE: Help me ...

MELISSA: Everything's going to be all right, Sweetie. Just go back to bed.

(Outside, BONSAINT and SCULLY drive up. They see a car parked close by.)

BONSAINT: That's Buddy's car.

(Inside, MELISSA closes the door to POLLY'S bedroom. She puts the hammer back in the cabinet and padlocks it. Then she goes to the kitchen and tips a portable heater over, spilling kerosene on the floor next to the dead body of BUDDY RIGGS. She gets a box of matches then hears BONSAINT and SCULLY outside knocking.)

BONSAINT: Melissa!

(SCULLY looks in a window.)

BONSAINT: You see anything?

SCULLY: Unh-uh.

BONSAINT: (knocking) Melissa.

(Inside, Melissa tries to strike a match. She is shaking. Finally, the third match lights)

BONSAINT: (outside) Melissa!

POLLY: (watching MELISSA, frightened) Mommy?!

(Doll's eyes open. Match goes out.)

DOLL: Don't play with matches.

MELISSA: (crying, and trying to strike another match) You go back to bed, Polly!

(MELISSA strikes more matches. They each get blown out.)

BONSAINT: (outside knocking) Melissa?!

MELISSA: Go on now.

(Outside, SCULLY sees the nails holding the door closed. As BONSAINT continues to knock on the door, SCULLY looks in the window again and sees MELISSA striking matches. SCULLY begins knocking on the window.)

SCULLY: Melissa? Melissa? Bonsaint!

(MELISSA gives up on the matches and begins trying to open drawers. They snap back closed.)

DOLL: Don't play with knives.

POLLY: Mommy!

SCULLY: (outside) She's got the door nailed shut. She's trying to kill herself.

(BONSAINT begins breaking down the door. SCULLY keeps knocking on the window.)

SCULLY: Melissa! Melissa!

POLLY: Mommy! Mommy, no more pounding!

(Hardware cabinet bursts open on its own.)

DOLL: Let's play with the hammer.

(SCULLY and BONSAINT take turns hitting the door.)

SCULLY: Melissa!

(Door finally crashes open. BONSAINT and SCULLY enter. MELISSA is holding the hammer in front of her face.)

MELISSA: Get away from me!

SCULLY: Put it down, Melissa.

DOLL: I don't like you anymore.

(MELISSA hits herself on the forehead with the hammer.)

SCULLY: (kneels next to POLLY.) Give me the doll, Polly.

DOLL: I want to play.

(POLLY shakes her head and holds onto the doll. MELISSA hits herself again. Her head is now bloody.)

SCULLY: Polly, give me the doll.

DOLL: I want to play.

(MELISSA hits herself again. POLLY watches in horror. SCULLY takes the doll which keeps repeating "I want to play." She takes it down to the kitchen and stuffs the doll into the microwave and turns it on. Doll catches fire. Must be one of those oxygenated

microwaves. POLLY walks over to MELISSA who is bloody and crying. SCULLY and BONSAINT watch the doll burn.)

SCENE 19 (X-Files office. Mulder finishes sharpening a pencil in an electric sharpener, and delicately blows the dust off the tip. He places it on the desk and carefully lines it up with about 20 more sharpened pencils. Door opens and SCULLY enters.)

MULDER: Oh, hey, Scully. How you doing? (Laces his fingers together smoothly to hide the row of pencils.) How are you feeling? Rested?

SCULLY: I feel fine.

(SCULLY is focused on the I Want to Believe Poster behind MULDER.)

MULDER: What?

SCULLY: That poster ... Where'd you get it?

MULDER: Oh, I got it down on "M" Street at some head shop about five years ago.

SCULLY: Hmm.

MULDER: Why?

SCULLY: No. I just ... wanted to send one to somebody.

MULDER: You do?

SCULLY: Mm-hmm.

MULDER: Who?

(As SCULLY passes him, MULDER opens his desk drawer and coughs to cover the sound of the pencils being pushed into the drawer and the drawer being closed.)

MULDER: Who?

SCULLY: Oh, just ... some guy. (pause) Jack. "M" Street?

MULDER: Yeah. Hey, does this have something to do with that case you were working on?

SCULLY: What case? Uh, yeah. Yes it does.

MULDER: Did you solve it?

SCULLY: Me? No. No. I was, uh, I was on vacation. Just ... getting out of my own head for a few days. What about you? Did you, uh, did you get anything done while I was gone?

MULDER: Oh, God. It's amazing what I can accomplish without incessant meddling or questioning into everything I do. It's just ...

(MULDER is interrupted by a pencil dropping down on him. He looks up and another falls on him. SCULLY slowly raises her eyes to the ceiling. About thirty pencils are stuck into the ceiling tiles above MULDER'S desk.)

MULDER: (embarrassed, but charming) There's ... got to be an explanation.

SCULLY: Oh, I don't know. I think some things are better left unexplained.

(Another pencil falls and hits MULDER on the top of the head. He looks innocently at SCULLY. She looks at him with exasperation.)

SCENE 20 (Night. Fishing boat in Maine. Fisherman pulls a lobster out of a trap.)

FISHERMAN: Ah.

(He pulls the burned doll out of the trap. Doll's eyes open.)

DOLL: I want to play.

The End US Airdate: February 8, 1998

writers: Stephen King and Chris Carter director: Kim Manners

STARRING: David Duchovny as Special Agent Fox Mulder

Gillian Anderson as Special Agent Dana Scully

Guest Cast: Susannah Hoffman as Melissa Turner

Jenny Lynn Hutcheson as Polly Turner

Carolyn Tweedle as Jane Froelich

Gordon Tipple as Assistant Manager

Harrison R. Coe as Dave the Butcher

Larry Musser as Jack Bonsaint

William MacDonald as Buddy Riggs

Dean Wray as Rich Turner

CONE HEAD

Stephen King

In the spring of 1970, when I was twenty-two, I was arrested by the Orono, Maine, police. After a traffic stop, I'd been discovered in possession of some three dozen rubber traffic cones. After a hard night of drinking Long Island Iced Tea at the University Motor Inn, I had struck one of these traffic cones while driving home. It bounced up under the car and tore off the muffler of my ancient Ford station wagon. I had noticed earlier that the town of Orono had been painting crosswalks that day, and now realized they'd left their damn traffic cones all over the place. With a drunk's logic, I decided to cruise around town—slowly, safely, sanely—and pick up all the cones. Every single one. The following day, I would present them, along with my dead muffler, at the Town Office in a display of righteous anger.

The Orono police, who already had reasons to dislike me (I was a notorious anti-Vietnam War “hippie”), were delighted with their catch. The arresting officer found enough cones in the back of my station wagon to elevate the bust into the category of larceny. Only I knew that I'd actually been caught on my second cone run. Had I been caught with the hundred or so already stashed in my apartment building, perhaps we would have been talking grand larceny.

Months passed. I graduated from the University of Maine. With a potential larceny conviction hanging over my head, I looked for a teaching job. But jobs were scarce, and what I got instead was a gig pumping go-juice near the town of Brewer. My boss was a woman. I don't remember her name, but we'll call her Ellen. Ellen didn't know I had a trial for larceny in my future. For the minimum wage she was paying me (I think it was a dollar-sixty an hour), I didn't feel she was entitled to know.

There was a price war going on at the time, and we at Interstate 95 Gas were selling regular at twenty-nine cents a gallon. But wait, folks, there's more. With a fill-up, you got your choice of the Glass (an ugly but durable diner-style water tumbler) or the Bread (an extra-long loaf of spongy white). If we forgot to ask if we could check your oil, you got your fill-up free. If we forgot to say thank you, same

deal. And guess who would have to pay for the free fill-up? That's right, the forgetful pump jockey, who, in my case, was half past broke already; dinner in those days often consisted of Cheerios fried in lard with a cigarette chaser.

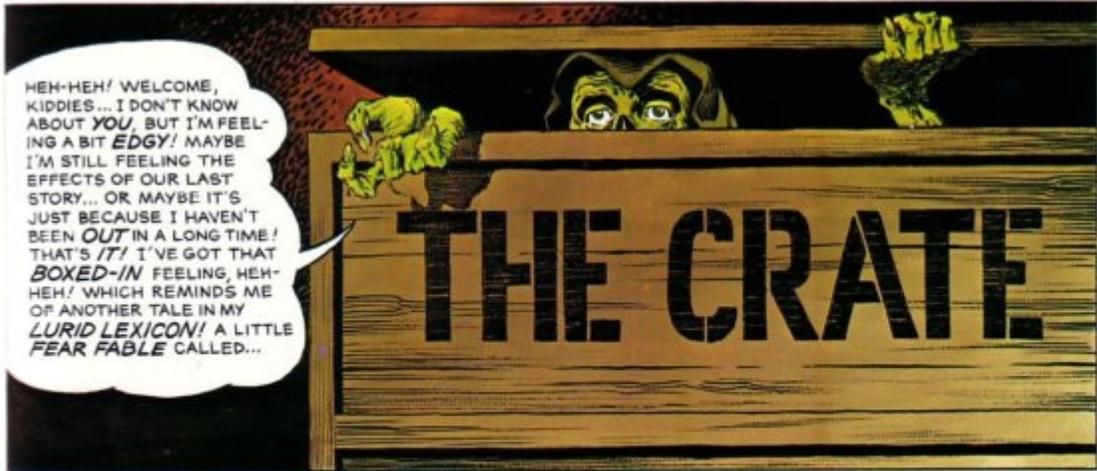
I had by then met Tabitha Spruce, of Old Town, and asked her to marry me. She had agreed, contingent upon my finding a slightly better job than pumping off-brand gasoline. I could understand that. Who wants to marry a guy whose largest responsibility is asking customers whether they prefer the Glass or the Bread?

Comes August of 1970, and my trial for cone theft. I tell Ellen I won't be able to make it to work that afternoon because a relative of my fiancée has died ("fiancée" sounds so much more responsible than "girlfriend") and I have to take her to the funeral. Ellen appears to buy this. And indeed there is a funeral of sorts, but it turns out to be mine. I serve as my own lawyer in Bangor District Court, but have a fool for a client. I am found guilty. Yet it could be worse; I am fined only a hundred dollars. I could have been put in the county jail for six months. Furthermore, I've just sold a horror story, "The Float," to a girlie mag called Adam. The check comes just in time to pay my fine.

The following day, when I arrive at work, Ellen is smiling a smile that tells me the elevator of bad fortune has not quite finished descending. She tells me she wasn't aware that funerals were held in Bangor District Court. It turns out that a relative of Ellen's—a cousin, nephew, something like that—was next on the docket following the disposition of my case. In one of those fantastic pranks of bad luck that seem to occur only when you're on a complete roll, this miscreant, who knew me by sight from the gas station, had mentioned seeing me.

And that is how I found myself unemployed and with a criminal record a month shy of my twenty-third birthday. I began wondering if I was going to turn out to be a Really Bad Person. Being a Really Bad Person is a shitty job, but somebody has to do it, I reasoned. Perhaps stealing traffic cones was only my first step downward. I think that was the summer I realized that we are really not all stars of

our own show, and that happy endings—even happy middles, for God’s sake—are absolutely in doubt.



HEH-HEH! WELCOME, KIDDIES... I DON'T KNOW ABOUT YOU, BUT I'M FEELING A BIT **EDGY!** MAYBE I'M STILL FEELING THE EFFECTS OF OUR LAST STORY... OR MAYBE IT'S JUST BECAUSE I HAVEN'T BEEN **OUT** IN A LONG TIME! THAT'S **IT!** I'VE GOT THAT **BOXED-IN** FEELING, HEH-HEH! WHICH REMINDS ME OF ANOTHER TALE IN MY **LURID LEXICON!** A LITTLE **FEAR FABLE** CALLED...

THE CRATE

OUR STORY OPENS IN THE BASEMENT OF **AMBERSON HALL**, THE SCIENCE BUILDING ON THE CAMPUS OF **HORLICKS UNIVERSITY**...

...IT BEGINS WITH A WHIM OF **FATE**... A TOSS OF THE **COIN**, AS IT WERE, HEH-HEH!

BUT IT'S NOT A CASE OF HEADS OR TAILS, KIDDIES... OH, NO...



THE CRATE

Stephen King

Dexter Stanley was scared. More; he felt as if that central axle that binds us to the state we call sanity were under a greater strain than it had ever been under before. As he pulled up beside Henry Northrup's house on North Campus Avenue that August night, he felt that if he didn't talk to someone, he really, would go crazy.

There was no one to talk to but Henry Northrup. Dex Stanley was the head of the zoology department, and once might have been university president if he had been better at academic politics. His wife had died twenty years before, and they had been childless. What remained of his own family was all west of the Rockies. He was not good at making friends.

Northrup was an exception to that. In some ways, they were two of a kind; both had been disappointed in the mostly meaningless, but always vicious, game of university politics. Three years before, Northrup had made his run at the vacant English department chairmanship. He had lost, and one of the reasons had undoubtedly been his wife, Wilma, an abrasive and unpleasant woman. At the few cocktail parties Dex had attended where English people and zoology people could logically mix, it seemed he could always recall the harsh mule-bray of her voice, telling some new faculty wife to "call me Billie, dear everyone does!"

Dex made his way across the lawn to Northrup's door at a stumbling run. It was Thursday, and Northrup's unpleasant spouse took two classes on Thursday nights. Consequently, it was Dex and Henry's chess night. The two men had been playing chess together for the last eight years.

Dex rang the bell beside the door of his friend's house; leaned on it. The door opened at last and Northrup was there.

"Dex," he said. I didn't expect you for another—"

Dex pushed in past him. "Wilma," he said. "Is she here?"

“No, she left fifteen minutes ago. I was just making myself some chow. Dex, you look awful.”

They had walked under the hall light, and it illuminated the cheesy pallor of Dex’s face and seemed to outline wrinkles as deep and dark as fissures in the earth. Dex was sixty-one, but on the hot August night, he looked more like ninety.

“I ought to.” Dex wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. “Well, what is it?”

“I’m afraid I’m going crazy, Henry. Or that I’ve already gone.”

“You want something to eat? Wilma left cold ham.”

“I’d rather have a drink. A big one.”

“All right.”

“Two men dead, Henry,” Dex said abruptly. “And I could be blamed. Yes, I can see how I could be blamed. But it wasn’t me. It was the crate. And I don’t even know what’s in there!” He uttered a wild laugh.

“Dead?” Northrup said. “What is this, Dex?”

“A janitor. I don’t know his name. And Gereson. A graduate student. He just happened to be there. In the way of... whatever it was.”

Henry studied Dex’s face for a long moment and then said, “I’ll get us both a drink.”

He left. Dex wandered into the living room, past the low table where the chess table had already been set up, and stared out the graceful bow window. That thing in his mind, that axle or whatever it was, did not feel so much in danger of snapping now. Thank God for Henry.

Northrup came back with two pony glasses choked with ice. Ice from the fridge’s automatic icemaker, Stanley thought randomly. Wilma

“just call me Billie, everyone does” Northrup insisted on all the modern conveniences... and when Wilma insisted on a thing, she did so savagely.

Northrup filled both glasses with Cutty Sark. He handed one of them to Stanley, who slopped Scotch over his fingers, stinging a small cut he'd gotten in the lab a couple of days before. He hadn't realized until then that his hands were shaking. He emptied half the glass and the Scotch boomed in his stomach, first hot, then spreading a steadying warmth.

“Sit down, man,” Northrup said.

Dex sat, and drank again. Now it was a lot better. He looked at Northrup, who was looking levelly back over the rim of his own glass. Dex looked away, out at the bloody orb of moon sitting over the rim of the horizon, over the university, which was supposed to be the seat of rationality, the forebrain of the body politic. How did that jibe with the matter of the crate? With the screams? With the blood?

“Men are dead?” Northrup said at last.

“Are you sure they're dead?”

“Yes. The bodies are gone now. At least, I think they are. Even the bones... the teeth... but the blood... the blood, you know...”

“No, I don't know anything. You've got to start at the beginning.” Stanley took another drink and set his glass down. “Of course I do,” he said. “Yes. It begins just where it ends. With the crate. The janitor found the crate...”

Dexter Stanley had come into Amberson Hall, sometimes called the Old Zoology Building, that afternoon at three o'clock. It was a blaringly hot day, and the campus looked listless and dead, in spite of the twirling sprinklers in front of the fraternity houses and the Old Front dorms.

The Old Front went back to the turn of the century, but Amberson Hall was much older than that. It was one of the oldest buildings on a university campus that had celebrated its tricentennial two years previous. It was a tall brick building, shackled with ivy that seemed to spring out of the earth like green, clutching hands. Its narrow windows were more like gun slits than real windows, and Amberson seemed to frown at the newer buildings with their glass walls and curvy, unorthodox shapes.

The new zoology building, Cather Hall, had been completed eight months before, and the process of transition would probably go on for another eighteen months. No one was completely sure what would happen to Amberson then. If the bond issue to build the new gym found favor with the voters, it would probably be demolished.

He paused a moment to watch two young men throwing a Frisbee back and forth. A dog ran back and forth between them, glumly chasing the spinning disc. Abruptly the mutt gave up and flopped in the shade of a poplar. A VW with a NO NUKES sticker on the back deck trundled slowly past, heading for the Upper Circle. Nothing else moved. A week before, the final summer session had ended and the campus lay still and fallow, dead ore on summer's anvil.

Dex had a number of files to pick up, part of the seemingly endless process of moving from Amberson to Cather. The old building seemed spectrally empty. His footfalls echoed back dreamily as he walked past closed doors with frosted glass panels, past bulletin boards with their yellowing notices and toward his office at the end of the first-floor corridor. The cloying smell of fresh paint hung in the air.

He was almost to his door, and jingling his keys in his pocket, when the janitor popped out of Room 6, the big lecture hall, startling him.

He grunted, then smiled a little shamefacedly, the way people will when they've gotten a mild zap. "You got me that time," he told the janitor.

The janitor smiled and twiddled the gigantic key ring clipped to his belt. “Sorry, Perfesser Stanley,” he said. “I was hopin’ it was you. Charlie said you’d be in this afternoon.”

“Charlie Gereson is still here?” Dex frowned. Gereson was a grad student who was doing an involved—and possibly very important—paper on negative environmental factors in long-term animal migration. It was a subject that could have a strong impact on area farming practices and pest control. But Gereson was pulling almost fifty hours a week in the gigantic (and antiquated) basement lab. The new lab complex in Cather would have been exponentially better suited to his purposes, but the new labs would not be fully equipped for another two to four months... if then.

“Think he went over the Union for a burger,” the janitor said. “I told him myself to quit a while and go get something to eat. He’s been here since nine this morning. Told him myself. Said he ought to get some food. A man don’t live on love alone.”

The janitor smiled, a little tentatively, and Dex smiled back. The janitor was right; Gereson was embarked upon a labor of love. Dex had seen too many squadrons of students just grunting along and making grades not to appreciate that... and not to worry about Charlie Gereson’s health and well-being from time to time.

“I would have told him, if he hadn’t been so busy,” the janitor said, and offered his tentative little smile again. “Also, I kinda wanted to show you myself.”

“What’s that?” Dex asked. He felt a little impatient. It was chess night with Henry; he wanted to get this taken care of and still have time for a leisurely meal at the Hancock House.

“Well, maybe it’s nothin,” the janitor said. “But... well, this buildin is some old, and we keep turnin things up, don’t we?”

Dex knew. It was like moving out of a house that has been lived in for generations. Halley, the bright young assistant professor who had

been here for three years now, had found half a dozen antique clips with small brass balls on the ends. She'd had no idea what the clips, which looked a little bit like spring-loaded wishbones, could be. Dex had been able to tell her. Not so many years after the Civil War, those clips had been used to hold the heads of white mice, who were then operated on without anesthetic. Young Halley, with her Berkeley education and her bright spill of Farrah Fawcett-Majors golden hair, had looked quite revolted. "No anti-vivisectionists in those days," Dex had told her jovially. "At least not around here." And Halley had responded with a blank look that probably disguised disgust or maybe even loathing. Dex had put his foot in it again. He had a positive talent for that, it seemed.

They had found sixty boxes of *The American Zoologist* in a crawlspace, and the attic had been a maze of old equipment and mouldering reports. Some of the impedimenta no one—not even Dexter Stanley—could identify.

In the closet of the old animal pens at the back of the building, Professor Viney had found a complicated gerbil-run with exquisite glass panels. It had been accepted for display at the Museum of Natural Science in Washington.

But the finds had been tapering off this summer, and Dex thought Amberson Hall had given up the last of its secrets. "What have you found?" he asked the janitor.

"A crate. I found it tucked right under the basement stairs. I didn't open it. It's been nailed shut, anyway."

Stanly couldn't believe that anything very interesting could have escaped notice for long, just by being tucked under the stairs. Tens of thousands of people went up and down them every week during the academic year. Most likely the janitor's crate was full of department records dating back twenty-five years. Or even more prosaic, a box of National Geographics.

"I hardly think—"

“It’s a real crate,” the janitor broke in earnestly. “I mean, my father was a carpenter, and this crate is built tile way he was buildin ‘em back in the twenties. And he learned from his father.”

“I really doubt if—”

“Also, it’s got about four inches of dust on it. I wiped some off and there’s a date. Eighteen thirty-four.”

That changed things. Stanley looked at his watch and decided he could spare half all hour.

In spite of the humid August heat outside, the smooth tile-faced throat of the stairway was almost cold. Above them, yellow frosted globes cast a dim and thoughtful light. The stair levels had once been red, but in the centers they shaded to a dead black where the feet of years had worn away layer after layer of resurfacing. The silence was smooth and nearly perfect.

The janitor reached the bottom first and pointed under the staircase. “Under here,” he said.

Dex joined him in staring into a shadowy, triangular cavity under the wide staircase. He felt a small tremor of disgust as he saw where the janitor had brushed away a gossamer veil of cobwebs. He supposed it was possible that the man had found something a little older than postwar records under there, now that he acutally looked at the space. But 1834?

“Just a second,” the janitor said, and left momentarily. Left alone, Dex hunkered down and peered in. He could make out nothing but a deeper patch of shadow in there. Then the janitor returned with a hefty four-cell flashlight. “This’ll show it up.”

“What were you doing under there anyway?” Dex asked.

The janitor grinned. “I was only standin here tryin to decide if I should buff that second-floor hallway first or wash the lab windows. I

couldn't make up my mind, so I flipped a quarter. Only I dropped it and it rolled under there." He pointed to the shadowy, triangular cave. "I prob'ly would have let it go, except that was my only quarter for the Coke machine. So I got my flash and knocked down the cobwebs, and when I crawled under to get it, I saw that crate. Here, have a look."

The janitor shone his light into the hole. Motes of disturbed dust preened and swayed lazily in the beam. The light struck the far wall in a spotlight circle, rose to the zigzag undersides of the stairs briefly, picking out an ancient cobweb in which long-dead bugs hung mumified, and then the light dropped and centered on a crate about five feet long and two-and-a-half wide. It was perhaps three feet deep. As the janitor had said, it was no knocked-together affair made out of scrap-boards. It was neatly constructed of a smooth, dark heavy wood. A coffin, Dexter thought uneasily. It looks like a child's coffin.

The dark color of the wood showed only a fan-shaped swipe on the side. The rest of the crate was the uniform dull gray of dust. Something was written on the side-stenciled there.

Dex squinted but couldn't read it. He fumbled his glasses out of his breast pocket and still couldn't. Part of what had been stenciled on was obscured by the dust—not four inches of it, by any means, but an extraordinarily thick coating, all the same.

Not wanting to crawl and dirty his pants, Dex duck-walked under the stairway, stifling a sudden and amazingly strong feeling of claustrophobia. The spit dried in his mouth and was replaced by a dry, woolly taste, like an old mitten. He thought of the generations of students trooping up and down these stairs, all male until 1888, then in coeducational platoons, carrying their books and papers and anatomical drawings, their bright faces and clear eyes, each of them convinced that a useful and exciting future lay ahead ... and here, below their feet, the spider spun his eternal snare for the fly and the trundling beetle, and here this crate sat impassively, gathering dust, waiting...

A tendril of spidersilk brushed across his forehead and he swept it away with a small cry of loathing and an uncharacteristic inner cringe.

“Not very nice under there, is it?” the janitor asked sympathetically, holding his light centered on the crate. “God, I hate tight places.”

Dex didn't reply. He had reached the crate. He looked at the letters that were stenciled there and then brushed the dust away from them. It rose in a cloud, intensifying that mitten taste, making him cough dryly. The dust hung in the beam of the janitor's light like old magic, and Dex Stanley read what some long-dead chief of lading had stenciled on this crate.

SHIP TO HORLICKS UNIVERSITY, the top line read. VIA JULIA CARPENTER, read the middle line. The third line read simply: ARCTIC EXPEDITION.

Below that, someone had written in heavy black charcoal strokes: JUNE 19, 1834. That was the one line the janitor's hand-swipe had completely cleared.

ARCTIC EXPEDITION, Dex read again. His heart began to thump. “So what do you think?” the janitor's voice floated in.

Dex grabbed one end and lifted it. Heavy. As he let it settle back with a mild thud, something shifted inside—he did not hear it but felt it through the palms of his hands, as if whatever it was had moved of its own volition. Stupid, of course. It had been an almost liquid feel, as if something not quite jelled had moved sluggishly.

ARCTIC EXPEDITION.

Dex felt the excitement of an antiques collector happening upon a neglected armoire with a twenty-five dollar price tag in the back room of some hick-town junk shop ... an armoire that just might be a Chippendale. “Help me get it out,” he called to the janitor.

Working bent over to keep from slamming their heads on the underside of the stairway, sliding the crate along, they got it out and then picked it up by the bottom. Dex had gotten his pants dirty after all, and there were cobwebs in his hair.

As they carried it into the old-fashioned, train-terminal-sized lab, Dex felt that sensation of shift inside the crate again, and he could see by the expression on the janitor's face that he had felt it as well. They set it on one of the formica-topped lab tables. The next one over was littered with Charlie Gerson's stuff—notebooks, graph paper, contour maps, a Texas Instruments calculator.

The janitor stood back, wiping his hands on his double-pocket gray shirt, breathing hard. "Some heavy mother," he said. "That bastard must weigh two hunnert pounds. You okay, Perfesser Stanley?"

Dex barely heard him. He was looking at the end of the box, where there was yet another series of stencils: PAELLA/SANTIAGO/SAN FRANCISCO/CHICAGO/NEW YORK/HORLICKS

"Perfesser—"

"Paella," Dex muttered, and then said it again, slightly louder. He was seized with an unbelieving kind of excitement that was held in check only by the thought that it might be some sort of hoax.

"Paella!"

"Paella, Dex?" Henry Northrup asked. The moon had risen in the sky, turning silver.

"Paella is a very small island south of Tierra del Fuego," Dex said. "Perhaps the smallest island ever inhabited by the race of man. A number of Easter Island-type monoliths were found there just after World War II. Not very interesting compared to their bigger brothers, but every bit as mysterious. The natives of Paella and Tierra del Fuego were Stone-Age people. Christian missionaries killed them with kindness."

“I beg your pardon?”

“It’s extremely cold down there. Summer temperatures rarely range above the mid-forties. The missionaries gave them blankets, partly so they would be warm, mostly to cover their sinful nakedness. The blankets were crawling with fleas, and the natives of both islands were wiped out by European diseases for which they had developed no immunities. Mostly by smallpox.”

Dex drank. The Scotch had lent his cheeks some color, but it was hectic and flaring—double spots of flush that sat above his cheekbones like rouge.

“But Tierra del Fuego—and this Paella—that’s not the Arctic, Dex. It’s the Antarctic.”

“It wasn’t in 1834,” Dex said, setting his glass down, careful in spite of his distraction to put it on the coaster Henry had provided. If Wilma found a ring on one of her end tables, his friend would have hell to pay. “The terms subarctic, Antarctic and Antarctica weren’t invented yet. In those days there was only the north arctic and the south arctic.”

“Okay.”

“Hell, I made the same kind of mistake. I couldn’t figure out why Frisco was on the itinerary as a port of call. Then I realized I was figuring on the Panama Canal, which wasn’t built for another eighty years or so.

“An Arctic expedition? In 1834?” Henry asked doubtfully.

“I haven’t had a chance to check the records yet,” Dex said, picking up his drink again. “But I know from my history that there were ‘Arctic expeditions’ as early as Francis Drake. None of them made it, that was all. They were convinced they’d find gold, silver, jewels, lost civilizations, God knows what else. The Smithsonian Institution outfitted an attempted exploration of the North Pole in, I think it was

1881 or '82. They all died. A bunch of men from the Explorers' Club in London tried for the South Pole in the 1850's. Their ship was sunk by icebergs, but three or four of them survived. They stayed alive by sucking dew out of their clothes and eating the kelp that caught on their boat, until they were picked up. They lost their teeth. And they claimed to have seen sea monsters."

"What happened, Dex?" Henry asked softly.

Stanley looked up. "We opened the crate," he said dully. "God help us, Henry, we opened the crate."

He paused for a long time, it seemed, before beginning to speak again.

"Paella?" the janitor asked. "What's that?"

"An island off the tip of South America," Dex said. "Never mind. Let's get this open." He opened one of the lab drawers and began to rummage through it, looking for something to pry with."

"Never mind that stuff," the janitor said. He looked excited himself now. "I got a hammer and chisel in my closet upstairs. I'll get 'em. Just hang on."

He left. The crate sat on the table's formica top, squat and mute. It sits squat and mute, Dex thought, and shivered a little. Where had that thought come from? Some story? The words had a cadenced yet unpleasant sound. He dismissed them. He was good at dismissing the extraneous. He was a scientist.

He looked around the lab just to get his eyes off the crate. Except for Charlie's table, it was unnaturally neat and quiet—like the rest of the university. White-tiled, subway-station walls gleamed freshly under the overhead globes; the globes themselves seemed to be double—caught and submerged in the polished formica surfaces, like eerie lamps shining from deep quarry water. A huge, old-fashioned slate blackboard dominated the wall opposite the sinks. And cupboards,

cupboards everywhere. It was easy enough—too easy, perhaps—to see the antique, sepia-toned ghosts of all those old zoology students, wearing their white coats with the green cuffs, their hairs marcelled or pomaded, doing their dissections and writing their reports...

Footfalls clattered on the stairs and Dex shivered, thinking again of the crate sitting there—yes, squat and mute—under the stairs for so many years, long after the men who had pushed it under there had died and gone back to dust.

Paella, he thought, and then the janitor came back in with a hammer and chisel.

“Let me do this for you, perfesser?” he asked, and Dex was about to refuse when he saw the pleading, hopeful look in the man’s eyes.

“Of course,” he said. After all, it was this man’s find.

“Prob’ly nothin in here but a bunch of rocks and plants so old they’ll turn to dust when you touch ‘em. But it’s funny; I’m pretty hot for it.”

Dex smiled noncommittally. He had no idea what was in the crate, but he doubted if it was just plant and rock specimens. There was that slightly liquid shifting sensation when they had moved it.

“Here goes,” the janitor said, and began to pound the chisel under the board with swift blows of the hammer. The board hiked up a bit, revealing a double row of nails that reminded Dex absurdly of teeth. The janitor levered the handle of his chisel down and the board pulled loose, the nails shrieking out of the wood. He did the same thing at the other end, and the board came free, clattering to the floor. Dex set it aside, noticing that even the nails looked different, somehow—thicker, squarer at the tip, and without that blue-steel sheen that is the mark of a sophisticated alloying process.

The janitor was peering into the crate through the long, narrow strip he had uncovered. “Can’t see nothin,” he said. “Where’d I leave my

light?”

“Never mind,” Dex said. “Go on and open it.”

“Okay.” He took off a second board, then a third. Six or seven had been nailed across the top of the box. He began on the fourth, reaching across the space he had already uncovered to place his chisel under the board, when the crate began to whistle.

It was a sound very much like the sound a teakettle makes when it has reached a rolling boil, Dex told Henry Northrup; no cheerful whistle this, but something like an ugly, hysterical shriek by a tantrumy child. And this suddenly dropped and thickened into a low, hoarse growling sound. It was not loud, but it had a primitive, savage sound that stood Dex Stanley’s hair up on the slant. The janitor stared around at him, his eyes widening... and then his arm was seized. Dex did not see what grabbed it; his eyes had gone instinctively to the man’s face.

The janitor screamed, and the sound drove a stiletto of panic into Dex’s chest. The thought that came unbidden was: This is the first time in my life that I’ve heard a grown man scream—what a sheltered life I’ve led!

The janitor, a fairly big guy who weighed maybe two hundred pounds, was suddenly yanked powerfully to one side. Toward the crate. “Help me!” He screamed. “Oh help doc it’s got me it’s biting me it’s biting meeeee—”

Dex told himself to run forward and grab the janitor’s free arm, but his feet might as well have been bonded to the floor. The janitor had been pulled into the crate up to his shoulder. That crazed snarling went on and on. The crate slid backwards along the table for a foot or so and then came firmly to rest against a bolted instrument mount. It began to rock back and forth. The janitor screamed and gave a tremendous lunge away from the crate. The end of the box came up off the table and then smacked back down. Part of his arm came out of the crate, and Dex saw to his horror that the gray sleeve of his

shirt was chewed and tattered and soaked with blood. Smiling crescent bites were punched into what he could see of the man's skin through the shredded flaps of cloth.

Then something that must have been incredibly strong yanked him back down. The thing in the crate began to snarl and gobble. Every now and then there would be a breathless whistling sound in between.

At last Dex broke free of his paralysis and lunged creakily forward. He grabbed the janitor's free arm. He yanked ... with no result at all. It was like trying to pull a man who has been handcuffed to the bumper of a trailer truck.

The janitor screamed again—a long, ululating sound that rolled back and forth between the lab's sparkling, white-tiled walls. Dex could see the gold glimmer of the fillings at the back of the man's mouth. He could see the yellow ghost of nicotine on his tongue.

The janitor's head slammed down against the edge of the board he had been about to remove when the thing had grabbed him. And this time Dex did see something, although it happened with such mortal, savage speed that later he was unable to describe it adequately to Henry. Something as dry and brown and scaly as a desert reptile came out of the crate—something with huge claws. It tore at the janitor's straining, knotted throat and severed his jugular vein. Blood began to pump across the table, pooling on the formica and jetting onto the white-tiled floor. For a moment, a mist of blood seemed to hang in the air.

Dex dropped the janitor's arm and blundered backward, hands clapped flat to his cheeks, eyes bulging.

The janitor's eyes rolled wildly at the ceiling. His mouth dropped open and then snapped closed. The click of his teeth was audible even below that hungry growling. His feet, clad in heavy black work shoes, did a short and jittery tap dance on the floor.

Then he seemed to lose interest. His eyes grew almost benign as they looked raptly at the overhead light globe, which was also blood-spattered. His feet splayed out in a loose V. His shirt pulled out of his pants, displaying his white and bulging belly.

“He’s dead,” Dex whispered. “Oh, Jesus.”

The pump of the janitor’s heart faltered and lost its rhythm. Now the blood that flowed from the deep, irregular gash in his neck lost its urgency and merely flowed down at the command of indifferent gravity. The crate was stained and splashed with blood. The snarling seemed to go on endlessly. The crate rocked back and forth a bit, but it was too well-braced against the instrument mount to go very far. The body of the janitor lolled grotesquely, still grasped firmly by whatever was in there. The small of his back was pressed against the lip of the lab table. His free hand dangled, sparse hair curling on the fingers between the first and second knuckles. His big key ring glimmered chrome in the light.

And now his body began to rock slowly this way and that. His shoes dragged back and forth, not tap dancing now but waltzing obscenely. And then they did not drag. They dangled an inch off the floor... then two inches..., then half a foot above the floor. Dex realized that the janitor was being dragged into the crate.

Tile nape of his neck came to rest against the board fronting the far side of the hole in the top of the crate. He looked like a man resting in some weird Zen position of contemplation. His dead eyes sparkled. And Dex heard, below the savage growling noises, a smacking, rending sound. And the crunch of a bone.

Dex ran.

He blundered his way across the lab and out the door and up the stairs. Halfway up, he fell down, clawed at the risers, got to his feet, and ran again. He gained the first floor hallway and sprinted down it, past the closed doors with their frosted-glass panels, past the

bulletin boards. He was chased by his own footfalls. In his ears he could hear that damned whistling.

He ran right into Charlie Gereson's arms and almost knocked him over, and he spilled the milk shake Charlie had been drinking all over both of them.

"Holy hell, what's wrong?" Charlie asked, comic in his extreme surprise. He was short and compact, wearing cotton chinos and a white tee shirt. Thick spectacles sat grimly on his nose, meaning business, proclaiming that they were there for a long haul.

"Charlie," Dex said, panting harshly. "My boy... the janitor... the crate... it whistles... it whistles when it's hungry and it whistles again when it's full... my boy ... we have to ... campus security ... we We..."

"Slow down, Professor Stanley," Charlie said. He looked concerned and a little frightened. You don't expect to be seized by the senior professor in your department when you had nothing more aggressive in mind yourself than charting the continued outmigration of sandflies. "Slow down, I don't know what you're talking about."

Stanley, hardly aware of what he was saying, poured out a garbled version of what had happened to the janitor. Charlie Gereson looked more and more confused and doubtful. As upset as he was, Dex began to realize that Charlie didn't believe a word of it. He thought, with a new kind of horror, that soon Charlie would ask him if he had been working too hard, and that when he did, Stanley would burst into mad cackles of laughter.

But what Charlie said was, "That's pretty far out, Professor Stanley."

"It's true. We've got to get campus security over here. We—"

"No, that's no good. One of them would stick his hand in there, first thing." He saw Dex's stricken look and went on. "If I'm having trouble swallowing this, what are they going to think?"

“I don’t know,” Dex said. “I... I never thought...”

“They’d think you just came off a helluva toot and were seeing Tasmanian devils instead of pink elephants,” Charlie Gereson said cheerfully, and pushed his glasses up on his pug nose. “Besides, from what you say, the responsibility has belonged with zo all along... like for a hundred and forty years.”

“But...” He swallowed, and there was a click in his throat as he prepared to voice his worst fear. “But it may be out.”

“I doubt that,” Charlie said, but didn’t elaborate. And in that, Dex saw two things: that Charlie didn’t believe a word he had said, and that nothing he could say would dissuade Charlie from going back down there.

Henry Northrup glanced at his watch. They had been sitting in the study for a little over an hour; Wilma wouldn’t be back for another two. Plenty of time. Unlike Charlie Gereson, he had passed no judgment at all on the factual basis of Dex’s story. But he had known Dex for a longer time than young Gereson had, and he didn’t believe his friend exhibited the signs of a man who has suddenly developed a psychosis. What he exhibited was a kind of bug-eyed fear, no more or

less than you’d expect to see a man who has had an extremely close call with... well, just an extremely close call.

“He went down, Dex?”

“Yes. He did.”

“You went with him?”

“Yes.”

Henry shifted position a little. “I can understand why he didn’t want to get campus security until he had checked the situation himself. But

Dex, you knew you were telling the flat-out truth, even if he didn't. Why didn't you call?"

"You believe me?" Dex asked. His voice trembled. "You believe me, don't you, Henry?"

Henry considered briefly. The story was mad, no question about that. The implication that there could be something in that box big enough and lively enough to kill a man after some one hundred and forty years was mad. He didn't believe it. But this was Dex... and he didn't disbelieve it either.

"Yes," he said.

"Thank God for that," Dex said. He groped for his drink. "Thank God for that, Henry."

"It doesn't answer the question, though. Why didn't you call the campus cops?"

"I thought... as much as I did think... that it might not want to come out of the crate, into the bright light. It must have lived in the dark for so long... so very long... and ... grotesque as this sounds... I thought it might be pot-bound, or something. I thought ... well, he'll see it... he'll see the crate... the janitor's body... he'll see the blood... and then we'd call security. You see?" Stanley's eyes pleaded with him to see, and Henry did. He thought that, considering the fact that it had been a snap judgment in a pressure situation, that Dex had thought quite clearly. The blood. When the young graduate student saw the blood, he would have been happy to call in the cops.

"But it didn't work out that way."

"No." Dex ran a hand through his thinning hair.

"Why not?"

"Because when we got down there, the body was gone."

“It was gone?”

“That’s right. And the crate was gone, too.”

When Charlie Gereson saw the blood, his round and good-natured face went very pale. His eyes, already magnified by his thick spectacles, grew even huger. Blood was puddled on the lab table. It had run down one of the table legs. It was pooled on the floor, and beads of it clung to the light globe and to the white tile wall. Yes, there was plenty of blood.

But no janitor. No crate.

Dex Stanley’s jaw dropped. “What the fuck!” Charlie whispered. Dex saw something then, perhaps the only thing that allowed him to keep his sanity. Already he could feel that central axle trying to pull free. He grabbed Charlie’s shoulder and said, “Look at the blood on the table!”

“I’ve seen enough,” Charlie said.

His Adam’s apple rose and fell like an express elevator as he struggled to keep his lunch down.

“For God’s sake, get hold of yourself,” Dex said harshly. “You’re a zoology major. You’ve seen blood before.”

It was the voice of authority, for that moment anyway. Charlie did get a hold of himself, and they walked a little closer. The random pools of blood on the table were not as random as they had first appeared. Each had been neatly straight-edged on one side.

“The crate sat there,” Dex said. He felt a little better. The fact that the crate really had been there steadied him a good deal. “And look there.” He pointed at the floor. Here the blood had been smeared into a wide, thin trail. It swept toward where the two of them stood, a few paces inside the double doors. It faded and faded, petering out altogether about halfway between the lab table and the doors. It was

crystal clear to Dex Stanley, and the nervous sweat on his skin went cold and clammy.

It had gotten out.

It had gotten out and pushed the crate off the table. And then it had pushed the crate... where? Under the stairs, of course. Back under the stairs. Where it had been safe for so long.

“Where’s the... the...” Charlie couldn’t finish.

“Under the stairs,” Dex said numbly. “It’s gone back to where it came from.”

“No. The...” He jerked it out finally. “The body.”

“I don’t know,” Dex said. But he thought he did know. His mind would simply not admit the truth.

Charlie turned abruptly and walked back through the doors. “Where are you going?” Dex called shrilly, and ran after him. Charlie stopped opposite the stairs. The triangular black hole beneath them gaped. The janitor’s big four-cell flashlight still sat on the floor. And beside it was a bloody scrap of gray cloth, and one of the pens that had been clipped to the man’s breast pocket.

“Don’t go under there, Charlie! Don’t.” His heartbeat whammed savagely in his ears, frightening him even more.

“No,” Charlie said. “But the body...”

Charlie hunkered down, grabbed the flashlight, and shone it under the stairs. And the crate was there, shoved up against the far wall, just as it had been before, squat and mute. Except that now it was free of dust and three boards had been pried off the top.

The light moved and centered on one of the janitor’s big, sensible work shoes. Charlie drew breath in a low, harsh gasp. The thick leather of the shoe had been savagely gnawed and chewed. The

laces hung, broken, from the eyelets. “It looks like somebody put it through a hay baler,” he said hoarsely.

“Now do you believe me?” Dex asked.

Charlie didn’t answer. Holding onto the stairs lightly with one hand, he leaned under the overhang—presumably to get the shoe. Later, sitting in Henry’s study, Dex said he could think of only one reason why Charlie would have done that—to measure and perhaps categorize the bite of the thing in the crate. He was, after all, a zoologist, and a damned good one.

“Don’t!” Dex screamed, and grabbed the back of Charlie’s shirt. Suddenly there were two green gold eyes glaring over the top of the crate. They were almost exactly the color of owls’ eyes, but smaller. There was a harsh, chattering growl of anger. Charlie recoiled, startled, and slammed the back of his head on the underside of the stairs. A shadow moved from the crate toward him at projectile speed. Charlie howled. Dex heard the dry purr of his shirt as it ripped open, the click as Charlie’s glasses struck the floor and spun away. Once more Charlie tried to back away. The thing began to snarl—then the snarls suddenly stopped. And Charlie Gereson began to scream in agony.

Dex pulled on the back of his white tee shirt with all his might. For a moment Charlie came backwards and he caught a glimpse of a furry, writhing shape spread-eagled on the young man’s chest, a shape that appeared to have not four but six legs and the flat bullet head of a young lynx. The front of Charlie Gereson’s shirt had been so quickly and completely tattered that it now looked like so many crepe streamers hung around his neck.

Then the thing raised its head and those small green gold eyes stared balefully into Dex’s own. He had never seen or dreamed such savagery. His strength failed. His grip on the back of Charlie’s shirt loosened momentarily.

A moment was all it took. Charlie Gereson's body was snapped under the stairs with grotesque, cartoonish speed. Silence for a moment. Then the growling, smacking sounds began again.

Charlie screamed once more, a long sound of terror and pain that was abruptly cut off... as if something had been clapped over his mouth.

Or stuffed into it.

Dex fell silent. The moon was high in the sky. Half of his third drink—an almost unheard-of phenomenon—was gone, and he felt the reaction setting in as sleepiness and extreme lassitude.

“What did you do then?” Henry asked. What he hadn't done, he knew, was to go to campus security; they wouldn't have listened to such a story and then released him so he could go and tell it again to his friend Henry.

“I just walked around, in utter shock, I suppose. I ran up the stairs again, just as I had after... after it took the janitor, only this time there was no Charlie Gereson to run into. I walked... miles, I suppose. I think I was mad. I kept thinking about Ryder's Quarry. You know that place?”

“Yes,” Henry said.

“I kept thinking that would be deep enough. If... if there would be a way to get that crate out there. I kept... kept thinking...” He put his hands to his face. “I don't know. I don't know anymore. I think I'm going crazy.”

“If the story you just told is true, I can understand that,” Henry said quietly. He stood up suddenly. “Come on. I'm taking you home.”

“Home?” Dex looked at this friend vacantly. “But—”

“I’ll leave a note for Wilma telling her where we’ve gone and then we’ll call... who do you suggest, Dex? Campus security or the state police?”

“You believe me, don’t you? You believe me? Just say you do.”

“Yes, I believe you,” Henry said, and it was the truth. “I don’t know what that thing could be or where it came from, but I believe you.” Dex Stanley began to weep.

“Finish your drink while I write my wife,” Henry said, apparently not noticing the tears. He even grinned a little. “And for Christ’s sake, let’s get out of here before she gets back.”

Dex clutched at Henry’s sleeve. “But we won’t go anywhere near Amberson Hall, will we? Promise me, Henry! We’ll stay away from there, won’t we?”

“Does a bear shit in the woods?” Henry Northrup asked. It was a three-mile drive to Dex’s house on the outskirts of town, and before they got there, he was half-asleep in the passenger seat.

“The state cops, I think,” Henry said. His words seemed to come from a great distance. “I think Charlie Gerson’s assessment of the campus cops was pretty accurate. The first one there would happily stick his arm into that box.”

“Yes. All right.” Through the drifting, lassitudinous aftermath of shock, Dex felt a dim but great gratitude that his friend had taken over with such efficiency. Yet a deeper part of him believed that Henry could not have done it if he had seen the things he had seen. “Just... the importance of caution ...”

“I’ll see to that,” Henry said grimly, and that was when Dex fell asleep.

He awoke the next morning with August sunshine making crisp patterns on the sheets of his bed. Just a dream, he thought with

indescribable relief. All some crazy dream.

But there was a taste of Scotch in his mouth—Scotch and something else. He sat up, and a lance of pain bolted through his head. Not the sort of pain you got from a hangover, though; not even if you were the type to get a hangover from three Scotches, and he wasn't.

He sat up, and there was Henry, sitting across the room. His first thought was that Henry needed a shave. His second was that there was something in Henry's eyes that he had never seen before—something like chips of ice. A ridiculous thought came to Dex; it passed through his mind and was gone. Sniper's eyes. Henry Northrup, whose specialty is the earlier English poets, has got sniper's eyes.

"How are you feeling, Dex?"

"A slight headache," Dex said. "Henry... the police... what happened?"

"The police aren't coming," Northrup said calmly. "As for your head, I'm very sorry. I put one of Wilma's sleeping powders in your third drink. Be assured that it will pass."

"Henry, what are you saying?"

Henry took a sheet of notepaper from his breast pocket. "This is the note I left my wife. It will explain a lot, I think. I got it back after everything was over. I took a chance that she'd leave it on the table, and I got away with it."

"I don't know what you're—"

He took the note from Henry's fingers and read it, eyes widening.

Dear Billie,

I've just had a call from Dex Stanley. He's hysterical. Seems to have committed some sort of indiscretion with one of his female grad

students. He's at Amberson Hall. So is the girl. For God's sake, come quickly. I'm not sure exactly what the situation is, but a woman's presence may be imperative, and under the circumstances, a nurse from the infirmary just won't do. I know you don't like Dex much, but a scandal like this could ruin his career. Please come.

Henry.

"What in God's name have you done?" Dex asked hoarsely.

Henry plucked the note from Dex's nerveless fingers, produced his Zippo, and set flame to the corner. When it was burning well, he dropped the charring sheet of paper into an ashtray on the windowsill.

"I've killed Wilma," he said in the same calm voice. "Ding-dong, the wicked bitch is dead." Dex tried to speak and could not. That central axle was trying to tear loose again. The abyss of utter insanity was below. "I've killed my wife, and now I've put myself into your hands."

Now Dex did find his voice. It had a sound that was rusty yet shrill. "The crate," he said. "What have you done with the crate?"

"That's the beauty of it," Henry said. "You put the final piece in the jigsaw yourself. The crate is at the bottom of Ryder's Quarry."

Dex groped at that while he looked into Henry's eyes. The eyes of his friend. Sniper's eyes. You can't knock off your own queen, that's not in anyone's rules of chess, he thought, and restrained an urge to roar out gales of rancid laughter. The quarry, he had said. Ryder's Quarry. It was over four hundred feet deep, some said. It was perhaps twelve miles east of the university. Over the thirty years that Dex had been here, a dozen people had drowned there, and three years ago the town had posted the place.

"I put you to bed," Henry said. "Had to carry you into your room. You were out like a light. Scotch, sleeping powder, shock. But you were breathing normally and well. Strong heart action. I checked those

things. Whatever else you believe, never think I had any intention of hurting you, Dex.”

“It was fifteen minutes before Wilma’s last class ended, and it would take her another fifteen minutes to drive home and another fifteen minutes to get over to Amberson Hall. That gave me forty-five minutes. I got over to Amberson in ten. It was unlocked. That was enough to settle any doubts I had left.”

“What do you mean?”

“The key ring on the janitor’s belt. It went with the janitor.”

Dex shuddered.

“If the door had been locked—forgive me, Dex, but if you’re going to play for keeps, you ought to cover every base—there was still time enough to get back home ahead of Wilma and burn that note.

“I went downstairs—and I kept as close to the wall going down those stairs as I could, believe me...”

Henry stepped into the lab and glanced around. It was just as Dex had left it. He slicked his tongue over his dry lips and then wiped his face with his hand. His heart was thudding in his chest. Get hold of yourself, man. One thing at a time. Don’t look ahead.

The boards the janitor had pried off the crate were still stacked on the lab table. One table over was the scatter of Charlie Gerson’s lab notes, never to be completed now. Henry took it all in, and then pulled his own flashlight—the one he always kept in the glovebox of his car for emergencies—from his back pocket. If this didn’t qualify as an emergency, nothing did.

He snapped it on and crossed the lab and went out the door. The light bobbed uneasily in the dark for a moment, and then he trained it on the floor. He didn’t want to step on anything he shouldn’t. Moving slowly and cautiously, Henry moved around to the side of the stairs

and shone the light underneath. His breath paused, and then resumed again, more slowly. Suddenly the tension and fear were gone, and he only felt cold. The crate was under there, just as Dex had said it was. And the janitor's ballpoint pen. And his shoes. And Charlie Gereson's glasses.

Henry moved the light from one of these artifacts to the next slowly, spotlighting each. Then he glanced at his watch, snapped the flashlight off and jammed it back in his pocket. He had half an hour. There was no time to waste.

In the janitor's closet upstairs he found buckets, heavy-duty cleaner, rags... and gloves. No prints. He went back downstairs like the sorcerer's apprentice, a heavy plastic bucket full of hot water and foaming cleaner in each hand, rags draped over his shoulder. His footfalls clacked hollowly in the stillness. He thought of Dex saying, It sits squat and mute. And still he was cold.

He began to clean up.

"She came," Henry said. "Oh yes, she came. And she was... excited and happy."

"What?" Dex said.

"Excited," he repeated. "She was whining and carping the way she always did in that high, unpleasant voice, but that was just habit, I think. All those years, Dex, the only part of me she wasn't able to completely control, the only part she could never get completely under her thumb, was my friendship with you. Our two drinks while she was at class. Our chess. Our... companionship."

Dex nodded. Yes, companionship was the right word. A little light in the darkness of loneliness. It hadn't just been the chess or the drinks; it had been Henry's face over the board, Henry's voice recounting how things were in his department, a bit of harmless gossip, a laugh over something.

“So she was whining and bitching in her best ‘just call me Billie’ style, but I think it was just habit. She was excited and happy, Dex. Because she was finally going to be able to get control over the last ... little.., bit.” He looked at Dex calmly. “I knew she’d come, you see. I knew she’d want to see what kind of mess you gotten yourself into, Dex.”

“They’re downstairs,” Henry told Wilma. Wilma was wearing a bright yellow sleeveless blouse and green pants that were too tight for her. “Right downstairs.” And he uttered a sudden, loud laugh.

Wilma’s head whipped around and her narrow face darkened with suspicion. “What are you laughing about?” She asked in her loud, buzzing voice. “Your best friend gets in a scrape with a girl and you’re laughing?”

No, he shouldn’t be laughing. But he couldn’t help it. It was sitting under the stairs, sitting there squat and mute, just try telling that thing in the crate to call you Billie, Wilma—and another loud laugh escaped him and went rolling down the dim first-floor hall like a depth charge.

“Well, there is a funny side to it,” he said, hardly aware of what he was saying. “Wait’ll you see. You’ll think—”

Her eyes, always questing, never still, dropped to his front pocket, where he had stuffed the rubber gloves.

“What are those? Are those gloves?”

Henry began to spew words. At the same time he put his arm around Wilma’s bony shoulders and led her toward the stairs. “Well, he’s passed out, you know. He smells like a distillery. Can’t guess how much he drank. Threw up all over everything. I’ve been cleaning up. Hell of an awful mess, Billie. I persuaded the girl to stay a bit. You’ll help me, won’t you? This is Dex, after all.”

“I don’t know,” she said, as they began to descend the stairs to the basement lab. Her eyes snapped with dark glee. “I’ll have to see what the situation is. You don’t know anything, that’s obvious. You’re hysterical. Exactly what I would have expected.”

“That’s right,” Henry said. They had reached the bottom of the stairs. “Right around here. Just step right around here.”

“But the lab’s that way—”

“Yes... but the girl...” And he began to laugh again in great, loonlike bursts.

“Henry, what is wrong with you?” And now that acidic contempt was mixed with something else—something that might have been fear.

That made Henry laugh harder. His laughter echoed and rebounded, filling the dark basement with a sound like laughing banshees or demons approving a particularly good jest. “The girl, Billie,” Henry said between bursts of helpless laughter. “That’s what’s so funny, the girl, the girl has crawled under the stairs and won’t come out, that what’s so funny, ah-heh-heh-hahahahaa—”

And now the dark kerosene of joy lit in her eyes; her lips curled up like charring paper in what the denizens of hell might call a smile. And Wilma whispered, “What did he do to her?”

“You can get her out,” Henry babbled, leading her to the dark, triangular, gaping maw. “I’m sure you can get her out, no trouble, no problem.” He suddenly grabbed Wilma at the nape of the neck and the waist, forcing her down even as he pushed her into the space under the stairs.

“What are you doing?” she screamed querulously. “What are you doing, Henry?”

“What I should have done a long time ago,” Henry said, laughing. “Get under there, Wilma. Just tell it to call you Billie, you bitch.”

She tried to turn, tried to fight him. One hand clawed for his wrist—he saw her spade-shaped nails slice down, but they clawed only air. “Stop it, Henry!” She cried. “Stop it right now! Stop this foolishness! I—I’ll scream!”

“Scream all you want!” he bellowed, still laughing. He raised one foot, planted it in the center of her narrow and joyless backside, and pushed. “I’ll help you, Wilma! Come on out! Wake up, whatever you are! Wake up! Here’s your dinner! Poison meat! Wake up! Wake up!”

Wilma screamed piercingly, an inarticulate sound that was still more rage than fear.

And then Henry heard it.

First a low whistle, the sound a man might make while working alone without even being aware of it. Then it rose in pitch, sliding up the scale to an earsplitting whine that was barely audible. Then it suddenly descended again and became a growl... and then a hoarse yammering. It was an utterly savage sound. All his married life Henry Northrup had gone in fear of his wife, but the thing in the crate made Wilma sound like a child doing a kindergarten tantrum. Henry had time to think: Holy God, maybe it really is a Tasmanian devil... it’s some kind of devil, anyway.

Wilma began to scream again, but this time it was a sweeter tune—at least to the ear of Henry Northrup. It was a sound of utter terror. Her yellow blouse flashed in the dark under the stairs, a vague beacon. She lunged at the opening and Henry pushed her back, using all his strength.

“Henry!” She howled. “Henreeeee!”

She came again, head first this time, like a charging bull. Henry caught her head in both hands, feeling the tight, wiry cap of her curls squash under his palms. He Pushed. And then, over Wilma’s shoulder, he saw something that might have been the gold-glinting eyes of a small owl. Eyes that were infinitely cold and hateful. The

yammering became louder, reaching a crescendo. And when it struck at Wilma, the vibration running through her body was enough to knock him backwards.

He caught one glimpse of her face, her bulging eyes, and then she was dragged back into the darkness. She screamed once more. Only once.

“Just tell it to call you Billie,” he whispered.

Henry Northrup drew a great, shuddering breath.

“It went on ... for quite a while,” he said. After a long time, maybe twenty minutes, the growling and the... the sounds of its feeding... that stopped, too. And it started to whistle. Just like you said, Dex. As if it were a happy teakettle or something. It whistled for maybe five minutes, and then it stopped. I shone my light underneath again. The crate had been pulled out a little way. There was... fresh blood. And Wilma’s purse had spilled everywhere. But it got both of her shoes. That was something, wasn’t it?”

Dex didn’t answer. The room basked in sunshine. Outside, a bird sang.

“I finished cleaning the lab,” Henry resumed at last. “It took me another forty minutes, and I almost missed a drop of blood that was on the light globe ... saw it just as I was going out. But when I was done, the place was as neat as a pin. Then I went out to my car and drove across campus to the English department. It was getting late, but I didn’t feel a bit tired. In fact, Dex, I don’t think I ever felt more clear-headed in my life. There was a crate in the basement of the English department. I flashed on that very early in your story. Associating one monster with another, I suppose.”

“What do you mean?”

“Last year when Badlinger was in England—you remember Badlinger, don’t you?”

Dex nodded. Badlinger was the man who had beaten Henry out for the English department chair... partly because Badlinger's wife was bright, vivacious and sociable, while Henry's wife was a shrew. Had been a shrew.

"He was in England on sabbatical," Henry said. "Had all their things crated and shipped back. One of them was a giant stuffed animal. Nessie, they call it. For his kids. That bastard bought it for his kids. I always wanted children, you know. Wilma didn't. She said kids get in the way.

"Anyway, it came back in this gigantic wooden crate, and Badlinger dragged it down to the English department basement because there was no room in the garage at home, he said, but he didn't want to throw it out because it might come in handy someday. Meantime, our janitors were using it as a gigantic sort of wastebasket. When it was full of trash, they'd dump it into the back of the truck on trash day and then fill it up again.

"I think it was the crate Badlinger's damned stuffed monster came back from England in that put the idea in my head. I began to see how your Tasmanian devil could be gotten rid of. And that started me thinking about something else I wanted to be rid of. That I wanted so badly to be rid of.

"I had my keys, of course. I let myself in and went downstairs. The crate was there. It was a big, unwieldy thing, but the janitors' dolly was down there as well. I dumped out the little bit of trash that was in it and got the crate onto the dolly by standing it on end. I pulled it upstairs and wheeled it straight across the mall and back to Amberson."

"You didn't take your car?"

"No, I left my car in my space in the English department parking lot. I couldn't have gotten the crate in there, anyway."

For Dex, new light began to break. Henry would have been driving his MG, of course—an elderly sportscar that Wilma had always called Henry’s toy. And if Henry had the MG, then Wilma would have had the Scout—a jeep with a fold-down back seat. Plenty of storage space, as the ads said.

“I didn’t meet anyone,” Henry said. “At this time of year—and at no other—the campus is quite deserted. The whole thing was almost hellishly perfect. I didn’t see so much as a pair of headlights. I got back to Amberson Hall and took Badlinger’s crate downstairs. I left it sitting on the dolly with the open end facing under the stairs. Then I went back upstairs to the janitors’ closet and got that long pole they use to open and close the windows. They only have those poles in the old buildings now. I went back down and got ready to hook the crate—your Paella crate—out from under the stairs. Then I had a bad moment. I realized the top of Badlinger’s crate was gone, you see. I’d noticed it before, but now I realized it. In my guts.”

“What did you do?”

“Decided to take the chance,” Henry said. “I took the window pole and pulled the crate out. I eased it out, as if it were full of eggs. No ... as if it were full of Mason jars with nitroglycerine in them.”

Dex sat up, staring at Henry. “What... what...”

Henry looked back somberly. “It was my first good look at it, remember. It was horrible.” He paused deliberately and then said it again: “It was horrible, Dex. It was splattered with blood, some of it seemingly grimed right into tile wood. It made me think of... do you remember those joke boxes they used to sell? You’d push a little lever and tile box would grind and shake, and then a pale green hand would come out of the top and push the lever back and snap inside again. It made me think of that.

“I pulled it out—oh, so carefully—and I said I wouldn’t look down inside, no matter what. But I did, of course. And I saw...” His voice

dropped helplessly, seeming to lose all strength. “I saw Wilma’s face, Dex. Her face.”

“Henry, don’t—”

“I saw her eyes, looking up at me from that box. Her glazed eyes. I saw something else, too. Something white. A bone, I think. And a black something. Furry. Curled up. Whistling, too. A very low whistle. I think it was sleeping.”

“I hooked it out as far as I could, and then I just stood there looking at it, realizing that I couldn’t drive knowing that thing could come out at any time... come out and land on the back of my neck. So I started to look around for something—anything—to cover the top of Badlinger’s crate.

“I went into the animal husbandry room, and there were a couple of cages big enough to hold the Paella crate, but I couldn’t find the goddamned keys. So I went upstairs and I still couldn’t find anything. I don’t know how long I hunted, but there was this continual feeling of time... slipping away. I was getting a little crazy. Then I happened to poke into that big lecture room at the far end of the hall—”

“Room 6?”

“Yes, I think so. They had been painting the walls. There was a big canvas dropcloth on the floor to catch the splatters. I took it, and then I went back downstairs, and I pushed the Paella crate into Badlinger’s crate. Carefully!... you wouldn’t believe how carefully I did it, Dex.”

When the smaller crate was nested inside the larger, Henry uncinched the straps on the English department dolly and grabbed the end of the dropcloth. It rustled stiffly in the stillness of Amberson Hall’s basement. His breathing rustled stiffly as well. And there was that low whistle. He kept waiting for it to pause, to change. It didn’t. He had sweated his shirt through; it was plastered to his chest and back.

Moving carefully, refusing to hurry, he wrapped the dropcloth around Badlinger's crate three times, then four, then five. In the dim light shining through from the lab, Badlinger's crate now looked mummified. Holding the seam with one splayed hand, he wrapped first one strap around it, then the other. He cinched them tight and then stood back a moment. He glanced at his watch. It was just past one o'clock. A pulse beat rhythmically at his throat.

Moving forward again, wishing absurdly for a cigarette (he had given them up sixteen years before), he grabbed the dolly, tilted it back, and began pulling it slowly up the stairs.

Outside, the moon watched coldly as he lifted the entire load, dolly and all, into the back of what he had come to think of as Wilma's Jeep—although Wilma had not earned a dime since the day he had married her. It was the biggest lift he had done since he had worked with a moving company in Westbrook as an undergraduate. At the highest point of the lift, a lance of pain seemed to dig into his lower back. And still he slipped it into the back of the Scout as gently as a sleeping baby.

He tried to close the back, but it wouldn't go up; the handle of the dolly stuck out four inches too far. He drove with the tailgate down, and at every bump and pothole, his heart seemed to stutter. His ears felt for the whistle, waiting for it to escalate into a shrill scream and then descend to a guttural howl of fury waiting for the hoarse rip of canvas as teeth and claws pulled their way through it.

And overhead the moon, a mystic silver disc, rode the sky.

"I drove out to Ryder's Quarry," Henry went on. "There was a chain across the head of the road, but I geared the Scout down and got around. I backed right up to the edge of the water. The moon was still up and I could see its reflection way down in the blackness, like a drowned silver dollar. I went around, but it was a long time before I could bring myself to grab the thing. In a very real way, Dex, it was three bodies... the remains of three human beings. And I started wondering...where did they go? I saw Wilma's face, but it looked ...

God help me, it looked all flat, like a Halloween mask. How much of them did it eat, Dex? How much could it eat? And I started to understand what you meant about that central axle pulling loose.”

“It was still whistling. I could hear it, muffled and faint, through that canvas dropcloth. Then I grabbed it and I heaved... I really believe it was do it then or do it never. It came sliding out... and I think maybe it suspected, Dex... because, as the dolly started to tilt down toward the water it started to growl and yammer again ... and the canvas started to ripple and bulge ... and I yanked it again. I gave it all I had ... so much that I almost fell into the damned quarry myself. And it went in. There was a splash ... and then it was gone. Except for a few ripples, it was gone. And then the ripples were gone, too.”

He fell silent, looking at his hands.

“And you came here,” Dex said.

“First I went back to Amberson Hall. Cleaned under the stairs. Picked up all of Wilma’s things and put them in her purse again. Picked up the janitor’s shoe and his pen and your grad student’s glasses. Wilma’s purse is still on the seat. I parked the car in our—in my—driveway. On the way there I threw the rest of the stuff in the river.”

“And then did what? Walked here?”

“Yes.”

“Henry, what if I’d waked up before you got here? Called the police?”

Henry Northrup said simply: “You didn’t.”

They stared at each other, Dex from his bed, Henry from the chair by the window.

Speaking in tones so soft as to be nearly inaudible, Henry said, “The question is, what happens now? Three people are going to be

reported missing soon. There is no one element to connect all three. There are no signs of foul play; I saw to that. Badlinger's crate, the dolly, the painters' dropcloth—those things will be reported missing too, presumably. There will be a search. But the weight of the dolly will carry the crate to the bottom of the quarry, and ... there are really no bodies, are there, Dex?"

"No," Dexter Stanley said. "No, I suppose there aren't."

"But what are you going to do, Dex? What are you going to say?"

"Oh, I could tell a tale," Dex said. "And if I told it, I suspect I'd end up in the state mental hospital. Perhaps accused of murdering the janitor and Gereson, if not your wife. No matter how good your cleanup was, a state police forensic unit could find traces of blood on the floor and walls of that laboratory. I believe I'll keep my mouth shut."

"Thank you," Henry said. "Thank you, Dex."

Dex thought of that elusive thing Henry had mentioned companionship. A little light in the darkness. He thought of playing chess perhaps twice a week instead of once. Perhaps even three times a week... and if the game was not finished by ten, perhaps playing until midnight if neither of them had any early morning classes, instead of having to put the board away (and, as likely as not, Wilma would just "accidentally" knock over the pieces "while dusting," so that the game would have to be started all over again the following Thursday evening). He thought of his friend, at last free of that other species of Tasmanian devil that killed more slowly but just as surely—by heart attack, by stroke, by ulcer, by high blood pressure, yammering and whistling in the ear all the while.

Last of all, he thought of the janitor, casually flicking his quarter, and of the quarter coming down and rolling under the stairs, where a very old horror sat squat and mute, covered with dust and cobwebs, waiting... biding its time...

What had Henry said? The whole thing was almost hellishly perfect.

“No need to thank me, Henry,” he said.

Henry stood up. “If you got dressed,” he said, “you could run me down to the campus. I could get my MG and go back home and report Wilma missing.”

Dex thought about it. Henry was inviting him to cross a nearly invisible line, it seemed, from bystander to accomplice. Did he want to cross that line?

At last he swung his legs out of bed. “All right, Henry.”

“Thank you, Dexter.”

Dex smiled slowly. “That’s all right,” he said. “After all, what are friends for?”

NIGHTMARES & DREAMSCAPES
CROUCH END



CROUCH END

Stephen King

By the time the woman had finally gone, it was nearly two-thirty in the morning. Outside the Crouch End police station, Tottenham Lane was a small dead river. London was asleep ... but London never sleeps deeply, and its dreams are uneasy.

PC Vetter closed his notebook, which he'd almost filled as the American woman's strange, frenzied story poured out. He looked at the typewriter and the stack of blank forms on the shelf beside it. "This one'll look odd come morning light," he said.

PC Farnham was drinking a Coke. He didn't speak for a long time. "She was American, wasn't she?" he said finally, as if that might explain most or all of the story she had told.

"It'll go in the back file," Vetter agreed, and looked round for a cigarette. "But I wonder ..."

Farnham laughed. "You don't mean you believe any part of it? Go on, sir! Pull the other one!"

"Didn't say that, did I? No. But you're new here."

Farnham sat a little straighter. He was twenty-seven, and it was hardly his fault that he had been posted here from Muswell Hill to the north, or that Vetter, who was nearly twice his age, had spent his entire uneventful career in the quiet London backwater of Crouch End.

"Perhaps so, sir," he said, "but—with respect, mind—I still think I know a swatch of the old whole cloth when I see one... or hear one."

"Give us a fag, mate," Vetter said, looking amused. "There! What a good boy you are." He lit it with a wooden match from a bright red railway box, shook it out, and tossed the match stub into Farnham's ashtray. He peered at the lad through a haze of drifting smoke. His own days of laddie good looks were long gone; Vetter's face was deeply lined and his nose was a map of broken veins. He liked his

six of Harp a night, did PC Vetter. “You think Crouch End’s a very quiet place, then, do you?”

Farnham shrugged. In truth he thought Crouch End was a big suburban yawn—what his younger brother would have been pleased to call “a fucking Bore-a-Torium.”

“Yes,” Vetter said, “I see you do. And you’re right. Goes to sleep by eleven most nights, it does. But I’ve seen a lot of strange things in Crouch End. If you’re here half as long as I’ve been, you’ll see your share, too. There are more strange things happen right here in this quiet six or eight blocks than anywhere else in London—that’s saying a lot, I know, but I believe it. It scares me. So I have my lager, and then I’m not so scared. You look at Sergeant Gordon sometime, Farnham, and ask yourself why his hair is dead white at forty. Or I’d say take a look at Petty, but you can’t very well, can you? Petty committed suicide in the summer of 1976. Our hot summer. It was ...” Vetter seemed to consider his words. “It was quite bad that summer. Quite bad. There were a lot of us who were afraid they might break through.”

“Who might break through what?” Farnham asked. He felt a contemptuous smile turning up the corners of his mouth, knew it was far from politic, but was unable to stop it. In his way, Vetter was raving as badly as the American woman had. He had always been a bit queer. The booze, probably. Then he saw Vetter was smiling right back at him.

“You think I’m a dotty old prat, I suppose,” he said.

“Not at all, not at all,” Farnham protested, groaning inwardly.

“You’re a good boy,” Vetter said. “Won’t be riding a desk here in the station when you’re my age. Not if you stick on the force. Will you stick, d’you think? D’you fancy it?”

“Yes,” Farnham said. It was true; he did fancy it. He meant to stick even though Sheila wanted him off the police force and somewhere

she could count on him. The Ford assembly line, perhaps. The thought of joining the wankers at Ford curdled his stomach.

“I thought so,” Vetter said, crushing his smoke. “Gets in your blood, doesn’t it? You could go far, too, and it wouldn’t be boring old Crouch End you’d finish up in, either. Still, you don’t know everything. Crouch End is strange. You ought to have a peek in the back file sometime, Farnham. Oh, a lot of it’s the usual ... girls and boys run away from home to be hippies or punks or whatever it is they call themselves now ... husbands gone missing (and when you clap an eye to their wives you can most times understand why)... unsolved arsons ... purse-snatchings ... all of that. But in between, there’s enough stories to curdle your blood. And some to make you sick to your stomach.”

“True word?”

Vetter nodded. “Some of em very like the one that poor American girl just told us. She’ll not see her husband again—take my word for it.” He looked at Farnham and shrugged. “Believe me, believe me not. It’s all one, isn’t it? The file’s there. We call it the open file because it’s more polite than the back file or the kiss-my-arse file. Study it up, Farnham. Study it up.”

Farnham said nothing, but he actually did intend to “study it up.” The idea that there might be a whole series of stories such as the one the American woman had told ... that was disturbing.

“Sometimes,” Vetter said, stealing another of Farnham’s Silk Cuts, “I wonder about Dimensions.”

“Dimensions?”

“Yes, my good old son—dimensions. Science fiction writers are always on about Dimensions, aren’t they? Ever read science fiction, Farnham?”

“No,” Farnham said. He had decided this was some sort of elaborate leg-pull.

“What about Lovecraft? Ever read anything by him?”

“Never heard of him,” Farnham said. The last fiction he’d read for pleasure, in fact, had been a small Victorian Era pastiche called *Two Gentlemen in Silk Knickers*.

“Well, this fellow Lovecraft was always writing about Dimensions,” Vetter said, producing his box of railway matches. “Dimensions close to ours. Full of these immortal monsters that would drive a man mad at one look. Frightful rubbish, of course. Except, whenever one of these people straggles in, I wonder if all of it was rubbish. I think to myself then—when it’s quiet and late at night, like now—that our whole world, everything we think of as nice and normal and sane, might be like a big leather ball filled with air. Only in some places, the leather’s scuffed almost down to nothing. Places where the barriers are thinner. Do you get me?”

“Yes,” Farnham said, and thought: Maybe you ought to give me a kiss, Vetter—I always fancy a kiss when I’m getting my doodle pulled.

“And then I think, ‘Crouch End’s one of those thin places.’ Silly, but I do have those thoughts. Too imaginative, I expect; my mother always said so, anyway.”

“Did she indeed?”

“Yes. Do you know what else I think?”

“No, sir—not a clue.”

“Highgate’s mostly all right, that’s what I think—it’s just as thick as you’d want between us and the Dimensions in Muswell Hill and Highgate. But now you take Archway and Finsbury Park. They border on Crouch End, too. I’ve got friends in both places, and they

know of my interest in certain things that don't seem to be any way rational. Certain crazy stories which have been told, we'll say, by people with nothing to gain by making up crazy stories.

"Did it occur to you to wonder, Farnham, why the woman would have told us the things she did if they weren't true?"

"Well..."

Vetter struck a match and looked at Farnham over it. "Pretty young woman, twenty-six, two kiddies back at her hotel, husband's a young lawyer doing well in Milwaukee or someplace. What's she to gain by coming in and spouting about the sort of things you only used to see in Hammer films?"

"I don't know," Farnham said stiffly. "But there may be an ex—"

"So I say to myself"—Vetter overrode him—"that if there are such things as 'thin spots,' this one would begin at Archway and Finsbury Park ... but the very thinnest part is here at Crouch End. And I say to myself, wouldn't it be a day if the last of the leather between us and what's on the inside of that ball just ... rubbed away? Wouldn't it be a day if even half of what that woman told us was true?"

Farnham was silent. He had decided that PC Vetter probably also believed in palmistry and phrenology and the Rosicrucians.

"Read the back file," Vetter said, getting up. There was a crackling sound as he put his hands in the small of his back and stretched. "I'm going out to get some fresh air."

He strolled out. Farnham looked after him with a mixture of amusement and resentment. Vetter was dotty, all right. He was also a bloody fag-mooch. Fags didn't come cheap in this brave new world of the welfare state. He picked up Vetter's notebook and began leafing through the girl's story again.

And, yes, he would go through the back file.

He would do it for laughs.

*

The girl—or young woman, if you wanted to be politically correct (and all Americans did these days, it seemed)—had burst into the station at quarter past ten the previous evening, her hair in damp strings around her face, her eyes bulging. She was dragging her purse by the strap.

“Lonnie,” she said. “Please, you’ve got to find Lonnie.”

“Well, we’ll do our best, won’t we?” Vetter said. “But you’ve got to tell us who Lonnie is.”

“He’s dead,” the young woman said. “I know he is.” She began to cry. Then she began to laugh—to cackle, really. She dropped her purse in front of her. She was hysterical.

The station was fairly deserted at that hour on a weeknight. Sergeant Raymond was listening to a Pakistani woman tell, with almost unearthly calm, how her purse had been nicked on Hillfield Avenue by a job with a lot of football tattoos and a great coxcomb of blue hair. Vetter saw Farnham come in from the anteroom, where he had been taking down old posters (HAVE YOU ROOM IN YOUR HEART FOR AN UNWANTED CHILD?) and putting up new ones (SIX RULES FOR SAFE NIGHT-CYCLING).

Vetter waved Farnham forward and Sergeant Raymond, who had looked round at once when he heard the American woman’s semi-hysterical voice, back. Raymond, who liked breaking pickpockets’ fingers like breadsticks (“Aw, c’mon, mate,” he’d say if asked to justify this extra-legal proceeding, “fifty million wogs can’t be wrong”), was not the man for a hysterical woman.

“Lonnie!” she shrieked. “Oh, please, they’ve got Lonnie!”

The Pakistani woman turned toward the young American woman, studied her calmly for a moment, then turned back to Sergeant Raymond and continued to tell him how her purse had been snatched.

“Miss—” PC Farnham began.

“What’s going on out there?” she whispered. Her breath was coming in quick pants. Farnham noticed there was a slight scratch on her left cheek. She was a pretty little hen with nice bubs—small but pert—and a great cloud of auburn hair. Her clothes were moderately expensive. The heel had come off one of her shoes.

“What’s going on out there?” she repeated. “Monsters—”

The Pakistani woman looked over again ... and smiled. Her teeth were rotten. The smile was gone like a conjurer’s trick, and she took the Lost and Stolen Property form Raymond was holding out to her.

“Get the lady a cup of coffee and bring it down to Room Three,” Vetter said. “Could you do with a cup of coffee, mum?”

“Lonnie,” she whispered. “I know he’s dead.”

“Now, you just come along with old Ted Vetter and we’ll sort this out in a jiff,” he said, and helped her to her feet. She was still talking in a low moaning voice when he led her away with one arm snugged around her waist. She was rocking unsteadily because of the broken shoe.

Farnham got the coffee and brought it into Room Three, a plain white cubicle furnished with a scarred table, four chairs, and a water cooler in the corner. He put the coffee in front of her.

“Here, mum,” he said, “this’ll do you good. I’ve got some sugar if—”

“I can’t drink it,” she said. “I couldn’t—” And then she clutched the porcelain cup, someone’s long-forgotten souvenir of Blackpool, in

her hands as if for warmth. Her hands were shaking quite badly, and Farnham wanted to tell her to put it down before she slopped the coffee and scalded herself.

“I couldn’t,” she said again. Then she drank, still holding the cup two-handed, the way a child will hold his cup of broth. And when she looked at them, it was a child’s look—simple, exhausted, appealing ... and at bay, somehow. It was as if whatever had happened had somehow shocked her young; as if some invisible hand had swooped down from the sky and slapped the last twenty years out of her, leaving a child in grownup American clothes in this small white interrogation room in Crouch End.

“Lonnie,” she said. “The monsters,” she said. “Will you help me? Will you please help me? Maybe he isn’t dead. Maybe—

“I’m an American citizen!” she cried suddenly, and then, as if she had said something deeply shameful, she began to sob.

Vetter patted her shoulder. “There, mum. I think we can help find your Lonnie. Your husband, is he?”

Still sobbing, she nodded. “Danny and Norma are back at the hotel ... with the sitter ... they’ll be sleeping ... expecting him to kiss them when we come in ...”

“Now if you could just relax and tell us what happened—”

“And where it happened,” Farnham added. Vetter looked up at him swiftly, frowning.

“But that’s just it!” she cried. “I don’t know where it happened! I’m not even sure what happened, except that it was h-huh-horrible!”

Vetter had taken out his notebook. “What’s your name, mum?”

“Doris Freeman. My husband is Leonard Freeman. We’re staying at the Hotel Inter-Continental. We’re American citizens.” This time the

statement of nationality actually seemed to steady her a little. She sipped her coffee and put the mug down. Farnham saw that the palms of her hands were quite red. You'll feel that later, dearie, he thought.

Vetter was drudging it all down in his notebook. Now he looked momentarily at PC Farnham, just an unobtrusive flick of the eyes.

"Are you on holiday?" he asked.

"Yes ... two weeks here and one in Spain. We were supposed to have a week in Barcelona ... but this isn't helping find Lonnie! Why are you asking me these stupid questions?"

"Just trying to get the background, Mrs. Freeman," Farnham said. Without really thinking about it, both of them had adopted low, soothing voices. "Now you go ahead and tell us what happened. Tell it in your own words."

"Why is it so hard to get a taxi in London?" she asked abruptly.

Farnham hardly knew what to say, but Vetter responded as if the question were utterly germane to the discussion.

"Hard to say, mum. Tourists, partly. Why? Did you have trouble getting someone who'd take you out here to Crouch End?"

"Yes," she said. "We left the hotel at three and came down to Hatchard's. Do you know it?"

"Yes, mum," Vetter said. "Lovely big bookshop, isn't it?"

"We had no trouble getting a cab from the Inter-Continental ... they were lined up outside. But when we came out of Hatchard's, there was nothing. Finally, when one did stop, the driver just laughed and shook his head when Lonnie said we wanted to go to Crouch End."

"Aye, they can be right barstards about the suburbs, beggin your pardon, mum," Farnham said.

“He even refused a pound tip,” Doris Freeman said, and a very American perplexity had crept into her tone. “We waited for almost half an hour before we got a driver who said he’d take us. It was five-thirty by then, maybe quarter of six. And that was when Lonnie discovered he’d lost the address ...”

She clutched the mug again.

“Who were you going to see?” Vetter asked.

“A colleague of my husband’s. A lawyer named John Squales. My husband hadn’t met him, but their two firms were—” She gestured vaguely.

“Affiliated?”

“Yes, I suppose. When Mr. Squales found out we were going to be in London on vacation, he invited us to his home for dinner. Lonnie had always written him at his office, of course, but he had Mr. Squales’s home address on a slip of paper. After we got in the cab, he discovered he’d lost it. And all he could remember was that it was in Crouch End.”

She looked at them solemnly.

“Crouch End—I think that’s an ugly name.”

Vetter said, “So what did you do then?”

She began to talk. By the time she’d finished, her first cup of coffee and most of another were gone, and PC Vetter had filled up several pages of his notebook with his blocky, sprawling script.

*

Lonnie Freeman was a big man, and hunched forward in the roomy back seat of the black cab so he could talk to the driver, he looked to her amazingly as he had when she’d first seen him at a college basketball game in their senior year—sitting on the bench, his knees

somewhere up around his ears, his hands on their big wrists dangling between his legs. Only then he had been wearing basketball shorts and a towel slung around his neck, and now he was in a suit and tie. He had never gotten in many games, she remembered fondly, because he just wasn't that good. And he lost addresses.

The cabby listened indulgently to the tale of the lost address. He was an elderly man impeccably turned out in a gray summer-weight suit, the antithesis of the slouching New York cabdriver. Only the checked wool cap on the driver's head clashed, but it was an agreeable clash; it lent him a touch of rakish charm. Outside, the traffic flowed endlessly past on Haymarket; the theater nearby announced that *The Phantom of the Opera* was continuing its apparently endless run.

"Well, I tell you what, guv," the cabby said. "I'll take yer there to Crouch End, and we'll stop at a call box, and you check your governor's address, and off we go, right to the door."

"That's wonderful," Doris said, really meaning it. They had been in London six days now, and she could not recall ever having been in a place where the people were kinder or more civilized.

"Thanks," Lonnie said, and sat back. He put his arm around Doris and smiled. "See? No problem."

"No thanks to you," she mock-growled, and threw a light punch at his midsection.

"Right," the cabby said. "Heigh-ho for Crouch End."

It was late August, and a steady hot wind rattled the trash across the roads and whipped at the jackets and skirts of the men and women going home from work. The sun was settling, but when it shone between the buildings, Doris saw that it was beginning to take on the reddish cast of evening. The cabby hummed. She relaxed with Lonnie's arm around her—she had seen more of him in the last six

days than she had all year, it seemed, and she was very pleased to discover that she liked it. She had never been out of America before, either, and she had to keep reminding herself that she was in England, she was going to Barcelona, thousands should be so lucky.

Then the sun disappeared behind a wall of buildings, and she lost her sense of direction almost immediately. Cab rides in London did that to you, she had discovered. The city was a great sprawling warren of Roads and Mews and Hills and Closes (even Inns), and she couldn't understand how anyone could get around. When she had mentioned it to Lonnie the day before, he had replied that they got around very carefully... hadn't she noticed that all the cabbies kept the London Streetfinder tucked cozily away beneath the dash?

This was the longest cab ride they had taken. The fashionable section of town dropped behind them (in spite of that perverse going-around-in-circles feeling). They passed through an area of monolithic housing developments that could have been utterly deserted for all the signs of life they showed (no, she corrected herself to Vetter and Farnham in the small white room; she had seen one small boy sitting on the curb, striking matches), then an area of small, rather tatty-looking shops and fruit stalls, and then—no wonder driving in London was so disorienting to out-of-towners—they seemed to have driven smack into the fashionable section again.

“There was even a McDonald's,” she told Vetter and Farnham in a tone of voice usually reserved for references to the Sphinx and the Hanging Gardens.

“Was there?” Vetter replied, properly amazed and respectful—she had achieved a kind of total recall, and he wanted nothing to break the mood, at least until she had told them everything she could.

The fashionable section with the McDonald's as its centerpiece dropped away. They came briefly into the clear and now the sun was a solid orange ball sitting above the horizon, washing the streets with a strange light that made all the pedestrians look as if they were about to burst into flame.

“It was then that things began to change,” she said. Her voice had dropped a little. Her hands were trembling again.

Vetter leaned forward, intent. “Change? How? How did things change, Mrs. Freeman?”

They had passed a newsagent’s window, she said, and the signboard outside had read SIXTY LOST IN UNDERGROUND HORROR.

*

“Lonnie, look at that!”

“What?” He craned around, but the newsagent’s was already behind them.

“It said, ‘Sixty Lost in Underground Horror.’ Isn’t that what they call the subway? The Underground?”

“Yes—that or the tube. Was it a crash?”

“I don’t know.” She leaned forward. “Driver, do you know what that was about? Was there a subway crash?”

“A collision, mum? Not that I know of.”

“Do you have a radio?”

“Not in the cab, mum.”

“Lonnie?”

“Hmmm?”

But she could see that Lonnie had lost interest. He was going through his pockets again (and because he was wearing his three-piece suit, there were a lot of them to go through), having another hunt for the scrap of paper with John Squales’s address written on it.

The message chalked on the board played over and over in her mind, SIXTY KILLED IN TUBE CRASH, it should have read. But... SIXTY LOST IN UNDERGROUND HORROR. It made her uneasy. It didn't say "killed," it said "lost," the way news reports in the old days had always referred to sailors who had been drowned at sea.

UNDERGROUND HORROR.

She didn't like it. It made her think of graveyards, sewers, and flabby-pale, noisome things swarming suddenly out of the tubes themselves, wrapping their arms (tentacles, maybe) around the hapless commuters on the platforms, dragging them away to darkness... .

They turned right. Standing on the corner beside their parked motorcycles were three boys in leathers. They looked up at the cab and for a moment—the setting sun was almost full in her face from this angle—it seemed that the bikers did not have human heads at all. For that one moment she was nastily sure that the sleek heads of rats sat atop those black leather jackets, rats with black eyes staring at the cab. Then the light shifted just a tiny bit and she saw of course she had been mistaken; there were only three young men smoking cigarettes in front of the British version of the American candy store.

“Here we go,” Lonnie said, giving up the search and pointing out the window. They were passing a sign which read “Crouch Hill Road.” Elderly brick houses like sleepy dowagers had closed in, seeming to look down at the cab from their blank windows. A few kids passed back and forth, riding bikes or trikes. Two others were trying to ride a skateboard with no notable success. Fathers home from work sat together, smoking and talking and watching the children. It all looked reassuringly normal.

The cab drew up in front of a dismal-looking restaurant with a small spotted sign in the window reading FULLY LICENSED and a much larger one in the center which informed that within one could purchase curries to take away. On the inner ledge there slept a gigantic gray cat. Beside the restaurant was a call box.

“Here you are, guv,” the cabdriver said. “You find your friend’s address and I’ll track him down.”

“Fair enough,” Lonnie said, and got out.

Doris sat in the cab for a moment and then also emerged, deciding she felt like stretching her legs. The hot wind was still blowing. It whipped her skirt around her knees and then plastered an old ice-cream wrapper to her shin. She removed it with a grimace of disgust. When she looked up, she was staring directly through the plate-glass window at the big gray tom. It stared back at her, one-eyed and inscrutable. Half of its face had been all but clawed away in some long-ago battle. What remained was a twisted pinkish mass of scar tissue, one milky cataract, and a few tufts of fur.

It miaowed at her silently through the glass.

Feeling a surge of disgust, she went to the call box and peered in through one of the dirty panes. Lonnie made a circle at her with his thumb and forefinger and winked. Then he pushed ten-pence into the slot and talked with someone. He laughed—soundlessly through the glass. Like the cat. She looked over for it, but now the window was empty. In the dimness beyond she could see chairs up on tables and an old man pushing a broom. When she looked back, she saw that Lonnie was jotting something down. He put his pen away, held the paper in his hand—she could see an address was jotted on it—said one or two other things, then hung up and came out.

He wagged the address at her in triumph. “Okay, that’s th—” His eyes went past her shoulder and he frowned. “Where’s the stupid cab gone?”

She turned around. The taxi had vanished. Where it had stood there was only curbing and a few papers blowing lazily up the gutter. Across the street, two kids were clutching at each other and giggling. Doris noticed that one of them had a deformed hand—it looked more like a claw. She’d thought the National Health was supposed to take

care of things like that. The children looked across the street, saw her observing them, and fell into each other's arms, giggling again.

"I don't know," Doris said. She felt disoriented and a little stupid. The heat, the constant wind that seemed to blow with no gusts or drops, the almost painted quality of the light ...

*

"What time was it then?" Farnham asked suddenly.

"I don't know," Doris Freeman said, startled out of her recital. "Six, I suppose. Maybe twenty past."

"I see, go on," Farnham said, knowing perfectly well that in August sunset would not have begun—even by the loosest standards—until well past seven.

*

"Well, what did he do?" Lonnie asked, still looking around. It was almost as if he expected his irritation to cause the cab to pop back into view. "Just pick up and leave?"

"Maybe when you put your hand up," Doris said, raising her own hand and making the thumb-and-forefinger circle Lonnie had made in the call box, "maybe when you did that he thought you were waving him on."

"I'd have to wave a long time to send him on with two-fifty on the meter," Lonnie grunted, and walked over to the curb. On the other side of Crouch Hill Road, the two small children were still giggling. "Hey!" Lonnie called. "You kids!"

"You an American, sir?" the boy with the claw-hand called back.

"Yes," Lonnie said, smiling. "Did you see the cab over here? Did you see where it went?"

The two children seemed to consider the question. The boy's companion was a girl of about five with untidy brown braids sticking off in opposite directions. She stepped forward to the opposite curb, formed her hands into a megaphone, and still smiling—she screamed it through her megaphoned hands and her smile—she cried at them: “Bugger off, Joe!”

Lonnie's mouth dropped open.

“Sir! Sir! Sir!” the boy screeched, saluting wildly with his deformed hand. Then the two of them took to their heels and fled around the corner and out of sight, leaving only their laughter to echo back.

Lonnie looked at Doris, dumbstruck.

“I guess some of the kids in Crouch End aren't too crazy about Americans,” he said lamely.

She looked around nervously. The street now appeared deserted.

He slipped an arm around her. “Well, honey, looks like we hike.”

“I'm not sure I want to. Those two kids might've gone to get their big brothers.” She laughed to show it was a joke, but there was a shrill quality to the sound. The evening had taken on a surreal quality she didn't much like. She wished they had stayed at the hotel.

“Not much else we can do,” he said. “The street's not exactly overflowing with taxis, is it?”

“Lonnie, why would the cabdriver leave us here like that? He seemed so nice.”

“Don't have the slightest idea. But John gave me good directions. He lives in a street called Brass End, which is a very minor dead-end street, and he said it wasn't in the Streetfinder.” As he talked he was moving her away from the call box, from the restaurant that sold curries to take away, from the now-empty curb. They were walking

up Crouch Hill Road again. “We take a right onto Hillfield Avenue, left halfway down, then our first right ... or was it left? Anyway, onto Petrie Street. Second left is Brass End.”

“And you remember all that?”

“I’m a star witness,” he said bravely, and she just had to laugh. Lonnie had a way of making things seem better.

*

There was a map of the Crouch End area on the wall of the police station lobby, one considerably more detailed than the one in the London Streetfinder. Farnham approached it and studied it with his hands stuffed into his pockets. The station seemed very quiet now. Vetter was still outside—clearing some of the witchmoss from his brains, one hoped—and Raymond had long since finished with the woman who’d had her purse nicked.

Farnham put his finger on the spot where the cabby had most likely let them off (if anything about the woman’s story was to be believed, that was). The route to their friend’s house looked pretty straightforward. Crouch Hill Road to Hillfield Avenue, then a left onto Vickers Lane followed by a left onto Petrie Street. Brass End, which stuck off from Petrie Street like somebody’s afterthought, was no more than six or eight houses long. About a mile, all told. Even Americans should have been able to walk that far without getting lost.

“Raymond!” he called. “You still here?”

Sergeant Raymond came in. He had changed into streets and was putting on a light poplin windcheater. “Only just, my beardless darling.”

“Cut it,” Farnham said, smiling all the same. Raymond frightened him a little. One look at the spooky sod was enough to tell you he was standing a little too close to the fence that ran between the yard of

the good guys and that of the villains. There was a twisted white line of scar running like a fat string from the left corner of his mouth almost all the way to his Adam's apple. He claimed a pickpocket had once nearly cut his throat with a jagged bit of bottle. Claimed that's why he broke their fingers. Farnham thought that was the shit. He thought Raymond broke their fingers because he liked the sound they made, especially when they popped at the knuckles.

"Got a fag?" Raymond asked.

Farnham sighed and gave him one. As he lit it he asked, "Is there a curry shop on Crouch Hill Road?"

"Not to my knowledge, my dearest darling," Raymond said.

"That's what I thought."

"Got a problem, dear?"

"No," Farnham said, a little too sharply, remembering Doris Freeman's clotted hair and staring eyes.

*

Near the top of Crouch Hill Road, Doris and Lonnie Freeman turned onto Hillfield Avenue, which was lined with imposing and gracious-looking homes—nothing but shells, she thought, probably cut up with surgical precision into apartments and bed-sitters inside.

"So far so good," Lonnie said.

"Yes, it's—" she began, and that was when the low moaning arose.

They both stopped. The moaning was coming almost directly from their right, where a high hedge ran around a small yard. Lonnie started toward the sound, and she grasped his arm. "Lonnie, no!"

"What do you mean, no?" he asked. "Someone's hurt."

She stepped after him nervously. The hedge was high but thin. He was able to brush it aside and reveal a small square of lawn outlined with flowers. The lawn was very green. In the center of it was a black, smoking patch—or at least that was her first impression. When she peered around Lonnie’s shoulder again—his shoulder was too high for her to peer over it—she saw it was a hole, vaguely man-shaped. The tendrils of smoke were emanating from it.

SIXTY LOST IN UNDERGROUND HORROR, she thought abruptly.

The moaning was coming from the hole, and Lonnie began to force himself through the hedge toward it.

“Lonnie,” she said, “please, don’t.”

“Someone’s hurt,” he repeated, and pushed himself the rest of the way through with a bristly tearing sound. She saw him going toward the hole, and then the hedge snapped back, leaving her nothing but a vague impression of his shape as he moved forward. She tried to push through after him and was scratched by the short, stiff branches of the hedge for her trouble. She was wearing a sleeveless blouse.

“Lonnie!” she called, suddenly very afraid. “Lonnie, come back!”

“Just a minute, hon!”

The house looked at her impassively over the top of the hedge.

The moaning sounds continued, but now they sounded lower—guttural, somehow gleeful. Couldn’t Lonnie hear that?

“Hey, is somebody down there?” she heard Lonnie ask. “Is there—oh! Hey! Jesus!” And suddenly Lonnie screamed. She had never heard him scream before, and her legs seemed to turn to waterbags at the sound. She looked wildly for a break in the hedge, a path, and couldn’t see one anywhere. Images swirled before her eyes—the

bikers who had looked like rats for a moment, the cat with the pink chewed face, the boy with the claw-hand.

Lonnie! she tried to scream, but no words came out.

Now there were sounds of a struggle. The moaning had stopped. But there were wet, sloshing sounds from the other side of the hedge. Then, suddenly, Lonnie came flying back through the stiff dusty-green bristles as if he had been given a tremendous push. The left arm of his suit-coat was torn, and it was splattered with runnels of black stuff that seemed to be smoking, as the pit in the lawn had been smoking.

“Doris, run!”

“Lonnie, what—”

“Run!” His face pale as cheese.

Doris looked around wildly for a cop. For anyone. But Hillfield Avenue might have been a part of some great deserted city for all the life or movement she saw. Then she glanced back at the hedge and saw something else was moving behind there, something that was more than black; it seemed ebony, the antithesis of light.

And it was sloshing.

A moment later, the short, stiff branches of the hedge began to rustle. She stared, hypnotized. She might have stood there forever (so she told Vetter and Farnham) if Lonnie hadn't grabbed her arm roughly and shrieked at her—yes, Lonnie, who never even raised his voice at the kids, had shrieked—she might have been standing there yet. Standing there, or ...

But they ran.

Where? Farnham had asked, but she didn't know. Lonnie was totally undone, in a hysteria of panic and revulsion—that was all she really

knew. He clamped his fingers over her wrist like a handcuff and they ran from the house looming over the hedge, and from the smoking hole in the lawn. She knew those things for sure; all the rest was only a chain of vague impressions.

At first it had been hard to run, and then it got easier because they were going downhill. They turned, then turned again. Gray houses with high stoops and drawn green shades seemed to stare at them like blind pensioners. She remembered Lonnie pulling off his jacket, which had been splattered with that black goo, and throwing it away. At last they came to a wider street.

“Stop,” she panted. “Stop, I can’t keep up!” Her free hand was pressed to her side, where a red-hot spike seemed to have been planted.

And he did stop. They had come out of the residential area and were standing at the corner of Crouch Lane and Norris Road. A sign on the far side of Norris Road proclaimed that they were but one mile from Slaughter Town.

Town? Vetter suggested.

No, Doris Freeman said. Slaughter Town, with an “e.”

*

Raymond crushed out the cigarette he had cadged from Farnham. “I’m off,” he announced, and then looked more closely at Farnham. “My poppet should take better care of himself. He’s got big dark circles under his eyes. Any hair on your palms to go with it, my pet?” He laughed uproariously.

“Ever hear of a Crouch Lane?” Farnham asked.

“Crouch Hill Road, you mean.”

“No, I mean Crouch Lane.”

“Never heard of it.”

“What about Norris Road?”

“There’s the one cuts off from the high street in Basingstoke—”

“No, here.”

“No—not here, poppet.”

For some reason he couldn’t understand—the woman was obviously buzzed—Farnham persisted. “What about Slaughter Town?”

“Town, you said? Not Town?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“Never heard of it, but if I do, I believe I’ll steer clear.”

“Why’s that?”

“Because in the old Druid lingo, a touen or townen was a place of ritual sacrifice—where they abstracted your liver and lights, in other words.” And zipping up his windcheater, Raymond glided out.

Farnham looked after him uneasily. He made that last up, he told himself. What a hard copper like Sid Raymond knows about the Druids you could carve on the head of a pin and still have room for the Lord’s Prayer.

Right. And even if he had picked up a piece of information like that, it didn’t change the fact that the woman was ...

*

“Must be going crazy,” Lonnie said, and laughed shakily.

Doris had looked at her watch earlier and saw that somehow it had gotten to be quarter of eight. The light had changed; from a clear

orange it had gone to a thick, murky red that glared off the windows of the shops in Norris Road and seemed to face a church steeple across the way in clotted blood. The sun was an oblate sphere on the horizon.

“What happened back there?” Doris asked. “What was it, Lonnie?”

“Lost my jacket, too. Hell of a note.”

“You didn’t lose it, you took it off. It was covered with—”

“Don’t be a fool!” he snapped at her. But his eyes were not snappish; they were soft, shocked, wandering. “I lost it, that’s all.”

“Lonnie, what happened when you went through the hedge?”

“Nothing. Let’s not talk about it. Where are we?”

“Lonnie—”

“I can’t remember,” he said more softly. “It’s all a blank. We were there ... we heard a sound ... then I was running. That’s all I can remember.” And then he added in a frighteningly childish voice: “Why would I throw my jacket away? I liked that one. It matched the pants.” He threw back his head, gave voice to a frightening loonlike laugh, and Doris suddenly realized that whatever he had seen beyond the hedge had at least partially unhinged him. She was not sure the same wouldn’t have happened to her ... if she had seen. It didn’t matter. They had to get out of here. Get back to the hotel where the kids were.

“Let’s get a cab. I want to go home.”

“But John—” he began.

“Never mind John!” she cried. “It’s wrong, everything here is wrong, and I want to get a cab and go home!”

“Yes, all right. Okay.” Lonnie passed a shaking hand across his forehead. “I’m with you. The only problem is, there aren’t any.”

There was, in fact, no traffic at all on Norris Road, which was wide and cobbled. Directly down the center of it ran a set of old tram tracks. On the other side, in front of a flower shop, an ancient three-wheeled D-car was parked. Farther down on their own side, a Yamaha motorbike stood aslant on its kickstand. That was all. They could hear cats, but the sound was faraway, diffuse.

“Maybe the street’s closed for repairs,” Lonnie muttered, and then had done a strange thing ... strange, at least, for him, who was ordinarily so easy and self-assured. He looked back over his shoulder as if afraid they had been followed.

“We’ll walk,” she said.

“Where?”

“Anywhere. Away from Crouch End. We can get a taxi if we get away from here.” She was suddenly positive of that, if of nothing else.

“All right.” Now he seemed perfectly willing to entrust the leadership of the whole matter to her.

They began walking along Norris Road toward the setting sun. The faraway hum of the traffic remained constant, not seeming to diminish, not seeming to grow any, either. It was like the constant push of the wind. The desertion was beginning to nibble at her nerves. She felt they were being watched, tried to dismiss the feeling, and found that she couldn’t. The sound of their footfalls

(SIXTY LOST IN UNDERGROUND HORROR)

echoed back to them. The business at the hedge played on her mind more and more, and finally she had to ask again.

“Lonnie, what was it?”

He answered simply: “I don’t remember. And I don’t want to.”

They passed a market that was closed—a pile of coconuts like shrunken heads seen back-to were piled against the window. They passed a launderette where white machines had been pulled from the washed-out pink plasterboard walls like square teeth from dying gums. They passed a soap-streaked show window with an old SHOP TO LEASE sign in the front. Something moved behind the soap streaks, and Doris saw, peering out at her, the pink and tufted battle-scarred face of a cat. The same gray tom.

She consulted her interior workings and tickings and discovered that she was in a state of slowly building terror. She felt as if her intestines had begun to crawl sluggishly around and around within her belly. Her mouth had a sharp unpleasant taste, almost as if she had dosed with a strong mouthwash. The cobbles of Norris Road bled fresh blood in the sunset.

They were approaching an underpass. And it was dark under there. I can’t, her mind informed her matter-of-factly. I can’t go under there, anything might be under there, don’t ask me because I can’t.

Another part of her mind asked if she could bear for them to retrace their steps, past the empty shop with the travelling cat in it (how had it gotten from the restaurant to here? best not to ask, or even wonder about it too deeply), past the weirdly oral shambles of the launderette, past The Market of the Shrunken Heads. She didn’t think she could.

They had drawn closer to the underpass now. A strangely painted six-car train—it was bone-white—lunged over it with startling suddenness, a crazy steel bride rushing to meet her groom. The wheels kicked up bright spinners of sparks. They both leaped back involuntarily, but it was Lonnie who cried out. She looked at him and saw that in the last hour he had turned into someone she had never seen before, had never even suspected. His hair appeared somehow grayer, and while she told herself firmly—as firmly as she could—that it was just a trick of the light, it was the look of his hair

that decided her. Lonnie was in no shape to go back. Therefore, the underpass.

“Come on,” she said, and took his hand. She took it brusquely so he would not feel her own trembling. “Soonest begun, soonest done.” She walked forward and he followed docilely.

They were almost out—it was a very short underpass, she thought with ridiculous relief—when the hand grasped her upper arm.

She didn’t scream. Her lungs seemed to have collapsed like small crumpled paper sacks. Her mind wanted to leave her body behind and just ... fly. Lonnie’s hand parted from her own. He seemed unaware. He walked out on the other side—she saw him for just one moment silhouetted, tall and lanky, against the bloody, furious colors of the sunset, and then he was gone.

The hand grasping her upper arm was hairy, like an ape’s hand. It turned her remorselessly toward a heavy slumped shape leaning against the sooty concrete wall. It hung there in the double shadow of two concrete supporting pillars, and the shape was all she could make out... the shape, and two luminous green eyes.

“Give us a fag, love,” a husky cockney voice said, and she smelled raw meat and deep-fat-fried chips and something sweet and awful, like the residue at the bottom of garbage cans.

Those green eyes were cat’s eyes. And suddenly she became horribly sure that if the slumped shape stepped out of the shadows, she would see the milky cataract of eye, the pink ridges of scar tissue, the tufts of gray hair.

She tore free, backed up, and felt something skid through the air near her. A hand? Claws? A spitting, hissing sound—

Another train charged overhead. The roar was huge, brain-rattling. Soot sifted down like black snow. She fled in a blind panic, for the second time that evening not knowing where ... or for how long.

What brought her back to herself was the realization that Lonnie was gone. She had half collapsed against a dirty brick wall, breathing in great tearing gasps. She was still in Morris Road (at least she believed herself to be, she told the two constables; the wide way was still cobbled, and the tram tracks still ran directly down the center), but the deserted, decaying shops had given way to deserted, decaying warehouses. DAW-GLISH & SONS read the soot-begrimed signboard on one. A second had the name ALHAZRED emblazoned in ancient green across the faded brickwork. Below the name was a series of Arabic pothooks and dashes.

“Lonnie!” she called. There was no echo, no carrying in spite of the silence (no, not complete silence, she told them; there was still the sound of traffic, and it might have been closer, but not much). The word that stood for her husband seemed to drop from her mouth and fall like a stone at her feet. The blood of sunset had been replaced by the cool gray ashes of twilight. For the first time it occurred to her that night might fall upon her here in Crouch End—if she was still indeed in Crouch End—and that thought brought fresh terror.

She told Vetter and Farnham that there had been no reflection, no logical train of thought, on her part during the unknown length of time between their arrival at the call box and the final horror. She had simply reacted, like a frightened animal. And now she was alone. She wanted Lonnie, she was aware of that much but little else. Certainly it did not occur to her to wonder why this area, which must surely lie within five miles of Cambridge Circus, should be utterly deserted.

Doris Freeman set off walking, calling for her husband. Her voice did not echo, but her footfalls seemed to. The shadows began to fill Norris Road. Overhead, the sky was now purple. It might have been some distorting effect of the twilight, or her own exhaustion, but the warehouses seemed to lean hungrily over the road. The windows, caked with the dirt of decades—of centuries, perhaps—seemed to be staring at her. And the names on the signboards became progressively stranger, even lunatic, at the very least,

unpronounceable. The vowels were in the wrong places, and consonants had been strung together in a way that would make it impossible for any human tongue to get around them. CTHULHU KRYON read one, with more of those Arabic pothooks beneath it. YOGSOGGOTH read another. R'YELEH said yet another. There was one that she remembered particularly: NRTESN NYARLAHOTEP.

*

“How could you remember such gibberish?” Farnham asked her.

Doris Freeman shook her head, slowly and tiredly. “I don’t know. I really don’t. It’s like a nightmare you want to forget as soon as you wake up, but it won’t fade away like most dreams do; it just stays and stays and stays.”

*

Norris Road seemed to stretch on into infinity, cobbled, split by tram tracks. And although she continued to walk—she wouldn’t have believed she could run, although later, she said, she did—she no longer called for Lonnie. She was in the grip of a terrible, bone-rattling fear, a fear so great she would not have believed a human being could endure it without going mad or dropping dead. It was impossible for her to articulate her fear except in one way, and even this, she said, only began to bridge the gulf which had opened within her mind and heart. She said it was as if she were no longer on earth but on a different planet, a place so alien that the human mind could not even begin to comprehend it. The angles seemed different, she said. The colors seemed different. The ... but it was hopeless.

She could only walk under a gnarled-plum sky between the eldritch bulking buildings, and hope that it would end.

As it did.

She became aware of two figures standing on the sidewalk ahead of her—the children she and Lonnie had seen earlier. The boy was using his claw-hand to stroke the little girl's ratty braids.

"It's the American woman," the boy said.

"She's lost," said the girl.

"Lost her husband."

"Lost her way."

"Found the darker way."

"The road that leads into the funnel."

"Lost her hope."

"Found the Whistler from the Stars—"

"—Eater of Dimensions—"

"—the Blind Piper—"

Faster and faster their words came, a breathless litany, a flashing loom. Her head spun with them. The buildings leaned. The stars were out, but they were not her stars, the ones she had wished on as a girl or courted under as a young woman, these were crazed stars in lunatic constellations, and her hands went to her ears and her hands did not shut out the sounds and finally she screamed at them:

"Where's my husband? Where's Lonnie? What have you done to him?"

There was silence. And then the girl said: "He's gone beneath."

The boy: "Gone to the Goat with a Thousand Young."

The girl smiled—a malicious smile full of evil innocence. “He couldn’t well not go, could he? The mark was on him. You’ll go, too.”

“Lonnie! What have you done with—”

The boy raised his hand and chanted in a high fluting language that she could not understand—but the sound of the words drove Doris Freeman nearly mad with fear.

“The street began to move then,” she told Vetter and Farnham. “The cobbles began to undulate like a carpet. They rose and fell, rose and fell. The tram tracks came loose and flew into the air—I remember that, I remember the starlight shining on them—and then the cobbles themselves began to come loose, one by one at first, and then in bunches. They just flew off into the darkness. There was a tearing sound when they came loose. A grinding, tearing sound ... the way an earthquake must sound. And—something started to come through—”

“What?” Vetter asked. He was hunched forward, his eyes boring into her. “What did you see? What was it?”

“Tentacles,” she said, slowly and haltingly. “I think it was tentacles. But they were as thick as old banyan trees, as if each of them was made up of a thousand smaller ones ... and there were pink things like suckers... except sometimes they looked like faces ... one of them looked like Lonnie’s face ... and all of them were in agony. Below them, in the darkness under the street—in the darkness beneath—there was something else. Something like eyes ...”

At that point she had broken down, unable to go on for some time, and as it turned out, there was really no more to tell. The next thing she remembered with any clarity was cowering in the doorway of a closed newsagent’s shop. She might be there yet, she had told them, except that she had seen cars passing back and forth just up ahead, and the reassuring glow of arc-sodium streetlights. Two people had passed in front of her, and Doris had cringed farther back into the shadows, afraid of the two evil children. But these were not

children, she saw; they were a teenage boy and girl walking hand in hand. The boy was saying something about the new Martin Scorsese film.

She'd come out onto the sidewalk warily, ready to dart back into the convenient bolthole of the newsagent's doorway at a moment's notice, but there was no need. Fifty yards up was a moderately busy intersection, with cars and lorries standing at a stop-and-go light. Across the way was a jeweler's shop with a large lighted clock in the show window. A steel accordion grille had been drawn across, but she could still make out the time. It was five minutes of ten.

She had walked up to the intersection then, and despite the streetlights and the comforting rumble of traffic, she had kept shooting terrified glances back over her shoulder. She ached all over. She was limping on one broken heel. She had pulled muscles in her belly and both legs—her right leg was particularly bad, as if she had strained something in it.

At the intersection she saw that somehow she had come around to Hillfield Avenue and Tottenham Road. Under a streetlamp a woman of about sixty with her graying hair escaping from the rag it was done up in was talking to a man of about the same age. They both looked at Doris as if she were some sort of dreadful apparition.

"Police," Doris Freeman croaked. "Where's the police station? I'm an American citizen ... I've lost my husband ... I need the police."

"What's happened, then, lovey?" the woman asked, not unkindly. "You look like you've been through the wringer, you do."

"Car accident?" her companion asked.

"No. Not ... not ... Please, is there a police station near here?"

"Right up Tottenham Road," the man said. He took a package of Players from his pocket. "Like a cig? You look like you c'd use one."

“Thank you,” she said, and took the cigarette although she had quit nearly four years ago. The elderly man had to follow the jittering tip of it with his lighted match to get it going for her.

He glanced at the woman with her hair bound up in the rag. “I’ll just take a little stroll up with her, Evvie. Make sure she gets there all right.”

“I’ll come along as well, then, won’t I?” Evvie said, and put an arm around Doris’s shoulders. “Now what is it, lovey? Did someone try to mug you?”

“No,” Doris said. “It ... I ... I ... the street ... there was a cat with only one eye ... the street opened up ... I saw it... and they said something about a Blind Piper ... I’ve got to find Lonnie!”

She was aware that she was speaking incoherencies, but she seemed helpless to be any clearer. And at any rate, she told Vetter and Farnham, she hadn’t been all that incoherent, because the man and woman had drawn away from her, as if, when Evvie asked what the matter was, Doris had told her it was bubonic plague.

The man said something then—“Happened again,” Doris thought it was.

The woman pointed. “Station’s right up there. Globes hanging in front. You’ll see it.” Moving very quickly, the two of them began to walk away. The woman glanced back over her shoulder once; Doris Freeman saw her wide, gleaming eyes. Doris took two steps after them, for what reason she did not know. “Don’t ye come near!” Evvie called shrilly, and forked the sign of the evil eye at her. She simultaneously cringed against the man, who put an arm about her. “Don’t you come near, if you’ve been to Crouch End Townen!”

And with that, the two of them had disappeared into the night.

*

Now PC Farnham stood leaning in the doorway between the common room and the main filing room—although the back files Vetter had spoken of were certainly not kept here. Farnham had made himself a fresh cup of tea and was smoking the last cigarette in his pack—the woman had also helped herself to several.

She'd gone back to her hotel, in the company of the nurse Vetter had called—the nurse would be staying with her tonight, and would make a judgement in the morning as to whether the woman would need to go in hospital. The children would make that difficult, Farnham supposed, and the woman's being an American almost guaranteed a first-class cock-up. He wondered what she was going to tell the kiddies when they woke up tomorrow, assuming she was capable of telling them anything. Would she gather them round and tell them that the big bad monster of Crouch End Town

(Townen)

had eaten up Daddy like an ogre in a fairy-story?

Farnham grimaced and put down his teacup. It wasn't his problem. For good or for ill, Mrs. Freeman had become sandwiched between the British constabulary and the American Embassy in the great waltz of governments. It was none of his affair; he was only a PC who wanted to forget the whole thing. And he intended to let Vetter write the report. Vetter could afford to put his name to such a bouquet of lunacy; he was an old man, used up. He would still be a PC on the night shift when he got his gold watch, his pension, and his council flat. Farnham, on the other hand, had ambitions of making sergeant soon, and that meant he had to watch every little posey.

And speaking of Vetter, where was he? He'd been taking the night air for quite awhile now.

Farnham crossed the common room and went out. He stood between the two lighted globes and stared across Tottenham Road. Vetter was nowhere in sight. It was past 3:00 A.M., and silence lay

thick and even, like a shroud. What was that line from Wordsworth? "All that great heart lying still," or something like.

He went down the steps and stood on the sidewalk, feeling a trickle of unease now. It was silly, of course, and he was angry with himself for allowing the woman's mad story to gain even this much of a foothold in his head. Perhaps he deserved to be afraid of a hard copper like Sid Raymond.

Farnham walked slowly up to the corner, thinking he would meet Vetter coming back from his night stroll. But he would go no farther, if the station was left empty even for a few moments, there would be hell to pay if it was discovered. He reached the corner and looked around. It was funny, but all the arc-sodiums seemed to have gone out up here. The entire street looked different without them. Would it have to be reported, he wondered? And where was Vetter?

He would walk just a little farther, he decided, and see what was what. But not far. It simply wouldn't do to leave the station unattended for long.

Just a little way.

*

Vetter came in less than five minutes after Farnham had left. Farnham had gone in the opposite direction, and if Vetter had come along a minute earlier, he would have seen the young constable standing indecisively at the corner for a moment before turning it and disappearing forever.

"Farnham?"

No answer but the buzz of the clock on the wall.

"Farnham?" he called again, and then wiped his mouth with the palm of his hand.

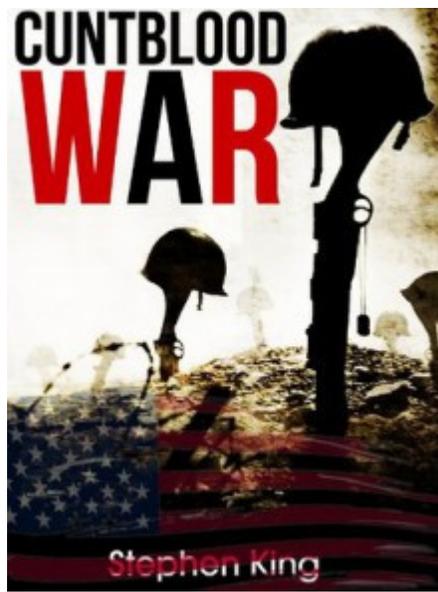
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Lonnie Freeman was never found. Eventually his wife (who had begun to gray around the temples) flew back to America with her children. They went on Concorde. A month later she attempted suicide. She spent ninety days in a rest home and came out much improved. Sometimes when she cannot sleep—this occurs most frequently on nights when the sun goes down in a ball of red and orange—she creeps into her closet, knee-walks under the hanging dresses all the way to the back, and there she writes Beware the Goat with a Thousand Young over and over with a soft pencil. It seems to ease her somehow to do this.

PC Robert Farnham left a wife and two-year-old twin girls. Sheila Farnham wrote a series of angry letters to her MP, insisting that something was going on, something was being covered up, that her Bob had been enticed into taking some dangerous sort of undercover assignment. He would have done anything to make sergeant, Mrs. Farnham repeatedly told the MP. Eventually that worthy stopped answering her letters, and at about the same time Doris Freeman was coming out of the rest home, her hair almost entirely white now, Mrs. Farnham moved back to Essex, where her parents lived. Eventually she married a man in a safer line of work—Frank Hobbs is a bumper inspector on the Ford assembly line. It had been necessary to get a divorce from her Bob on grounds of desertion, but that was easily managed.

Vetter took early retirement about four months after Doris Freeman had stumbled into the station in Tottenham Lane. He did indeed move into council housing, a two-above-the-shops in Frimley. Six months later he was found dead of a heart attack, a can of Harp Lager in his hand.

And in Crouch End, which is really a quiet suburb of London, strange things still happen from time to time, and people have been known to lose their way. Some of them lose it forever.



CUNTBLOOD WAR

Stephen King

Let author Stephen King take you on one of the greatest adventures of all time! Follow 15 year old general Matt Carter as he uses his military skills to help stop a deadly terrorist!

General Matt Carter entered the conference room and adjusted his general's hat to make sure it was in the correct position. He surmised this was like a nervous tic, caused by the fact that he was entering a conference room full of the most important heads of the American Government.

Including President Hispanez, the first latino president in history.

This was a proud moment for General Carter, President Hispanez had personally selected General Carter to be head of security for this event, an awards ceremony honoring superstar Katy Perry for being the best person ever.

Most people would not consider it unusual for a General to be put in charge of a high profile event, especially when the President was in attendance but most people didn't know that General Matt Carter was only sixteen years old. A loose cannon with a blonde mop top and the hot ripped look of a young Chad Michael Murray.

Most people in the military did not approve of General Matt Carter's fly by the seat of his panties style of military command, but General Matt Carter really couldn't give a fuck. His way got things done, he'd won ten wars in under three years, including Iraq, Israel, the jungle, Africa, and operations on the Falklands Island. He'd even spent ten years on the down low in Harlem.

Matt Carter had an eagle eye and once, back during the Armenian genocide he had used his Luger pistol to shoot a rogue F-15 out of the sky. It was during this same genocide that Matt had met his best friend, the cat standing beside him right at that moment, the cat who always wore a pair of golden Marshwood style frames, Prof. Mark Kitteh.

“For the love of meow how long is this event gonna last Matthew? I know we are best friends but sometimes I resent going to these stuffy functions, it feels like back in the old days at Oxford being stuck with a bunch of stuffy PHD candidates,” Prof. Kitteh said.

“Don’t sweat it Prof. Kitteh, ” said General Matt Carter, “The President is about to give Katy Perry her gold medal and then we just have to escort her out.”

“Okay Matthew but you know I wanted to make it to Knotts Berry Farm in time to ride the Ghost Rider.”

“We’ll make it, today is gonna be a good day.”

But the door to the conference room exploded in a shower of wooden splinters. Startling everyone in the room and causing an aftershock that made Katy Perry’s boobs bounce up and down.

Most of the men in the room had been knocked over by the blast but General Matt Carter and Prof. Kitteh has rushed to the side of President Hispanez and Katy Perry. Prof. Kitteh buried his fuzzy kitteh body into Katy Perry’s ample cleavage to make sure she was safe.

“Oh thank you Prof. Kitteh, you are so sexy and intellectual will you lick my kitty later on tonight?” Katy Perry said.

“Of course I will lick your pussy Katy Perry, I would love to just let my tongue linger on your clit for an eternity. That taste of your pussy juice would taste just like the stars.”

“You guys need to cool out that sex stuff for a minute,” General Matt Carter said while brandishing his Walther PPK pistol, just like the kind James Bond uses.

General Matt Carter also stripped out of his General’s uniform so that he was only wearing a white t-shirt and loose blue jeans over a pair of brown Air Jordans. Over his white t-shirt Matt wore a Detroit

Pistons Jersey in honor of Bison Dele, the NBA star who got drowned under the ocean in a murder gone bad.

“I’m more comfortable now,” General Matt Carter said, “And ready to track the source of this explosion.”

“I believe the source of the explosion lays hither,” Prof. Kitteh said, “Beyond that door.”

“Tell me something I don’t know,” General Matt Carter said.

“General Carter, ” President Hispanez said, “As the first hispanic president I demand to know what has just occurred.”

“In laymen’s terms,” Prof Kitteh said, “A compound of gunpowder and plastique explosive devices were ignited by a spark thrower.”

“Can the science Prof. Kitteh,” General Matt Carter said, “Some bad dude apparently decided to crash the party President Hispanez and I mean literally crash the party by crashing a bomb through the door.”

“Actually gentlemen,” said the lanky dark haired lady who stepped elegantly through the shattered door, “It wasn’t any kind of bomb at all, just my Anne Sexton powers.”

Then the dark haired foxy lady ripped a medal off her neck and tossed it like a discus at Katy Perry’s face. The medal slammed into Katy Perry’s face, crushed her nose inward into her brain, killing her instantly as her gray matter was flooded with pieces of broken bone.

The medal then returned to Anne Sexton’s long manicured fingers as if it was Thor’s hammer.

“Do you realize what you just did ese?” President Hispanez said.

“Yes,” Anne Sexton said, “I just used my Pulitzer prize to kill Katy Perry.”

“Why would you kill the best superstar ever?” Prof. Kitteh said.

“I don’t know,” Anne Sexton said as she threw her Pulitzer into Prof. Kitteh’s skull, exploding it to pieces, his brain fragments splattering General Matt Carter’s face so bad brain pieces went up his nose and made him sneeze, “Why did I just kill you?”

General Matt Carter blew his nose and then pointed his Walther PPK at Anne Sexton’s pussy.

“You just fucked yourself Anne Sexton, I’m gonna shoot you in your pussy and watch you bleed to death.”

“As much as I find you to be foxy and hot I’m afraid I just don’t have the time to get fucked by a bullet right now,” Anne Sexton said.

And with that Anne Sexton launced her Pulitzer into the air and held onto the ribbon trailing from it. The medal tore through the ceiling and pulled Anne Sexton up through the whole and into the sky like some kind of rocketship powered by poetry.

General Matt Carter lunged for the door but President Hispanez grabbed his shoulder.

“Lay off it Hispanez, I’m in a rush.”

“Listen General, I mean Matt, we’re friends first, colleagues second. You just lost your best friend. You’re too upset to handle this case.”

“Hector, we’re boys, Mark was your friend too, you have to let me go after her.”

“I know Matt, Hector would totally be down with what you are saying but in this room, on this day I’m not Hector Hispanez, I’m President Hispanez. I’m sorry Matt, I can’t let your personal feelings lead to an international incident. I’m calling in Shipwreck to take care of this.”

“Fuck Shipwreck and his stupid parrot Hector. You are letting me take this case, this is personal.”

“I’m sorry Matt,” Hector Hispanez said, “This is a business. Give me your gun and your general’s hat.”

“Fuck it yo,” said General Matt Carter, “I’m done with the military.”

Former General Matt Carter threw his gun and General’s hat on the floor of the conference room, which was located at the Sheraton Hotel.

“Don’t do this Matthew,” Hector Hispanez said, “You still have a solid career in the military...behind a desk.”

“I’m not in the military anymore,” Matt Carter said as he pulled out his switchblade and walked out the door.

Vice Chancellor Corwin approached President Hispanez with a shocked look on his face and brushed explosion debris and blood from his hair.

“President Hispanez, I am on the line with Shipwreck right now, he wants to know how to proceed.”

“Tell that Hawaiiin shirt wearing piece of shit that he can proceed to go fuck himself.”

“What the devil?” Vice Chancellor Corwin explained.

“Fuck this President shit,” said Hector Hispanez, “Mark Kiteh was my friend too, and so is Matt. Just call the chief of police and tell him to get me an unmarked car and a shotgun, I’m getting Matt’s back. I’m taking Anne Sexton down.”

“Whatever you say Hector,” Vice Chancellor Corwin said.

“And Vice Chancellor Corwin?”

“Yes Hector?”

“Tell that fucking no good, on the down low, cocksucking mother fucker to make sure she scratches the serial numbers off that fucking sawed off shotgun.”

#

Matt Carter stopped at his small studio apartment in Cincinnati to shower and change into a blue tracksuit.

The studio wasn't much but it suited his needs as a young bachelor always on the go.

Without his General's salary Matt was going to have to find another way to pay rent but he wasn't concerned with matters such as that right now.

Matt Carter was only concerned with revenge.

The problem was if Anne Sexton had the ability to take to the skies Matt was going to need to get his gyrocopter back from the boys at the docks.

And that meant Matt was going to have to do the one thing he promised himself he would never do.

Squash the beef with Nick Ramirez and the Sanchez boys.

Easier said than done thought Matt Carter as he wrapped a doo rag around his skull to reign in his unruly blonde locks.

I am also gonna need a haircut at some point, though Matt, as he slipped out the door while his feet whispered inside his soft Easy Spirit slip-on flats.

#

Hector Hispanez entered the office of the chief of police with a frowny face.

“What gives Chief Givens?”

Chief Robin Givens stopped painting her toe nails and slipped her pink Louboutin pumps back onto her feet. Then she uncrossed her shapely black legs and squeezed her chocolate boobs together.

“Listen Hector, your President, what kind of Chief of Police would I be if I just handed out guns and unmarked cars like candy?”

Hector threw his President’s badge down at Robin Givens feet.

“Fuck it, Matt Carter and Mark Kitch were my two best friend ever. We had a tight bond kind of like the characters in that movie Sleepers.”

“Okay Hector, you don’t want to be President then it’s done,” Robin Givens texted a bunch of stuff into her phone.

“What did you just do?”

“I just texted Vice Chancellor Corwin, he’s president now.”

“So can I have my shotgun and unmarked car now?”

“Sure just one thing though,” Robin Givens said.

“What’s that?”

“Suck my toes,” Robin Givens pointed down to her Louboutins.

“Sure,” Hector said, “That is really hot.”

#

“Matt Carter, I thought I smelled pussy stink around here,” Burt Sanchez said from his tire swing hanging over the shark tank at the docks.

“What’s up Burt,” Matt Carter said, “Listen where is Nick Ramirez and your brother Terry.”

“Fuck you wanna know where them guys be?” laughed Burt Sanchez with a bad sneer.

“Listen Burt, I’m here to make peace, squash the beef.”

“Oh yeah. Wonder why?” laughed Burt Sanchez, “You got a taste for the skies?”

“This isn’t just about the gyrocopter.”

“Be a hot day up in hell the day I believe that bull tripe,” giggled Burt Sanchez furiously.

“Damn it Burt,” Matt Carter said as he slashed Burt Sanchez’s thick Puerto Rican throat with his pearl handled switchblade, “I’m off the rails now, don’t you get it?”

Just then Matt heard a light clapping and looked up to see Nick Ramirez standing next to Terry Sanchez.

“Bravo Carter,” said Nick Ramirez, “I applaud your furiousness.”

“Can it Ramirez,” Matt Carter said, “I’m here to squash the beef for once.”

“Squash the beef? You just killed my brother in cold blood,” Terry Sanchez fumed.

Nick Ramirez pulled out a grenade and stuck it up Terry's ass, then he pulled the pin and kicked him off the docks into the ocean.

Terry screamed as he plunged through the cold water and his ass exploded in a shower of shit and guts.

A shit and gut burst splashed the lapel of Matt's blue tracksuit.

"Nice move Ramirez."

"That's what I think about peace Carter, I don't squash beefs and neither do you. You came here for that good for nothing gyrocopter but I won it off you fair and square during a gambling match."

"You cheated at that gambling match Ramirez," Matt pointed his switchblade at Ramirez.

To be totally continued...

THE CURSED EXPEDITION

Stephen King

“Well,” said Jimmy Keller, looking across to the gantry to where the rocket rested in the middle of the desert. A lonely wind blew across the desert, and Hugh Bullford said, “Yeah. It’s about time to leave for Venus. Why? Why do we want to go to Venus?”

“I don’t know,” Keller said. “I just don’t know.”

The rocket ship touched down on Venus. Bullford checked the air and said in amazed tones, “Why, it’s good old type Earth air! Perfectly breathable.”

They went out, and it was Keller’s turn for amazement. “Why, it’s just like spring on earth! Everything’s lush and green and beautiful. Why ... it’s Paradise!”

They ran out. The fruits were exotic and delicious, the temperature perfect. When night fell, they slept outside.

“I’m going to call it the Garden of Eden,” said Keller enthusiastically.

Bullford stared into the fire. “I don’t like this place, Jimmy.’ It feels all wrong. There’s something ... evil about it.”

“You’re space happy.” Keller scoffed. “Sleep it off.”

The next morning James Keller was dead.

There was a look of horror on his face that Bullford never hoped to see again.

After the burial, Bullford called Earth. He got no reply. The radio was dead. Bullford took it apart and put it together. There was nothing wrong with it, but the fact remained: it didn’t work.

Bullford’s worry doubled itself. He ran outside. The landscape was the same pleasant and happy. But Bullford could see the evil in it.

“You killed him!” he cried. “I know it!”

Suddenly the ground opened up and it slithered toward him. In near panic, he ran back to the ship. But not before he got a piece of soil. .

He analyzed the soil and then panic took him. Venus was alive.

Suddenly the space ship tilted and went over. Bullford screamed. But the soil closed over it and almost seemed to lick its lips.

Then it reset itself, waiting for the next victim...

THE DEATH OF JACK HAMILTON

Stephen King

Want you to get one thing straight from the start: wasn't nobody on earth didn't like my pal Johnnie Dillinger, except Melvin Purvis of the F.B.I. Purvis was J. Edgar Hoover's right-hand man, and he hated Johnnie like poison. Everyone else—well, Johnnie had a way of making folks like him, that's all. And he had a way of making people laugh. God makes it come right in the end, that's something he used to say. And how can you not like a guy with that kind of philosophy?

But people don't want to let a man like that die. You'd be surprised how many folks still say it wasn't Johnnie the Feds knocked down in Chicago beside the Biograph Theater on July 22, 1934. After all, it was Melvin Purvis who'd been in charge of hunting Johnnie down, and, besides being mean, Purvis was a goddam fool (the sort of man who'd try to piss out a window without remembering to open it first). You won't hear no better from me, either. Little fag of a dandy, how I hated him! How we all did!

We got away from Purvis and the Gees after the shootout at Little Bohemia, Wisconsin—all of us! The biggest mystery of the year was how that goddam pansy ever kept his job. Johnnie once said, "J. Edgar probably can't get that good a blow job from a dame." How we laughed! Sure, Purvis got Johnnie in the end, but only after setting an ambush outside the Biograph and shooting him in the back while he was running down an alley. He fell down in the muck and the cat shit and said, "How's this, then?" and died.

Still folks won't believe it. Johnnie was handsome, they say, looked almost like a movie star. The fella the Gees shot outside the Biograph had a fat face, all swollen up and bloated like a cooked sausage. Johnnie was barely thirty-one, they say, and the mug the cops shot that night looked forty, easy! Also (and here they drop their voices to a whisper), everyone knows John Dillinger had a pecker the size of a Louisville Slugger. That fella Purvis ambushed outside the Biograph didn't have nothing but the standard six inches. And then there's the matter of that scar on his upper lip. You can see it clear as day in the morgue photographs (like the one where some yo-yo is holding up my old pal's head and looking all solemn, as if to

tell the world once and for all that Crime Does Not Pay). The scar cuts the side of Johnnie's mustache in two. Everyone knows John Dillinger never had a scar like that, people say; just look at any of the other pictures. God knows there's enough of them.

There's even a book that says Johnnie didn't die—that he lived on long after the rest of his running buddies, and finished up in Mexico, living in a haci and pleasing any number of senoras and señoritas with his oversized tool. The book claims that my old pal died on November 20, 1963—two days before Kennedy—at the ripe old age of sixty, and it wasn't no federal bullet that took him off but a plain old heart attack, that John Dillinger died in bed.

It's a nice story, but it ain't true.

Johnnie's face looks big in those last photos because he'd really packed on the pounds. He was the type who eats when he's nervous, and after Jack Hamilton died, in Aurora, Illinois, Johnnie felt he was next. Said as much, in that gravel pit where we took poor old Jack.

As for his tool—well, I'd known Johnnie ever since we met at Pendleton Reformatory in Indiana. I saw him dressed and undressed, and Homer Van Meter is here to tell you that he had a good one, but not an especially great one. (I'll tell you who had a great one, if you want to know: Dock Barker—the mama's boy! Ha!)

Which brings me to the scar on Johnnie's upper lip, the one you can see cutting through his mustache in those pictures where he's lying on the cooling board. The reason the scar doesn't show in any of Johnnie's other pictures is that he got it near the end. It happened in Aurora, while Jack (Red) Hamilton, our old pal, was on his deathbed. That's what I want to tell you about: how Johnnie Dillinger got the scar on his upper lip.

*

Me and Johnnie and Red Hamilton got away from the Little Bohemia shootout through the kitchen windows in back, making our way down the side of the lake while Purvis and his idiots were still pouring lead into the front of the lodge. Boy, I hope the kraut who owned the place had insurance! The first car we found belonged to an elderly neighbor couple, and it wouldn't start. We had better luck with the second—a Ford coupe that belonged to a carpenter just up the road. Johnnie put him in the driver's seat, and he chauffeured us a good way back toward St. Paul. Then he was invited to step out—which he did quite willingly—and I took over.

We crossed the Mississippi about twenty miles downriver from St. Paul, and although the local cops were all on the lookout for what they called the Dillinger Gang, I think we would have been all right if Jack Hamilton hadn't lost his hat while we were making our escape. He was sweating like a pig—he always did when he was nervous—and when he found a rag on the backseat of the carpenter's car he whipped it into a kind of rope and tied it around his head, Injun style. That was what caught the eye of those cops parked on the Wisconsin side of the Spiral Bridge as we went past them, and they came after us for a closer look.

That might have been the end of us right there, but Johnnie always had the Devil's own luck—until the Biograph, anyway. He put a cattle truck right between us and them, and the cops couldn't get past.

“Step on it, Homer!” Johnnie shouts at me. He was in the backseat, and in rare good humor from the sound of him. “Make it walk!”

I did, too, and we left the cattle truck in the dust, with those cops stuck behind it. So long, Mother, I'll write when I get work. Ha!

Once it seemed we had them buried for good, Jack says, “Slow down, you damned fool—no sense getting picked up for speeding.”

So I slowed down to thirty-five and for a quarter of an hour everything was fine. We were talking about Little Bohemia, and whether or not Lester (the one they were always calling Baby Face)

might have gotten away, when all at once there's the crackle of rifles and pistols, and the sound of bullets whining off the pavement. It was those hick cops from the bridge. They'd caught up, creeping easy the last ninety or a hundred yards, and were close enough now to be shooting for the tires—they probably weren't entirely sure, even then, that it was Dillinger.

They weren't in doubt for long. Johnnie broke out the back window of the Ford with the butt of his pistol and started shooting back. I mashed the gas pedal again and got that Ford all the way up to fifty, which was a tearing rush in those days. There wasn't much traffic, but what there was I passed any way I could—on the left, on the right, in the ditch. Twice I felt the driver's-side wheels go up, but we never tipped. Nothing like a Ford when it came to a getaway. Once Johnnie wrote to Henry Ford himself. "When I'm in a Ford, I can make any car take my dust," he told Mr. Ford, and we surely dusted them that day.

We paid a price, though. There were these spink! spink! spink! noises, and a crack ran up the windshield and a slug—I'm pretty sure it was a .45—fell dead on the dashboard. It looked like a big black elm beetle.

Jack Hamilton was in the passenger seat. He got his tommy gun off the floor and was checking the drum, ready to lean out the window, I imagine, when there came another of those spink! noises. Jack says, "Oh! Bastard! I'm hit!" That bullet had to have come in the busted back window and how it missed Johnnie to hit Jack I don't know.

"Are you all right?" I shouted. I was hung over the wheel like a monkey and driving like one, too, very likely. I passed a Coulee Dairy truck on the right, honking all the time, yelling for that white-coat-farmer-son-of-a-bitch to get out of my road. "Jack, are you all right?"

"I'm okay, I'm fine!" he says, and shoves himself and his sub gun out the window, almost to his waist. Only, at first the milk truck was in the way. I could see the driver in the mirror, gawking at us from under his little hat. And when I looked over at Jack as he leaned out I could

see a hole, just as neat and round as something you'd draw with a pencil, in the middle of his overcoat. There was no blood, just that little black hole.

"Never mind Jack, just run the son of a bitch!" Johnnie shouted at me.

I ran it. We gained maybe half a mile on the milk truck, and the cops stuck behind it the whole while because there was a guardrail on one side and a line of slowpoke traffic coming the other way. We turned hard, around a sharp curve, and for a moment both the milk truck and the police car were out of sight. Suddenly, on the right, there was a gravel road all grown in with weeds.

"In there!" Jack gasps, falling back into the passenger seat, but I was already turning in.

It was an old driveway. I drove about seventy yards, over a little rise and down the other side, ending at a farmhouse that looked long empty. I killed the engine, and we all got out and stood behind the car.

"If they come, we'll give em a show," Jack says. "I ain't going to no electric chair like Harry Pierpont."

But no one came, and after ten minutes or so we got back in the car and drove out to the main road, all slow and careful. And that's when I saw something I didn't like much. "Jack," I says, "you're bleeding out your mouth. Look out or it'll be on your shirt."

Jack wiped his mouth with the big finger of his right hand, looked at the blood on it, and then gave me a smile that I still see in my dreams: big and broad and scared to death. "I just bit the inside of my cheek," says he. "I'm all right."

"You sure?" Johnnie asks. "You sound kind of funny."

“I can’t catch all my breath just yet,” Jack says. He wiped his big finger across his mouth again and there was less blood, and that seemed to satisfy him. “Let’s get the fuck out of here.”

“Turn back toward the Spiral Bridge, Homer,” Johnnie says, and I did like he told me. Not all the stories about Johnnie Dillinger are true, but he could always find his way home, even after he didn’t have no home no more, and I always trusted him.

We were once again doing a perfectly legal parson-go-to-meeting thirty miles per, when Johnnie saw a Texaco station and told me to turn off to the right. We were soon on country gravel roads, Johnnie calling lefts and rights, even though all the roads looked the same to me: just wheel ruts running between clapped-out cornfields. The roads were muddy, and there were still scraps of snow in some of the fields. Every now and then there’d be some hick kid watching us go by. Jack was getting quieter and quieter. I asked him how he was doing and he said, “I’m all right.”

“Yes, well, we ought to get you looked at when we cool off a little,” Johnnie said. “And we have to get your coat mended, too. With that hole in it, it looks like somebody shot you!” He laughed, and so did I. Even Jack laughed. Johnnie could always cheer you up.

“I don’t think it went deep,” Jack said, just as we came out on Route 43. “I’m not bleeding out of my mouth anymore—look.” He turned to show Johnnie his finger, which now just had a maroon smear on it. But when he twisted back into his seat blood poured out of his mouth and nose.

“I think it went deep enough,” Johnnie said. “We’ll take care of you—if you can still talk, you’re likely fine.”

“Sure,” Jack said. “I’m fine.” His voice was smaller than ever.

“Fine as a fiddler’s fuck,” I said.

“Aw, shut up, you dummocks,” he said, and we all had a laugh. They laughed at me a lot. It was all in fun.

About five minutes after we got back on the main road, Jack passed out. He slumped against the window, and a thread of blood trickled from one corner of his mouth and smeared on the glass. It reminded me of swatting a mosquito that’s had its dinner—the claret everywhere. Jack still had the rag on his head, but it had gone crooked. Johnny took it off and cleaned the blood from Jack’s face with it. Jack muttered and raised his hands as if to push Johnnie away, but they dropped back into his lap.

“Those cops will have radioed ahead,” Johnnie says. “If we go to St. Paul, we’re finished. That’s what I think. How about you, Homer?”

“The same,” I says. “What does that leave? Chicago?”

“Yep,” he says. “Only first we have to ditch this motor. They’ll have the plates by now. Even if they didn’t, it’s bad luck. It’s a damn hoodoo.”

“What about Jack?” I says.

“Jack will be all right,” he says, and I knew to say no more on the subject.

We stopped about a mile down the road, and Johnnie shot out the front tire of the hoodoo Ford while Jack leaned against the hood, looking pale and sick.

When we needed a car, it was always my job to flag one down. “People who wouldn’t stop for any of the rest of us will stop for you,” Johnnie said once. “Why is that, I wonder?”

Harry Pierpont answered him. This was back in the days when it was still the Pierpont Gang instead of the Dillinger Gang. “Because he looks like a Homer,” he said. “Wasn’t ever anyone looked so much like a Homer as Homer Van Meter does.”

We all laughed at that, and now here I was again, and this time it was really important. You'd have to say life or death.

Three or four cars went by and I pretended to be fiddling with the tire. A farm truck was next, but it was too slow and waddly. Also, there were some fellas in the back. Driver slows down and says, "You need any help, amigo?"

"I'm fine," I says. "Workin' up a appetite for lunch. You go right on."

He gives me a laugh and on he went. The fellas in the back also waved.

Next up was another Ford, all by its lonesome. I waved my arms for them to stop, standing where they couldn't help but see that flat shoe. Also, I was giving them a grin. That big one that says I'm just a harmless Homer by the side of the road.

It worked. The Ford stopped. There was three folks inside, a man and a young woman and a fat baby. A family.

"Looks like you got a flat there, partner," the man says. He was wearing a suit and a topcoat, both clean but not what you'd call Grade A.

"Well, I don't know how bad it can be," I says, "when it's only flat on the bottom."

We was still laughing over that just like it was new when Johnnie and Jack come out of the trees with their guns drawn.

"Just hold still, sir," Jack says. "No one is going to get hurt."

The man looked at Jack, looked at Johnnie, looked at Jack again. Then his eyes went back to Johnnie and his mouth dropped open. I seen it a thousand times, but it always tickled me.

"You're Dillinger!" he gasps, and then shoots his hands up.

“Pleased to meet you, sir,” Johnnie says, and grabs one of the man’s hands out of the air. “Get those mitts down, would you?”

Just as he did, another two or three cars came along—country-go-to-town types, sitting up straight as sticks in their old muddy sedans. We didn’t look like nothing but a bunch of folks at the side of the road getting ready for a tire-changing party.

Jack, meanwhile, went to the driver’s side of the new Ford, turned off the switch, and took the keys. The sky was white that day, as if with rain or snow, but Jack’s face was whiter.

“What’s your name, Ma’am?” Jack asks the woman. She was wearing a long gray coat and a cute sailor’s cap.

“Deelie Francis,” she says. Her eyes were as big and dark as plums. “That’s Roy. He’s my husband. Are you going to kill us?”

Johnnie give her a stern look and says, “We are the Dillinger Gang, Mrs. Francis, and we have never killed anyone.” Johnnie always made this point. Harry Pierpont used to laugh at him and ask him why he wasted his breath, but I think Johnnie was right to do that. It’s one of the reasons he’ll be remembered long after the straw-hat-wearing little pansy is forgot.

“That’s right,” Jack says. “We just rob banks, and not half as many as they say. And who is this fine little man?” He chucked the kiddo under the chin. He was fat, all right; looked like W. C. Fields.

“That’s Buster,” Deelie Francis says.

“Well, he’s a regular little bouncer, ain’t he?” Jack smiled. There was blood on his teeth. “How old is he? Three or so?”

“Just barely two and a half,” Mrs. Francis says proudly.

“Is that so?”

“Yes, but he’s big for his age. Mister, are you all right? You’re awful pale. And there’s blood on your—”

Johnnie speaks up then. “Jack, can you drive this one into the trees?” He pointed at the carpenter’s old Ford.

“Sure,” Jack says.

“Flat tire and all?”

“You just try me. It’s just that ... I’m awful thirsty. Ma’am—Missus Francis—do you have anything to drink?”

She turned around and bent over—not easy with that horse of a baby in her arms—and got a thermos from the back.

Another couple of cars went puttering by. The folks inside waved, and we waved back. I was still grinning fit to split, trying to look just as Homer as a Homer could be. I was worried about Jack and didn’t know how he could stay on his feet, let alone tip up that thermos and swig what was inside. Iced tea, she told him, but he seemed not to hear. When he handed it back to her, there were tears rolling down his cheeks. He thanked her, and she asked him again if he was all right.

“I am now,” Jack says. He got into the hoodoo Ford and drove it into the bushes, the car jouncing up and down on the tire Johnnie had shot out.

“Why couldn’t you have shot out a back one, you goddam fool?” Jack sounded angry and out of breath. Then he wrestled the car into the trees and out of sight, and came back, walking slow and looking at his feet, like an old man on ice.

“All right,” Johnnie says. He’d discovered a rabbit’s foot on Mr. Francis’s key ring, and was working it in a way that made me know that Mr. Francis wasn’t ever going to see that Ford again. “Now, we’re all friends here, and we’re going to take a little ride.”

Johnnie drove. Jack sat in the passenger seat. I squeezed in back with the Francises and tried to get the piglet to shoot me a grin.

“When we get to the next little town,” Johnnie says to the Francis family in the backseat, “we’re going to drop you off with enough for bus fare to get you where you were going. We’ll take the car. We won’t hurt it a bit, and if no one shoots any bullet holes in it you’ll get it back good as new. One of us’ll phone you where it is.”

“We haven’t got a phone yet,” Deelie says. It was really a whine. She sounded like the kind of woman who needs a smack every second week or so to keep her tits up. “We’re on the list, but those telephone people are slower than cold molasses.”

“Well, then,” Johnnie says, good-humored and not at all perplexed, “we’ll give the cops a call, and they’ll get in touch. But if you squawk, you won’t ever get it back in running shape.”

Mr. Francis nodded as if he believed every word. Probably he did. This was the Dillinger Gang, after all.

Johnnie pulled in at a Texaco, gassed up, and bought soda pops all around. Jack drank a bottle of grape like a man dying of thirst in the desert, but the woman wouldn’t let Master Piglet have his. Not so much as a swallow. The kid was holding his hands out for it and bawling.

“He can’t have pop before his lunch,” she says to Johnnie, “what’s wrong with you?”

Jack was leaning his head against the glass of the passenger window with his eyes shut. I thought he’d passed out again, but he says, “Shut that brat up, missus, or I will.”

“I think you’ve forgotten whose car you’re in,” she says, all haughty.

“Give him his pop, you bitch,” Johnnie says. He was still smiling, but now it was his other smile. She looked at him and the color in her

cheeks disappeared. And that's how Master Piglet got his Nehi, lunch or no lunch. Twenty miles farther on, we dropped them off in some little town and went on our way toward Chicago.

"A man who marries a woman like that deserves all he gets," Johnnie remarked, "and he'll get plenty."

"She'll call the law," Jack says, still without opening his eyes.

"Never will," Johnnie says, as confident as ever. "Wouldn't spare the nickel." And he was right. We saw only two blue beetles before we got into Chi, both going the other way, and neither one of them so much as slowed down to look at us. It was Johnnie's luck. As for Jack, you had only to look at him to know that his supply of luck was running out fast. By the time we got to the Loop, he was delirious and talking to his mother.

"Homer!" Johnnie says, in that wide-eyed way that always used to tickle me. Like a girl doing a flirt.

"What!" I says, giving him the glad eye right back.

"We got no place to go. This is worse than St. Paul."

"Go to Murphy's," Jack says without opening his eyes. "I want a cold beer. I'm thirsty."

"Murphy's," Johnnie says. "You know, that's not a bad idea."

Murphy's was an Irish saloon on the South Side. Sawdust, a steam table, two bartenders, three bouncers, friendly girls at the bar, and a room upstairs where you could take them. More rooms in the back, where people sometimes met, or cooled off for a day or two. We knew four places like it in St. Paul, but only a couple in Chi. I parked the Francises' Ford up in the alley. Johnnie was in the backseat with our delirious friend—we weren't yet ready to call him our dying friend—and he was holding Jack's head against the shoulder of his coat.

“Go in and get Brian Mooney off the bar,” Johnnie says.

“What if he isn’t there?”

“Then I don’t know,” Johnnie says.

“Harry!” Jack shouts, presumably calling for Harry Pierpont. “That whore you set me up with has given me the goddam clap!”

“Go on,” Johnnie says to me, soothing his hand through Jack’s hair just like a mother.

Well, Brian Mooney was there—Johnnie’s luck again—and we got a room for the night, although it cost two hundred dollars, which was pretty dear, considering the view was an alley and the toilet was at the far end of the hall.

“You boys are hotter than hell,” Brian says. “Mickey McClure would have sent you right back into the street. There’s nothing in the papers and on the radio but Little Bohemia.”

Jack sat down on a cot in the corner, and got himself a cigarette and a cold draft beer. The beer brought him back wonderful; he was almost himself again. “Did Lester get away?” he asked Mooney. I looked over at him when he spoke up and saw a terrible thing. When he took a drag off his Lucky and inhaled, a little puff come out of the hole in the back of his overcoat like a smoke signal.

“You mean Baby Face?” Mooney asked.

“You don’t want to call him that where he can hear you,” Johnnie said, grinning. He was happier now that Jack had come back around, but he hadn’t seen that puff of smoke coming out of his back. I wished I hadn’t, either.

“He shot a bunch of Gees and got away,” Mooney said. “At least one of the Gees is dead, maybe two. Anyway, it just makes it that much

worse. You can stay here tonight, but you have to be gone by tomorrow afternoon.”

He went out. Johnnie waited a few seconds, then stuck his tongue out at the door like a little kid. I got laughing—Johnnie could always make me laugh. Jack tried to laugh, too, but quit. It hurt him too much.

“Time to get you out of that coat and see how bad it is, partner,” Johnnie said.

It took us five minutes. By the time he was down to his undershirt, all three of us were soaked with sweat. Four or five times I had to put my hands over Jack’s mouth to muffle him. I got blood all over my cuffs.

There was no more than a rose on the lining of his overcoat, but his white shirt had gone half red and his undershirt was soaked right through. Sticking up on the left side, just below his shoulder blade, was a lump with a hole in the middle of it, like a little volcano.

“No more,” Jack says, crying. “Please, no more.”

“That’s all right,” Johnnie says, running the palm of his hand through Jack’s hair again. “We’re all done. You can lie down now. Go to sleep. You need your rest.”

“I can’t,” he says. “It hurts too much. Oh, God, if you only knew how it hurts! And I want another beer. I’m thirsty. Only don’t put so much salt in it this time. Where’s Harry, where’s Charlie?”

Harry Pierpont and Charlie Makley, I guessed—Charlie was the Fagin who’d turned Harry and Jack out when they weren’t no more than snotnoses.

“There he goes again,” Johnnie says. “He needs a doc, Homer, and you’re the boy who has to find one.”

“Jesus, Johnnie, this ain’t my town!”

“Doesn’t matter,” Johnnie says. “If I go out, you know what’s going to happen. I’ll write down some names and addresses.”

It ended up being just one name and one address, and when I got there it was all for nothing. The doc (a pill-roller whose mission was giving abortions and acid melts to erase fingerprints) had happied himself to death on his own laudanum two months before.

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We stayed in that cheesy room behind Murphy’s for five days. Mickey McClure showed up and tried to turn us out, but Johnnie talked to him in the way that Johnnie had—when he turned on the charm, it was almost impossible to tell Johnnie no. And, besides, we paid. By the fifth night, the rent was four hundred, and we were forbidden to so much as show our faces in the taproom for fear someone would see us. No one did, and as far as I know the cops never found out where we were during those five days in late April. I wonder how much Mickey McClure made on the deal—it was more than a grand. We pulled bank jobs where we took less.

I ended up going around to half a dozen scrape artists and hairline-changers. There wasn’t one of them who would come and look at Jack. Too hot, they said. It was the worst time of all, and even now I hate to think about it. Let’s just say that me and Johnnie found out what Jesus felt like when Peter Pilot denied Him three times in the Garden of Gethsemane.

For a while, Jack was in and out of delirium, and then he was mostly in. He talked about his mother, and Harry Pierpont, and then about Boobie Clark, a famous fag from Michigan City we’d all known.

“Boobie tried to kiss me,” Jack said one night, over and over, until I thought I’d go nuts. Johnnie never minded, though. He just sat there beside Jack on the cot, stroking his hair. He’d cut out a square of cloth in Jack’s undershirt around the bullet hole, and kept painting it

with Mercurochrome, but the skin had already turned gray-green, and a smell was coming out of the hole. Just a whiff of it was enough to make your eyes water.

“That’s gangrene,” Mickey McClure said on a trip to pick up the rent. “He’s a goner.”

“He’s no goner,” Johnnie said.

Mickey leaned forward with his fat hands on his fat knees. He smelled Jack’s breath like a cop with a drunk, then pulled back. “You better find a doc fast. Smell it in a wound, that’s bad. Smell it on a man’s breath ...” Mickey shook his head and walked out.

“Fuck him,” Johnnie said to Jack, still stroking his hair. “What does he know?”

Only, Jack didn’t say nothing. He was asleep. A few hours later, after Johnnie and I had gone to sleep ourselves, Jack was on the edge of the bunk, raving about Henry Claudy, the warden at Michigan City. I-God Claudy, we used to call him, because it was always I-God I’ll do this and I-God you’ll do that. Jack was screaming that he’d kill Claudy if he didn’t let us out. That got someone pounding on the wall and yelling for us to shut that man up.

Johnnie sat next to Jack and talked to him and got him soothed down again.

“Homer?” Jack says after a while.

“Yes, Jack,” I says.

“Won’t you do the trick with the flies?” he asks.

I was surprised he remembered it. “Well,” I says, “I’d be happy to, but there ain’t no flies in here. Around these parts, flies ain’t in season just yet.”

In a low, hoarse voice, Jack sang, "There may be flies on some of you guys but there ain't no flies on me. Right, Chummah?"

I had no idea who Chummah was, but I nodded and patted his shoulder. It was hot and sticky. "That's right, Jack."

There were big purple circles under his eyes and dried spit on his lips. He was already losing weight. I could smell him, too. The smell of piss, which wasn't so bad, and the smell of gangrene, which was. Johnnie, though, never gave no sign that he smelled anything bad at all.

"Walk on your hands for me, John," Jack said. "Like you used to."

"In a minute," Johnnie said. He poured Jack a glass of water. "Drink this first. Wet your whistle. Then I'll see if I can still get across the room upside down. Remember when I used to run on my hands in the shirt factory? After I ran all the way to the gate, they stuck me in the hole."

"I remember," Jack said.

Johnnie didn't do no walking on his hands that night. By the time he got the glass of water to Jack's lips, the poor bugger had gone back to sleep with his head on Johnnie's shoulder.

"He's gonna die," I said.

"He's not," Johnnie said.

*

The next morning, I asked Johnnie what we were going to do. What we could do.

"I got one more name out of McClure. Joe Moran. McClure says he was the go-between on the Bremer kidnapping. If he'll fix Jack up, it's worth a thousand to me."

“I got six hundred,” I said. And I’d give it up, but not for Jack Hamilton. Jack had gone beyond needing a doctor; what Jack needed by then was a preacher. I did it for Johnnie Dillinger.

“Thanks, Homer,” he said. “I’ll be back in an hour. Meantime, you mind the baby.” But Johnnie looked bleak. He knew that if Moran wouldn’t help us we’d have to get out of town. It would mean taking Jack back to St. Paul and trying there. And we knew what going back in a stolen Ford would likely mean. It was the spring of 1934 and all three of us—me, Jack, and especially Johnnie—were on J. Edgar Hoover’s list of “public enemies.”

“Well, good luck,” I says. “See you in the funny pages.”

He went out. I mooned around. I was mighty sick of the room by then. It was like being back in Michigan City, only worse. Because when you were in stir they’d done the worst they could to you. Here, hiding out in the back of Murphy’s, things could always get worse.

Jack muttered, then he dropped off again.

There was a chair at the foot of the cot, with a cushion. I took the cushion and sat down beside Jack. It wouldn’t take long, I didn’t think. And when Johnnie came back I’d only have to say that poor old Jack took one final breath and just copped out. The cushion would be back on the chair. Really, it would be doing Johnnie a favor. Jack, too.

“I see you, Chummah,” Jack says suddenly. I tell you, it scared the living hell out of me.

“Jack!” I says, putting my elbows on that cushion. “How you doing?”

His eyes drifted closed. “Do the trick ... with the flies,” he says, and then he was asleep again. But he’d woken up at just the right time; if he hadn’t, Johnnie would have found a dead man on that cot.

*

When Johnnie finally did come back, he practically busted down the door. I had my gun out. He saw it and laughed. "Put away the bean shooter, pal, and pack up your troubles in your old kit bag!"

"What's up?"

"We're getting out of here, that's what." He looked five years younger. "High time, wouldn't you say?"

"Yeah."

"He been all right while I was gone?"

"Yeah," I said. The cushion lying on the chair had SEE YOU IN CHICAGO written on it in needlework.

"No change?"

"No change. Where are we going?"

"Aurora," Johnnie said. "It's a little town upstate. We're going to move in with Volney Davis and his girlfriend." He leaned over the cot. Jack's red hair, thin to start with, had started falling out. It was on the pillow, and you could see the crown of his head, white as snow. "You hear that, Jack?" Johnnie shouts. "We're hot now, but we're going to cool off quick! You understand?"

"Walk on your hands like Johnnie Dillinger used to," Jack said, without opening his eyes.

Johnnie just kept smiling. He winked at me. "He understands," he said. "He's just not awake. You know?"

"Sure," I said.

*

On the ride up to Aurora, Jack sat against the window, his head flying up and then thumping against the glass every time we hit a

pothole. He was holding long, muttery conversations with folks we couldn't see. Once we were out of town, me and Johnnie had to roll down our windows. The smell was just too bad otherwise. Jack was rotting from the inside out, but he wouldn't die. I've heard it said that life is fragile and fleeting, but I don't believe it. It would be better if it was.

"That Dr. Moran was a crybaby," Johnnie said. We were in the woods by then, the city behind us. "I decided I didn't want no crybaby like him working on my partner. But I wasn't going to leave without something." Johnnie always travelled with a .38 pistol tucked into his belt. Now he pulled it out and showed it to me, the way he must have shown it to Dr. Moran. "I says, 'If I can't take away nothing else, Doc, I'll just have to take your life.' He seen I meant business, and he called someone up there. Volney Davis."

I nodded as if that name meant something to me. I found out later that Volney was another member of Ma Barker's gang. He was a pretty nice fella. So was Dock Barker. And Volney's girlfriend, the one they called Rabbits. They called her Rabbits because she dug herself out of prison a few times. She was the best of the lot. Aces. Rabbits, at least, tried to help poor old troublesome Jack. None of the others would—not the pill-rollers, the scrapers, the face artists, and certainly not Dr. Joseph (Crybaby) Moran.

The Barkers were on the run after a botched kidnapping; Dock's Ma had already left—gone all the way to Florida. The hideout in Aurora wasn't much—four rooms, no electricity, a privy out back—but it was better than Murphy's saloon. And, like I say, Volney's girlfriend at least tried to do something. That was on our second night there.

She set up kerosene lamps all around the bed, then sterilized a paring knife in a pot of boiling water. "If you boys feel pukey," she said, "you just choke it back until I'm done."

"We'll be okay," Johnnie said. "Won't we, Homer?"

I nodded, but I was queasy even before she got going. Jack was laying on his stomach, head turned to the side, muttering. It seemed he never stopped. Whatever room he happened to be in was filled with people only he could see.

“I hope so,” she says, “because once I start in, there’s no going back.” She looked up and seen Dock standing in the doorway. Volney Davis, too. “Go on, baldy,” she says to Dock, “and take-um heap big chief with you.” Volney Davis was no more a Indian than I was, but they used to rib him because he was born in the Cherokee Nation. Some judge had given him three years for stealing a pair of shoes, which was how he got into a life of crime.

Volney and Dock went out. When they were gone, Rabbits turned Jack over and then cut him open in a X, bearing down in a way I could barely stand to look at. I held Jack’s feet. Johnnie sat beside his head, trying to soothe him, but it didn’t do no good. When Jack started to scream, Johnnie put a dishtowel over his head and nodded for Rabbits to go on, all the time stroking Jack’s head and telling him not to worry, everything would be just fine.

That Rabbits. They call them frails, but there was nothing frail about her. Her hands never even shook. Blood, some of it black and clotted, come pouring out of the sunken place when she cut it. She cut deeper and then out came the pus. Some was white, but there was big green chunks which looked like boogers. That was bad. But when she got to the lung the smell was a thousand times worse. It couldn’t have been worse in France during the gas attacks.

Jack was gasping in these big whistling breaths. You could hear it in his throat, and from the hole in his back, too.

“You better hurry up,” Johnnie says. “He’s sprung a leak in his air hose.”

“You’re telling me,” she says. “The bullet’s in his lung. You just hold him down, handsome.”

In fact, Jack wasn't thrashing much. He was too weak. The sound of the air shrieking in and out of him kept getting thinner and thinner. It was hotter than hell with those lamps set up all around the bed, and the stink of the hot oil was almost as strong as the gangrene. I wish we'd thought to open a window before we got started, but it was too late by then.

Rabbits had a set of tongs, but she couldn't get them in the hole. "Fuck this!" she cried, and tossed them to one side, and then stuck her fingers into the bloody hole, reached around until she found the slug that was in there, pulled it out, and threw it to the floor. Johnnie started to bend over for it and she said, "You can get your souvenir later, handsome. For now just hold him."

She went to work packing gauze into the mess she'd made.

Johnnie lifted up the dishtowel and peeked underneath it. "Not a minute too soon," he told her with a grin. "Old Red Hamilton has turned a wee bit blue."

Outside, a car pulled into the driveway. It could have been the cops, for all we knew, but there wasn't nothing we could do about it then.

"Pinch this shut," she told me, and pointed at the hole with the gauze in it. "I ain't much of a seamstress, but I guess I can put in half a dozen."

I didn't want to get my hands anywhere near that hole, but I wasn't going to tell her no. I pinched it shut, and more watery pus ran out when I did. My midsection clenched up and I started making this gurk-gurk noise. I couldn't help it.

"Come on," she says, kind of smiling. "If you're man enough to pull the trigger, you're man enough to deal with a hole." Then she sewed him up with these big, looping overhand strokes—really punching the needle in. After the first two, I couldn't look.

“Thank you,” Johnnie told her when it was done. “I want you to know I’m going to take care of you for this.”

“Don’t go getting your hopes up,” she says. “I wouldn’t give him one chance in twenty.”

“He’ll pull through now,” Johnnie says.

Then Dock and Volney rushed back in. Behind them was another member of the gang—Buster Daggs or Draggs, I can’t remember which. Anyway, he’d been down to the phone they used at the Cities Service station in town, and he said the Gees had been busy back in Chicago, arresting anyone and everyone they thought might be connected to the Bremer kidnapping, which had been the Barker Gang’s last big job. One of the fellas they took was John J. (Boss) McLaughlin, a high mucky-muck in the Chicago political machine. Another was Dr. Joseph Moran, also known as the Crybaby.

“Moran’ll give this place up, just as sure as shit sticks to a blanket,” Volney says.

“Maybe it’s not even true,” Johnnie says. Jack was unconscious now. His red hair lay on the pillow like little pieces of wire. “Maybe it’s just a rumor.”

“You better not believe that,” Buster says. “I got it from Timmy O’Shea.”

“Who’s Timmy O’Shea? The Pope’s butt-wiper?” Johnnie says.

“He’s Moran’s nephew,” Dock says, and that kind of sealed the deal.

“I know what you’re thinking, handsome,” Rabbits says to Johnnie, “and you can stop thinking it right now. You put this fella in a car and go bumping him over those back roads between here and St. Paul, he’ll be dead by morning.”

“You could leave him,” Volney says. “The cops show up, they’ll have to take care of him.”

Johnnie sat there, sweat running down his face in streams. He looked tired, but he was smiling. Johnnie was always able to find a smile. “They’d take care of him, all right,” he says, “but they wouldn’t take him to any hospital. Stick a pillow over his face and sit down on it, most likely.” Which gave me a start, as I’m sure you’ll understand.

“Well, you better decide,” Buster says, “because they’ll have this joint surrounded by dawn. I’m getting the hell out.”

“You all go,” Johnnie says. “You, too, Homer. I’ll stay here with Jack.”

“Well, what the hell,” Dock says. “I’ll stay, too.”

“Why not?” Volney Davis says.

Buster Daggs or Draggs looked at them like they was crazy, but you know what? I wasn’t surprised a bit. That’s just the effect Johnnie had on people.

“I’ll stay, too,” I says.

“Well, I’m getting out,” Buster says.

“Fine,” Dock says. “Take Rabbits with you.”

“The hell you say,” Rabbits pipes up. “I feel like cooking.”

“Have you gone cuckoo?” Dock asks her. “It’s one o’clock in the morning, and you’re in blood right up to the elbows.”

“I don’t care what time it is, and blood washes off,” she says. “I’m making you boys the biggest breakfast you ever ate—eggs, bacon, biscuits, gravy, hash browns.”

“I love you, marry me,” Johnnie says, and we all laughed.

“Oh, hell,” Buster says. “If there’s breakfast, I’ll hang around.”

Which is how we all wound up staying put in that Aurora farmhouse, ready to die for a man who was already—whether Johnnie liked it or not—on his way out. We barricaded the front door with a sofa and some chairs, and the back door with the gas stove, which didn’t work anyway. Only the woodstove worked. Me and Johnnie got our tommy guns from the Ford, and Dock got some more from the attic. Also a crate of grenades, a mortar, and a crate of mortar shells. I bet the Army didn’t have as much stuff in those parts as we did. Ha-ha!

“Well, I don’t care how many of them we get, as long as that son of a bitch Melvin Purvis is one of them,” Dock says. By the time Rabbits actually got the grub on the table, it was almost the time farmers eat. We took it in shifts, two men always watching the long driveway. Buster raised the alarm once and we all rushed to our places, but it was only a milk truck on the main road. The Gees never came. You could call that bad info; I called it more of John Dillinger’s luck.

Jack, meanwhile, was on his not-so-merry way from bad to worse. By midafternoon of the next day, even Johnnie must have seen he couldn’t go on much longer, although he wouldn’t come right out and say so. It was the woman I felt bad for. Rabbits seen new pus oozing out between those big black stitches of hers, and she started crying. She just cried and cried. It was like she’d known Jack Hamilton her whole life.

“Never mind,” Johnnie said. “Chin up, beautiful. You did the best you could. Besides, he might still come around.”

“It’s cause I took the bullet out with my fingers,” she says. “I never should have done that. I knew better.”

“No,” I says, “it wasn’t that. It was the gangrene. The gangrene was already in there.”

“Bullshit,” Johnnie said, and looked at me hard. “An infection, maybe, but no gangrene. There isn’t any gangrene now.”

You could smell it in the pus. There wasn't nothing to say.

Johnnie was still looking at me. "Remember what Harry used to call you when we were in Pendleton?"

I nodded. Harry Pierpont and Johnnie were always the best of friends, but Harry never liked me. If not for Johnnie, he never would've taken me into the gang, which was the Pierpont Gang to begin with, remember. Harry thought I was a fool. That was another thing Johnnie would never admit, or even talk about. Johnnie wanted everyone to be friends.

"I want you to go out and wrangle up some big uns," Johnnie says, "just like you used to when you was on the Pendleton mat. Some big old buzzers." When he asked for that, I knew he finally understood Jack was finished.

Fly-Boy was what Harry Pierpont used to call me at Pendleton Reformatory, when we were all just kids and I used to cry myself to sleep with my head under my pillow so the screws wouldn't hear. Well, Harry went on and rode the lightning in Ohio State, so maybe I wasn't the only fool.

Rabbits was in the kitchen, cutting up vegetables for supper. Something was simmering on the stove. I asked her if she had thread, and she said I knew goddam well she did, hadn't I been right beside her when she sewed up my friend? You bet, I said, but that was black and I wanted white. Half a dozen pieces, about so long. And I held out my index fingers maybe eight inches apart. She wanted to know what I was going to do. I told her that if she was that curious she could watch right out the window over the sink.

"Ain't nothing out there but the privy," she says. "I got no interest in watching you do your personal business, Mr. Van Meter."

She had a bag hanging on the pantry door, and she rummaged through it and came out with a spool of white thread and cut me off six pieces. I thanked her kindly and then asked if she had a Band-

Aid. She took some out of the drawer right beside the sink—because, she said, she was always cutting her fingers. I took one, then went to the door.

*

I got in Pendleton for robbing wallets off the New York Central line with that same Charlie Makley—small world, ain't it? Ha! Anyhow, when it come to ways of keeping the bad boys busy, the reformatory at Pendleton, Indiana, was loaded. They had a laundry, a carpentry shop, and a clothes factory where the dubs made shirts and pants, mostly for the guards in the Indiana penal system. Some called it the shirt shop; some called it the shit shop. That's what I drew—and met both Johnnie and Harry Pierpont. Johnnie and Harry never had any problem “making the day,” but I was always coming up ten shirts short, or five pairs of trousers short, and being made to stand on the mat. The screws thought it was because I was always clowning around. Harry thought the same thing. The truth was that I was slow, and clumsy—which Johnnie seemed to understand. That was why I played around.

If you didn't make your day, you had to spend the next day in the guardhouse, where there was a rush mat, about two feet square. You had to take off everything but your socks and then stand there all day. If you stepped off the mat once, you got your ass paddled. If you stepped off twice, a screw held you while another worked you over. Step off a third time and it was a week in solitary. You were allowed all the water you wanted to drink, but that was a trick, because you were allowed only one toilet break in the course of the day. If you were caught standing there with piss running down your leg, you got a beating and a trip to the hole.

It was boring. Boring at Pendleton, boring at Michigan City, I-God's prison for big boys. Some fellows told themselves stories. Some fellows sang. Some made lists of all the women they were going to screw when they got out.

Me, I taught myself to rope flies.

A privy's a damned fine place for fly-roping. I took up my station outside the door, then proceeded to make loops in the pieces of thread Rabbits had given me. After that, there was nothing to it except not moving much. Those were the skills I'd learned on the mat. You don't forget them.

It didn't take long. Flies are out in early May, but they're slow flies. And anyone who thinks it's impossible to lasso a horsefly ... well, all I can say is, if you want a challenge, try mosquitoes.

I took three casts and got my first one. That was nothing; there were times on the mat when I'd spend half the morning before I got my first. Right after I snagged him, Rabbits cried out, "What in God's name are you doing? Is it magic?"

From a distance, it did look like magic. You have to imagine how it appeared to her, twenty yards away: man standing by a privy throws out a little piece of thread—at nothing, so far as you can see—but, instead of drifting to the ground, the thread hangs in midair! It was attached to a good-sized horsefly. Johnnie would have seen it, but Rabbits didn't have Johnnie's eyes.

I got the end of the thread and taped it to the handle of the privy door with the Band-Aid. Then I went after the next one. And the next. Rabbits came out to get a closer look, and I told her that she could stay if she was quiet, and she tried, but she wasn't good at being quiet and finally I had to tell her she was scaring off the game and send her back inside.

I worked the privy for an hour and a half—long enough that I couldn't smell it anymore. Then it started getting cold, and my flies were sluggish. I'd got five. By Pendleton standards, that was quite a herd, although not that many for a man standing next to a shithouse. Anyway, I had to get inside before it got too cold for them to stay airborne.

When I came walking slowly through the kitchen, Dock, Volney, and Rabbits were all laughing and clapping. Jack's bedroom was on the

other side of the house, and it was shadowy and dim. That was why I'd asked for white thread instead of black. I looked like a man with a handful of strings leading up to invisible balloons. Except that you could hear the flies buzzing—all mad and bewildered, like anything else that's been caught it don't know how.

"I be dog," Dock Barker says. "I mean it, Homer. Double dog. Where'd you learn to do that?"

"Pendleton Reformatory," I says.

"Who showed you?"

"Nobody," I said. "I just did it one day."

"Why don't they tangle the strings?" Volney asked. His eyes were as big as grapes. It tickled me, I tell you that.

"Dunno," I says. "They always fly in their own space and don't hardly ever cross. It's a mystery."

"Homer!" Johnnie yells from the other room. "If you got em, this'd be a good time to get in here with em!"

I started across the kitchen, tugging the flies along by their halters like a good fly cowboy, and Rabbits touched my arm. "Be careful," she says. "Your pal is going, and it's made your other pal crazy. He'll be better—after—but right now he's not safe."

I knew it better than she did. When Johnnie set his heart on a thing, he almost always got it. Not this time, though.

Jack was propped up on the pillows with his head in the corner, and although his face was white as paper, he was in his right mind again. He'd come around at the end, like folks sometimes do.

"Homer!" he says, just as bright as you could want. Then he sees the strings and laughs. It was a shrill, whistley laughter, not a bit right, and immediately he starts to cough. Coughing and laughing, all

mixed together. Blood comes out of his mouth—some splattered on my strings. “Just like Michigan City!” he says, and pounds his leg. More blood now, running down his chin and dripping onto his undershirt. “Just like old times!” He coughed again.

Johnnie’s face looked terrible. I could see he wanted me to get out of the bedroom before Jack tore himself apart; at the same time, he knew it didn’t matter a fiddler’s fuck, and if this was a way Jack could die happy, looking at a handful of roped shithouse flies, then so be it.

“Jack,” I says, “you got to be quiet.”

“Naw, I’m all right now,” he says, grinning and wheezing. “Bring em over here! Bring em over where I can see!” But before he could say any more he was coughing again, all bent over with his knees up, and the sheet, spattered with a spray of blood, like a trough between them.

I looked at Johnnie and he nodded. He’d passed beyond something in his mind. He beckoned me over. I went slowly, the strings in my hand, floating up, just white lines in the gloom. And Jack too tickled to know he was coughing his last.

“Let em go,” he says, in a wet and husky voice I could hardly understand. “I remember ...”

And so I did. I let the strings go. For a second or two, they stayed clumped together at the bottom—stuck together on the sweat from my palm—and then they drifted apart, hanging straight and upright in the air. I suddenly thought of Jack standing in the street after the Mason City bank job. He was firing his tommy gun and was covering me and Johnnie and Lester as we herded the hostages to the getaway car. Bullets flew all around him, and although he took a flesh wound, he looked like he’d live forever. Now he lay with his knees sticking up in a sheet filled with blood.

“Golly, look at em,” he says as the white strings rose up, all on their own.

“That ain’t all, either,” Johnnie says. “Watch this.” He then walked one step to the kitchen door, turned, and took a bow. He was grinning, but it was the saddest grin I ever saw in my life. All we did was the best we could; we couldn’t very well give him a last meal, could we? “Remember how I used to walk on my hands in the shirt shop?”

“Yeah! Don’t forget the spiel!” Jack says.

“Ladies and gentlemen!” Johnnie says. “Now in the center ring for your delight and amazement, John Herbert Dillinger!” He said the “G” hard, the way his old man said it, the way he had said it himself before he got so famous. Then he clapped once and dived forward onto his hands. Buster Crabbe couldn’t have done it better. His pants slid up to his knees, showing the tops of his stockings and his shins. His change come out of his pockets and rattled away across the boards. He started walking across the floor that way, limber as ever, singing “Tra-ra-ra-boom-de-ay!” at the top of his voice. The keys from the stolen Ford fell out of his pocket, too. Jack was laughing in these big hoarse gusts—like he had the flu—and Dock Barker and Rabbits and Volney, all crowded in the doorway, were also laughing. Fit to split. Rabbits clapped her hands and called “Bravo! Encore!” Above my head the white threads were still floating on, only drifting apart a little at a time. I was laughing along with the rest, and then I saw what was going to happen and I stopped.

“Johnnie!” I shouted. “Johnnie, look out for your gun! Look out for your gun!”

It was that goddam .38 he kept tucked into the top of his pants. It was working free of his belt.

“Huh?” he said, and then it dropped onto the floor on top of the keys and went off. A .38 isn’t the world’s loudest gun, but it was loud enough in that back bedroom. And the flash was plenty bright. Dock yelled and Rabbits screamed. Johnnie didn’t say nothing, just did a complete somersault and fell flat on his face. His feet came down with a crash, almost hitting the foot of the bed Jack Hamilton was

dying in. Then he just lay there. I ran to him, brushing the white threads aside.

At first I thought he was dead, because when I turned him over there was blood all over his mouth and his cheek. Then he sat up. He wiped his face, looked at the blood, then looked at me.

“Holy shit, Homer, did I just shoot myself?” Johnnie says.

“I think you did,” I says.

“How bad is it?”

Before I could tell him I didn't know, Rabbits pushed me to the side and wiped away the blood with her apron. She looked at him hard for a second or two, and then she says, “You're all right. It's just a scrape.” Only we seen later, when she dabbled him up with the iodine, that it was actually two scrapes. The bullet cut through the skin over his lip on the right side, flew through maybe two inches of air, then it cut him again on the cheekbone, right beside his eye. After that it went into the ceiling, but before it did it plugged one of my flies. I know that's hard to believe, but it's true, I swear. The fly lay there on the floor in a little heap of white thread, nothing left of it but a couple of legs.

“Johnnie?” Dock says. “I think I got some bad news for you, partner.” He didn't have to tell us what it was. Jack was still sitting up, but now his head was bowed over so far that his hair was touching the sheet between his knees. While we were checking to see how bad Johnnie was hurt, Jack had died.

*

Dock told us to take the body to a gravel pit about two miles farther down the road, just past the Aurora town line. There was a bottle of lye under the sink, and Rabbits gave it to us. “You know what to do with this, don't you?” she asks.

“Sure,” Johnnie says. He had one of her Band-Aids stuck on his upper lip, over that place where his mustache never grew in later on. He sounded listless and he wouldn’t meet her eye.

“Make him do it, Homer,” she says, then jerked her thumb toward the bedroom, where Jack was laying wrapped up in the bloodstained sheet. “If they find that one and identify him before you get clear, it’ll make things just so much worse for you. Us, too, maybe.”

“You took us in when nobody else would,” Johnnie says, “and you won’t live to regret it.”

She gave him a smile. Women almost always fell for Johnnie. I’d thought this one was an exception because she was so businesslike, but now I seen she wasn’t. She’d just kept it all business because she knew she wasn’t much in the looks department. Also, when a bunch of men with guns are cooped up like we were, a woman in her right mind doesn’t want to make trouble among them.

“We’ll be gone when you get back,” Volney says. “Ma keeps talking about Florida, she got her eye on a place in Lake Weir—”

“Shut up, Vol,” Dock says, and gives him a hard poke in the shoulder.

“Anyway, we’re gettin’ out of here,” he says, rubbing the sore place. “You ought to get out, too. Take your luggage. Don’t even pull in on your way back. Things can change in a hurry.”

“Okay,” Johnnie says.

“At least he died happy,” Volney says. “Died laughin’.”

I didn’t say nothing. It was coming home to me that Red Hamilton—my old running buddy—was really dead. It made me awful sad. I turned my mind to how the bullet had just grazed Johnnie (and then gone on to kill a fly instead), thinking that would cheer me up. But it didn’t. It only made me feel worse.

Dock shook my hand, then Johnnie's. He looked pale and glum. "I don't know how we ended up like this, and that's the truth," he says. "When I was a boy, the only goddam thing I wanted was to be a railroad engineer."

"Well, I'll tell you something," Johnnie says. "We don't have to worry. God makes it all come right in the end."

*

We took Jack on his last ride, wrapped up in a bloodstained sheet and pushed into the back of that stolen Ford. Johnnie drove us to the far side of the pit, all bump and jounce (when it comes to rough riding, I'll take a Terraplane over a Ford any day). Then he killed the engine and touched the Band-Aid riding his upper lip. He says, "I used up the last of my luck today, Homer. They'll get me now."

"Don't talk like that," I says.

"Why not? It's true." The sky above us was white and full of rain. I reckoned we'd have a muddy splash of it between Aurora and Chicago (Johnnie had decided we should go back there because the Feds would be expecting us in St. Paul). Somewhere crows was calling. The only other sound was the ticktock of the cooling engine. I kept looking into the mirror at the wrapped-up body in the backseat. I could see the bumps of elbows and knees, the fine red spatters where he'd bent over, coughing and laughing, at the end.

"Look at this, Homer," Johnnie says, and points to the .38, which was tucked back in his belt. Then he twiddled Mr. Francis's key ring with the tips of his fingers, where the prints were growing back in spite of all his trouble. There were four or five keys on the ring besides the one to the Ford. And that lucky rabbit's foot. "Butt of the gun hit this when it come down," he says. He nodded his head. "Hit my very own lucky piece. And now my luck's gone. Help me with him."

We lugged Jack to the gravel slope. Then Johnnie got the bottle of lye. It had a big brown skull and crossbones on the label.

Johnnie knelt down and pulled the sheet back. “Get his rings,” he says, and I pulled them off. Johnnie put them in his pocket. We ended up getting forty-five dollars for them in Calumet City, although Johnnie swore up and down that the little one had a real diamond in it.

“Now hold out his hands.”

I did, and Johnnie poured a cap of lye over the tip of each finger. That was one set of prints wasn’t ever going to come back. Then he leaned over Jack’s face and kissed him on the forehead. “I hate to do this, Red, but I know you’d do the same to me if it’d gone the other way.”

He then poured the lye over Jack’s cheeks and mouth and brow. It hissed and bubbled and turned white. When it started to eat through his closed eyelids, I turned away. And of course none of it done no good; the body was found by a farmer after a load of gravel. A pack of dogs had knocked away most of the stones we covered him with and were eating what was left of his hands and face. As for the rest of him, there were enough scars for the cops to I.D. him as Jack Hamilton.

It was the end of Johnnie’s luck, all right. Every move he made after that—right up to the night Purvis and his badge-carrying gunsels got him at the Biograph—was a bad one. Could he have just thrown up his hands that night and surrendered? I’d have to say no. Purvis meant to have him dead one way or the other. That’s why the Gees never told the Chicago cops Johnnie was in town.

*

I’ll never forget the way Jack laughed when I brought them flies in on their strings. He was a good fellow. They all were, mostly—good fellows who got into the wrong line of work. And Johnnie was the best of the bunch. No man ever had a truer friend. We robbed one more bank together, the Merchants National in South Bend, Indiana. Lester Nelson joined us on that caper. Getting out of town, it seemed

like every hick in Indiana was throwing lead at us, and we still got away. But for what? We'd been expecting more than a hundred grand, enough to move to Mexico and live like kings. We ended up with a lousy twenty thousand, most of it in dimes and dirty dollar bills.

God makes it all come right in the end, that's what Johnnie told Dock Barker just before we parted company. I was raised a Christian—I admit I fell away a bit along my journey—and I believe that: we're stuck with what we have, but that's all right; in God's eyes, none of us are really much more than flies on strings and all that matters is how much sunshine you can spread along the way. The last time I seen Johnnie Dillinger was in Chicago, and he was laughing at something I said. That's good enough for me.

*

As a kid, I was fascinated by tales of the Depression-era outlaws, an interest that probably peaked with Arthur Penn's remarkable Bonnie and Clyde. In the spring of 2000, I re-read John Toland's history of that era, *The Dillinger Days*, and was particularly taken by his story about how Dillinger's sidekick, Homer Van Meter, taught himself how to rope flies in Pendleton Reformatory. Jack "Red" Hamilton's lingering death is a documented fact; my story of what happened in Dock Barker's hideout is, of course, pure imagination ... or myth, if you like that word better; I do.

DEATH
STEPHEN
KNOW



A DEATH

Stephen King

Jim Trusdale had a shack on the west side of his father's gone-to-seed ranch, and that was where he was when Sheriff Barclay and half a dozen deputized townsmen found him, sitting in the one chair by the cold stove, wearing a dirty barn coat and reading an old issue of the Black Hills Pioneer by lantern light. Looking at it, anyway.

Sheriff Barclay stood in the doorway, almost filling it up. He was holding his own lantern. "Come out of there, Jim, and do it with your hands up. I ain't drawn my pistol and don't want to."

Trusdale came out. He still had the newspaper in one of his raised hands. He stood there looking at the sheriff with his flat gray eyes. The sheriff looked back. So did the others, four on horseback and two on the seat of an old buckboard with "Hines Mortuary" printed on the side in faded yellow letters.

"I notice you ain't asked why we're here," Sheriff Barclay said.

"Why are you here, Sheriff?"

"Where is your hat, Jim?"

Trusdale put the hand not holding the newspaper to his head as if to feel for his hat, which was a brown plainsman and not there.

"In your place, is it?" the sheriff asked. A cold breeze kicked up, blowing the horses' manes and flattening the grass in a wave that ran south.

"No," Trusdale said. "I don't believe it is."

"Then where?"

"I might have lost it."

"You need to get in the back of the wagon," the sheriff said.

"I don't want to ride in no funeral hack," Trusdale said. "That's bad luck."

"You got bad luck all over," one of the men said. "You're painted in it. Get in."

Trusdale went to the back of the buckboard and climbed up. The breeze kicked again, harder, and he turned up the collar of his barn coat.

The two men on the seat of the buckboard got down and stood either side of it. One drew his gun; the other did not. Trusdale knew their faces but not their names. They were town men. The sheriff and the other four went into his shack. One of them was Hines, the undertaker. They were in there for some time. They even opened the stove and dug through the ashes. At last they came out.

"No hat," Sheriff Barclay said. "And we would have seen it. That's a damn big hat. Got anything to say about that?"

"It's too bad I lost it. My father gave it to me back when he was still right in the head."

"Where is it, then?"

"Told you, I might have lost it. Or had it stoled. That might have happened, too. Say, I was going to bed right soon."

"Never mind going to bed. You were in town this afternoon, weren't you?"

"Sure he was," one of the men said, mounting up again. "I seen him myself. Wearing that hat, too."

"Shut up, Dave," Sheriff Barclay said. "Were you in town, Jim?"

"Yes sir, I was," Trusdale said.

"In the Chuck-a-Luck?"

“Yes sir, I was. I walked from here, and had two drinks, and then I walked home. I guess the Chuck-a-Luck’s where I lost my hat.”

“That’s your story?”

Trusdale looked up at the black November sky. “It’s the only story I got.”

“Look at me, son.”

Trusdale looked at him.

“That’s your story?”

“Told you, the only one I got,” Trusdale said, looking at him.

Sheriff Barclay sighed. “All right, let’s go to town.”

“Why?”

“Because you’re arrested.”

“Ain’t got a brain in his fuckin’ head,” one of the men remarked.

“Makes his daddy look smart.”

They went to town. It was four miles. Trusdale rode in the back of the mortuary wagon, shivering against the cold. Without turning around, the man holding the reins said, “Did you rape her as well as steal her dollar, you hound?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Trusdale said.

The rest of the trip continued in silence except for the wind. In town, people lined the street. At first they were quiet. Then an old woman in a brown shawl ran after the funeral hack in a sort of limping hobble and spat at Trusdale. She missed, but there was a spatter of applause.

At the jail, Sheriff Barclay helped Trusdale down from the wagon. The wind was brisk, and smelled of snow. Tumbleweeds blew straight down Main Street and toward the town water tower, where they piled up against a shakepole fence and rattled there.

“Hang that baby killer!” a man shouted, and someone threw a rock. It flew past Trusdale’s head and clattered on the board sidewalk.

Sheriff Barclay turned and held up his lantern and surveyed the crowd that had gathered in front of the mercantile. “Don’t do that,” he said. “Don’t act foolish. This is in hand.”

The sheriff took Trusdale through his office, holding him by his upper arm, and into the jail. There were two cells. Barclay led Trusdale into the one on the left. There was a bunk and a stool and a waste bucket. Trusdale made to sit down on the stool, and Barclay said, “No. Just stand there.”

The sheriff looked around and saw the possemen crowding into the doorway. “You all get out of here,” he said.

“Otis,” the one named Dave said, “what if he attacks you?”

“Then I will subdue him. I thank you for doing your duty, but now you need to scat.”

When they were gone, Barclay said, “Take off that coat and give it to me.”

Trusdale took off his barn coat and began shivering. Beneath he was wearing nothing but an undershirt and corduroy pants so worn the wale was almost gone and one knee was out. Sheriff Barclay went through the pockets of the coat and found a twist of tobacco in a page of an R.W. Sears Watch Company catalogue, and an old lottery ticket promising a payoff in pesos. There was also a black marble.

“That’s my lucky marble,” Trusdale said. “I had it since I was a boy.”

“Turn out your pants pockets.”

Trusdale turned them out. He had a penny and three nickels and a folded-up news clipping about the Nevada silver rush that looked as old as the Mexican lottery ticket.

“Take off your boots.”

Trusdale took them off. Barclay felt inside them. There was a hole in one sole the size of a dime.

“Now your stockings.”

Barclay turned them inside out and tossed them aside.

“Drop your pants.”

“I don’t want to.”

“No more than I want to see what’s in there, but drop them anyway.”

Trusdale dropped his pants. He wasn’t wearing underdrawers.

“Turn around and spread your cheeks.”

Trusdale turned, grabbed his buttocks, and pulled them apart. Sheriff Barclay winced, sighed, and poked a finger into Trusdale’s anus. Trusdale groaned. Barclay removed his finger, wincing again at the soft pop, and wiped his finger on Trusdale’s undershirt.

“Where is it, Jim?”

“My hat?”

“You think I went up your ass looking for your hat? Or through the ashes in your stove? Are you being smart?”

Trusdale pulled up his trousers and buttoned them. Then he stood shivering and barefoot. An hour earlier he had been at home,

reading his newspaper and thinking about starting a fire in the stove, but that seemed long ago.

“I’ve got your hat in my office.”

“Then why did you ask about it?”

“To see what you’d say. That hat is all settled. What I really want to know is where you put the girl’s silver dollar. It’s not in your house, or your pockets, or up your ass. Did you get to feeling guilty and throw it away?”

“I don’t know about no silver dollar. Can I have my hat back?”

“No. It’s evidence. Jim Trusdale, I’m arresting you for the murder of Rebecca Cline. Do you have anything you want to say to that?”

“Yes, sir. That I don’t know no Rebecca Cline.”

The sheriff left the cell, closed the door, took a key from the wall, and locked it. The tumblers screeched as they turned. The cell mostly housed drunks and was rarely locked. He looked in at Trusdale and said, “I feel sorry for you, Jim. Hell ain’t too hot for a man who’d do such a thing.”

“What thing?”

The sheriff clumped away without any reply.

Trusdale stayed there in the cell, eating grub from Mother’s Best, sleeping on the bunk, shitting and pissing in the bucket, which was emptied every two days. His father didn’t come to see him, because his father had gone foolish in his eighties, and was now being cared for by a couple of squaws, one Sioux and the other Cheyenne. Sometimes they stood on the porch of the deserted bunkhouse and sang hymns in harmony. His brother was in Nevada, hunting for silver.

Sometimes children came and stood in the alley outside his cell, chanting, "Hangman, hangman, come on down." Sometimes men stood out there and threatened to cut off his privates. Once, Rebecca Cline's mother came and said she would hang him herself, were she allowed. "How could you kill my baby?" she asked through the barred window. "She was only ten years old, and 'twas her birthday."

"Ma'am," Trusdale said, standing on the bunk so that he could look down at her upturned face. "I didn't kill your baby nor no one."

"Black liar," she said, and went away.

Almost everyone in town attended the child's funeral. The squaws went. Even the two whores who plied their trade in the Chuck-a-Luck went. Trusdale heard the singing from his cell, as he squatted over the bucket in the corner.

Sheriff Barclay telegraphed Fort Pierre, and after a week or so the circuit-riding judge came. He was newly appointed and young for the job, a dandy with long blond hair down his back like Wild Bill Hickok. His name was Roger Mizell. He wore small round spectacles, and in both the Chuck-a-Luck and Mother's Best proved himself a man with an eye for the ladies, although he wore a wedding band.

There was no lawyer in town to serve as Trusdale's defense, so Mizell called on George Andrews, owner of the mercantile, the hostelry, and the Good Rest Hotel. Andrews had got two years of higher education at a business school back East. He said he would serve as Trusdale's attorney only if Mr. and Mrs. Cline agreed.

"Then go see them," Mizell said. He was in the barbershop, tilted back in the chair and taking a shave. "Don't let the grass grow under your feet."

"Well," Mr. Cline said, after Andrews had stated his business, "I got a question. If he doesn't have someone to stand for him, can they still hang him?"

“That would not be American justice,” Andrews said. “And although we are not one of the United States just yet, we will be soon.”

“Can he wriggle out of it?” Mrs. Cline asked.

“No, ma’am,” Andrews said. “I don’t see how.”

“Then do your duty and God bless you,” Mrs. Cline said.

The trial lasted through one November morning and halfway into the afternoon. It was held in the municipal hall, and on that day there were snow flurries as fine as wedding lace. Slate-gray clouds rolling toward town threatened a bigger storm. Roger Mizell, who had familiarized himself with the case, served as prosecuting attorney as well as judge.

“Like a banker taking out a loan from himself and then paying himself interest,” one of the jurors was overheard to say during the lunch break at Mother’s Best, and although nobody disagreed with this, no one suggested that it was a bad idea. It had a certain economy, after all.

Prosecutor Mizell called half a dozen witnesses, and Judge Mizell never objected once to his line of questioning. Mr. Cline testified first, and Sheriff Barclay came last. The story that emerged was a simple one. At noon on the day of Rebecca Cline’s murder, there had been a birthday party, with cake and ice cream. Several of Rebecca’s friends had attended. Around two o’clock, while the little girls were playing Pin the Tail on the Donkey and Musical Chairs, Jim Trusdale entered the Chuck-a-Luck and ordered a knock of whiskey. He was wearing his plainsman hat. He made the drink last, and when it was gone he ordered another.

Did he at any point take off the hat? Perhaps hang it on one of the hooks by the door? No one could remember.

“Only I never seen him without it,” Dale Gerard, the barman, said. “He was partial to that hat. If he did take it off, he probably laid it on

the bar beside him. He had his second drink, and then he went on his way.”

“Was his hat on the bar when he left?” Mizell asked.

“No, sir.”

“Was it on one of the hooks when you closed up shop for the night?”

“No, sir.”

Around three o'clock that day, Rebecca Cline left her house at the south end of town to visit the apothecary on Main Street. Her mother had told her she could buy some candy with her birthday dollar, but not eat it, because she had had sweets enough for one day. When five o'clock came and she hadn't returned home, Mr. Cline and some other men began searching for her. They found her in Barker's Alley, between the stage depot and the Good Rest. She had been strangled. Her silver dollar was gone. It was only when the grieving father took her in his arms that the men saw Trusdale's broad-brimmed leather hat. It had been hidden beneath the skirt of the girl's party dress.

During the jury's lunch hour, hammering was heard from behind the stage depot and not ninety paces from the scene of the crime. This was the gallows going up. The work was supervised by the town's best carpenter, whose name, appropriately enough, was Mr. John House. Big snow was coming, and the road to Fort Pierre would be impassable, perhaps for a week, perhaps for the entire winter. There were no plans to jug Trusdale in the local calaboose until spring. There was no economy in that.

“Nothing to building a gallows,” House told folks who came to watch. “A child could build one of these.”

He told how a lever-operated beam would run beneath the trapdoor, and how it would be axle-greased to make sure there wouldn't be

any last-minute holdups. "If you have to do a thing like this, you want to do it right the first time," House said.

In the afternoon, George Andrews put Trusdale on the stand. This occasioned some hissing from the spectators, which Judge Mizell gavelled down, promising to clear the courtroom if folks couldn't behave themselves.

"Did you enter the Chuck-a-Luck Saloon on the day in question?" Andrews asked when order had been restored.

"I guess so," Trusdale said. "Otherwise I wouldn't be here."

There was some laughter at that, which Mizell also gavelled down, although he was smiling himself and did not issue a second admonition.

"Did you order two drinks?"

"Yes, sir, I did. Two was all I had money for."

"But you got another dollar right quick, didn't you, you hound!" Abel Hines shouted.

Mizell pointed his gavel first at Hines, then at Sheriff Barclay, sitting in the front row. "Sheriff, escort that man out and charge him with disorderly conduct, if you please."

Barclay escorted Hines out but did not charge him with disorderly conduct. Instead, he asked what had got into him.

"I'm sorry, Otis," Hines said. "It was seeing him sitting there with his bare face hanging out."

"You go on downstreet and see if John House needs some help with his work," Barclay said. "Don't come back in here until this mess is over."

"He's got all the help he needs, and it's snowing hard now."

“You won’t blow away. Go on.”

Meanwhile, Trusdale continued to testify. No, he hadn’t left the Chuck-a-Luck wearing his hat, but hadn’t realized it until he got to his place. By then, he said, he was too tired to walk all the way back to town in search of it. Besides, it was dark.

Mizell broke in. “Are you asking this court to believe you walked four miles without realizing you weren’t wearing your damn hat?”

“I guess since I wear it all the time I just figured it must be there,” Trusdale said. This elicited another gust of laughter.

Barclay came back in and took his place next to Dave Fisher. “What are they laughing at?”

“Dummy don’t need a hangman,” Fisher said. “He’s tying the knot all by himself. It shouldn’t be funny, but it’s pretty comical, just the same.”

“Did you encounter Rebecca Cline in that alley?” George Andrews asked in a loud voice. With every eye on him, he had discovered a heretofore hidden flair for the dramatic. “Did you encounter her and steal her birthday dollar?”

“No, sir,” Trusdale said.

“Did you kill her?”

“No, sir. I didn’t even know who she was.”

Mr. Cline rose from his seat and shouted, “You did it, you lying son of a bitch!”

“I ain’t lying,” Trusdale said, and that was when Sheriff Barclay believed him.

“I have no further questions,” Andrews said, and walked back to his seat.

Trusdale started to get up, but Mizell told him to sit still and answer a few more questions.

“Do you continue to contend, Mr. Trusdale, that someone stole your hat while you were drinking in the Chuck-a-Luck, and that someone put it on, and went into the alley, and killed Rebecca Cline, and left it there to implicate you?”

Trusdale was silent.

“Answer the question, Mr. Trusdale.”

“Sir, I don’t know what ‘implicate’ means.”

“Do you expect us to believe someone framed you for this heinous murder?”

Trusdale considered, twisting his hands together. At last he said, “Maybe somebody took it by mistake and threwed it away.”

Mizell looked out at the rapt gallery. “Did anyone here take Mr. Trusdale’s hat by mistake?”

There was silence, except for the snow hitting the windows. The first big storm of winter had arrived. That was the winter townsfolk called the Wolf Winter, because the wolves came down from the Black Hills in packs to hunt for garbage.

“I have no more questions,” Mizell said. “And due to the weather we are going to dispense with any closing statements. The jury will retire to consider a verdict. You have three choices, gentlemen—innocent, manslaughter, or murder in the first degree.”

“Girlslaughter, more like it,” someone remarked.

Sheriff Barclay and Dave Fisher retired to the Chuck-a-Luck. Abel Hines joined them, brushing snow from the shoulders of his coat. Dale Gerard served them schooners of beer on the house.

“Mizell might not have had any more questions,” Barclay said, “but I got one. Never mind the hat. If Trusdale killed her, how come we never found that silver dollar?”

“Because he got scared and threw it away,” Hines said.

“I don’t think so. He’s too bone-stupid. If he’d had that dollar, he’d have gone back to the Chuck-a-Luck and drunk it up.”

“What are you saying?” Dave asked. “That you think he’s innocent?”

“I’m saying I wish we’d found that cartwheel.”

“Maybe he lost it out a hole in his pocket.”

“He didn’t have any holes in his pockets,” Barclay said. “Only one in his boot, and it wasn’t big enough for a dollar to get through.” He drank some of his beer. The tumbleweeds blowing up Main Street looked like ghostly brains in the snow.

The jury took an hour and a half. “We voted to hang him on the first ballot,” Kelton Fisher said later, “but we wanted it to look decent.”

Mizell asked Trusdale if he had anything to say before sentence was passed.

“I can’t think of nothing,” Trusdale said. “Just I never killed that girl.”

The storm blew for three days. John House asked Barclay how much he reckoned Trusdale weighed, and Barclay said he guessed the man went around one-forty. House made a dummy out of burlap sacks and filled it with stones, weighing it on the hostelry scales until the needle stood pat on one-forty. Then he hanged the dummy while half the town stood around in the snowdrifts and watched. The trial run went all right.

On the night before the execution, the weather cleared. Sheriff Barclay told Trusdale he could have anything he wanted for dinner. Trusdale asked for steak and eggs, with home fries on the side

soaked in gravy. Barclay paid for it out of his own pocket, then sat at his desk cleaning his fingernails and listening to the steady clink of Trusdale's knife and fork on the china plate. When it stopped, he went in. Trusdale was sitting on his bunk. His plate was so clean Barclay figured he must have lapped up the last of the gravy like a dog. He was crying.

"Something just come to me," Trusdale said.

"What's that, Jim?"

"If they hang me tomorrow morning, I'll go into my grave with steak and eggs still in my belly. It won't have no chance to work through."

For a moment, Barclay said nothing. He was horrified not by the image but because Trusdale had thought of it. Then he said, "Wipe your nose."

Trusdale wiped it.

"Now listen to me, Jim, because this is your last chance. You were in that bar in the middle of the afternoon. Not many people in there then. Isn't that right?"

"I guess it is."

"Then who took your hat? Close your eyes. Think back. See it."

Trusdale closed his eyes. Barclay waited. At last Trusdale opened his eyes, which were red from crying. "I can't even remember was I wearing it."

Barclay sighed. "Give me your plate, and mind that knife."

Trusdale handed the plate through the bars with the knife and fork laid on it, and said he wished he could have some beer. Barclay thought it over, then put on his heavy coat and Stetson and walked down to the Chuck-a-Luck, where he got a small pail of beer from

Dale Gerard. Undertaker Hines was just finishing a glass of wine. He followed Barclay out.

“Big day tomorrow,” Barclay said. “There hasn’t been a hanging here in ten years, and with luck there won’t be another for ten more. I’ll be gone out of the job by then. I wish I was now.”

Hines looked at him. “You really don’t think he killed her.”

“If he didn’t,” Barclay said, “whoever did is still walking around.”

The hanging was at nine o’clock the next morning. The day was windy and bitterly cold, but most of the town turned out to watch. Pastor Ray Rowles stood on the scaffold next to John House. Both of them were shivering in spite of their coats and scarves. The pages of Pastor Rowles’s Bible fluttered. Tucked into House’s belt, also fluttering, was a hood of homespun cloth dyed black.

Barclay led Trusdale, his hands cuffed behind his back, to the gallows. Trusdale was all right until he got to the steps, then he began to buck and cry.

“Don’t do this,” he said. “Please don’t do this to me. Please don’t hurt me. Please don’t kill me.”

He was strong for a little man, and Barclay motioned Dave Fisher to come and lend a hand. Together they muscled Trusdale, twisting and ducking and pushing, up the twelve wooden steps. Once, he bucked so hard all three of them almost fell off, and arms reached up to catch them if they did.

“Quit that and die like a man!” someone shouted.

On the platform, Trusdale was momentarily quiet, but when Pastor Rowles commenced Psalm 51, he began to scream. “Like a woman with her tit caught in the wringer,” someone said later in the Chuck-a-Luck.

“Have mercy on me, O God, after Thy great goodness,” Rowles read, raising his voice to be heard above the condemned man’s shrieks to be let off. “According to the multitude of Thy mercies, do away with mine offenses.”

When Trusdale saw House take the black hood out of his belt, he began to pant like a dog. He shook his head from side to side, trying to dodge the hood. His hair flew. House followed each jerk patiently, like a man who means to bridle a skittish horse.

“Let me look at the mountains!” Trusdale bellowed. Runners of snot hung from his nostrils. “I’ll be good if you let me look at the mountains one more time!”

But House only jammed the hood over Trusdale’s head and pulled it down to his shaking shoulders. Pastor Rowles was droning on, and Trusdale tried to run off the trapdoor. Barclay and Fisher pushed him back onto it. Down below, someone cried, “Ride ‘em, cowboy!”

“Say amen,” Barclay told Pastor Rowles. “For Christ’s sake, say amen.”

“Amen,” Pastor Rowles said, and stepped back, closing his Bible with a clap.

Barclay nodded to House. House pulled the lever. The greased beam retracted and the trap dropped. So did Trusdale. There was a crack when his neck broke. His legs drew up almost to his chin, then fell back limp. Yellow drops stained the snow under his feet.

“There, you bastard!” Rebecca Cline’s father shouted. “Died pissing like a dog on a fireplug. Welcome to Hell.” A few people clapped.

The spectators stayed until Trusdale’s corpse, still wearing the black hood, was laid in the same hurry-up wagon he’d ridden to town in. Then they dispersed.

Barclay went back to the jail and sat in the cell Trusdale had occupied. He sat there for ten minutes. It was cold enough to see his breath. He knew what he was waiting for, and eventually it came. He picked up the small bucket that had held Trusdale's last drink of beer and vomited. Then he went into his office and stoked up the stove.

He was still there eight hours later, trying to read a book, when Abel Hines came in. He said, "You need to come down to the funeral parlor, Otis. There's something I want to show you."

"What?"

"No. You'll want to see it for yourself."

They walked down to the Hines Funeral Parlor & Mortuary. In the back room, Trusdale lay naked on a cooling board. There was a smell of chemicals and shit.

"They load their pants when they die that way," Hines said. "Even men who go to it with their heads up. They can't help it. The sphincter lets go."

"And?"

"Step over here. I figure a man in your job has seen worse than a pair of shitty drawers."

They lay on the floor, mostly turned inside out. Something gleamed in the mess. Barclay leaned closer and saw it was a silver dollar. He reached down and plucked it from the crap.

"I don't understand it," Hines said. "Son of a bitch was locked up a good long time."

There was a chair in the corner. Barclay sat down on it so heavily he made a little woof sound. "He must have swallowed it the first time when he saw our lanterns coming. And every time it came out he cleaned it off and swallowed it again."

The two men stared at each other.

“You believed him,” Hines said at last.

“Fool that I am, I did.”

“Maybe that says more about you than it does about him.”

“He went on saying he was innocent right to the end. He’ll most likely stand at the throne of God saying the same thing.”

“Yes,” Hines said.

“I don’t understand. He was going to hang. Either way, he was going to hang. Do you understand it?”

“I don’t even understand why the sun comes up. What are you going to do with that cartwheel? Give it back to the girl’s mother and father? It might be better if you didn’t, because ...” Hines shrugged.

Because the Clines knew all along. Everyone in town knew all along. He was the only one who hadn’t known. Fool that he was.

“I don’t know what I’m going to do with it,” he said.

The wind gusted, bringing the sound of singing. It was coming from the church. It was the Doxology.

DEDICATION

Stephen King

Around the corner from the doormen, the limos, the taxis, and the revolving doors at the entrance to Le Palais, one of New York's oldest and grandest hotels, there is another door, this one small, unmarked, and—for the most part—unremarked.

Martha Rosewall approached it one morning at a quarter of seven, her plain blue canvas tote-bag in one hand and a smile on her face. The tote was usual, the smile much more rarely seen. She was not unhappy in her work—being the Chief Housekeeper of floors ten through twelve of Le Palais might not seem an important or rewarding job to some, but to a woman who had worn dresses made out of rice-and flour-sacks as a girl growing up in Babylon, Alabama, it seemed very important indeed, and very rewarding as well. Yet no matter what the job, mechanic or movie-star, on ordinary mornings a person arrives at work with an ordinary expression on his or her face; a look that says Most of me is still in bed and not much more. For Martha Rosewall, however, this was no ordinary morning.

Things had begun being not ordinary for her when she arrived home from work the previous afternoon and found the package her son had sent from Ohio. The long-expected and long-awaited had finally come. She had slept only in snatches last night—she had to keep getting up and checking to make sure the thing he had sent was real, and that it was still there. Finally she had slept with it under her pillow, like a bridesmaid with a piece of wedding cake.

Now she used her key to open the small door around the corner from the hotel's main entrance and went down three steps to a long hallway painted flat green and lined with Dandux laundry carts. They were piled high with freshly washed and ironed bed-linen. The hallway was filled with its clean smell, a smell that Martha always associated, in some vague way, with the smell of freshly baked bread. The faint sound of Muzak drifted down from the lobby, but these days Martha heard it no more than she heard the hum of the service elevators or the rattle of china in the kitchen.

Halfway down the hall was a door marked CHIEFS OF HOUSEKEEPING. She went in, hung up her coat, and passed through the big room where the Chiefs—there were eleven in all—took their coffee-breaks, worked out problems of supply and demand, and tried to keep up with the endless paperwork. Beyond this room with its huge desk, wall-length bulletin board, and perpetually overflowing ashtrays was a dressing room. Its walls were plain green cinderblock. There were benches, lockers, and two long steel rods festooned with the kind of coathangers you can't steal.

At the far end of the dressing room was the door leading into the shower and bathroom area. This door now opened and Darcy Sagamore appeared, wrapped in a fluffy Le Palais bathrobe and a plume of warm steam. She took one look at Martha's bright face and came to her with her arms out, laughing. "It came, didn't it?" she cried. "You got it! It's written all over your face! Yes sir and yes ma'am!"

Martha didn't know she was going to weep until the tears came. She hugged Darcy and put her face against Darcy's damp black hair.

"That's all right, honey," Darcy said. "You go on and let it all out."

"It's just that I'm so proud of him, Darcy—so damn proud."

"Of course you are. That's why you're crying, and that's fine... but I want to see it as soon as you stop." She grinned then. "You can hold it, though. If I dripped on that baby, I gotta believe you might poke my eye out."

So, with the reverence reserved for an object of great holiness (which, to Martha Rosewall, it was), she removed her son's first novel from the blue canvas tote. She had wrapped it carefully in tissue paper and put it under her brown nylon uniform. She now carefully removed the tissue so that Darcy could view the treasure.

Darcy looked carefully at the cover, which showed three Marines, one with a bandage wrapped around his head, charging up a hill with

their guns firing. Blaze of Glory, printed in fiery red-orange letters, was the title. And below the picture was this: A Novel by Peter Rosewall.

“All right, that’s good, wonderful, but now show me the other!” Darcy spoke in the tones of a woman who wants to dispense with the merely interesting and go directly to the heart of the matter.

Martha nodded and turned unhesitatingly to the dedication page, where Darcy read: “This book is dedicated to my mother, MARTHA ROSEWALL. Mom, I couldn’t have done it without you.” Below the printed dedication this was added in a thin, sloping, and somehow old-fashioned script: “And that’s no lie. Love you, Mom! Pete.”

“Why, isn’t that just the sweetest thing?” Darcy asked, and swiped at her dark eyes with the heel of her hand.

“It’s more than sweet,” Martha said. She re-wrapped the book in the tissue paper. “It’s true.” She smiled, and in that smile her old friend Darcy Sagamore saw something more than love. She saw triumph.

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After punching out at three o’clock, Martha and Darcy frequently stopped in at La Patisserie, the hotel’s coffee shop. On rare occasions they went into Le Cinq, the little pocket bar just off the lobby, for something a little stronger, and this day was a Le Cinq occasion if there had ever been one. Darcy got her friend comfortably situated in one of the booths, and left her there with a bowl of Goldfish crackers while she spoke briefly to Ray, who was tending bar that afternoon. Martha saw him grin at Darcy, nod, and make a circle with the thumb and forefinger of his right hand. Darcy came back to the booth with a look of satisfaction on her face. Martha regarded her with some suspicion.

“What was that about?”

“You’ll see.”

Five minutes later Ray came over with a silver ice-bucket on a stand and placed it beside them. In it was a bottle of Perrier-Jouet champagne and two chilled glasses.

“Here, now!” Martha said in a voice that was half-alarmed, half-laughing. She looked at Darcy, startled.

“Hush,” Darcy said, and to her credit, Martha did.

Ray uncorked the bottle, placed the cork beside Darcy, and poured a little into her glass. Darcy waved at it and winked at Ray.

“Enjoy, ladies,” Ray said, and then blew a little kiss at Martha. “And congratulate your boy for me, sweetie.” He walked away before Martha, who was still stunned, could say anything.

Darcy poured both glasses full and raised hers. After a moment Martha did the same. The glasses clinked gently. “Here’s to the start of your son’s career,” Darcy said, and they drank. Darcy tipped the rim of her glass against Martha’s a second time. “And to the boy himself,” she said. They drank again, and Darcy touched their glasses together yet a third time before Martha could set hers down. “And to a mother’s love.”

“Amen, honey,” Martha said, and although her mouth smiled, her eyes did not. On each of the first two toasts she had taken a discreet sip of champagne. This time she drained the glass.

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Darcy had gotten the bottle of champagne so that she and her best friend could celebrate Peter Rosewall’s breakthrough in the style it seemed to deserve, but that was not the only reason. She was curious about what Martha had said—It’s more than sweet, it’s true. And she was curious about that expression of triumph.

She waited until Martha had gotten through her third glass of champagne and then she said, “What did you mean about the

dedication, Martha?”

“What?”

“You said it wasn’t just sweet, it was true.”

Martha looked at her so long without speaking that Darcy thought she was not going to answer at all. Then she uttered a laugh so bitter it was shocking—at least to Darcy it was. She’d had no idea that cheerful little Martha Rosewall could be so bitter, in spite of the hard life she had led. But that note of triumph was still there, too, an unsettling counterpoint.

“His book is going to be a best-seller and the critics are going to eat it up like ice cream,” Martha said. “I believe that, but not because Pete says so ... although he does, of course. I believe it because that’s what happened with him.”

“Who?”

“Pete’s father,” Martha said. She folded her hands on the table and looked at Darcy calmly.

“But—” Darcy began, then stopped. Johnny Rosewall had never written a book in his life, of course. IOUs and the occasional I fucked yo momma in spray-paint on brick walls were more Johnny’s style. It seemed as if Martha was saying ...

Never mind the fancy stuff, Darcy thought. You know perfectly well what she’s saying: She might have been married to Johnny when she got pregnant with Pete, but someone a little more intellectual was responsible for the kid.

Except it didn’t fit. Darcy had never met Johnny, but she had seen half a dozen photos of him in Martha’s albums, and she’d gotten to know Pete well—so well, in fact, that during his last two years of high school and first two years of college she’d come to think of him as partly her own. And the physical resemblance between the boy

who'd spent so much time in her kitchen and the man in the photo albums ...

"Well, Johnny was Pete's biological father," Martha said, as if reading her mind. "Only have to look at his nose and eyes to see that. Just wasn't his natural one ... any more of that bubbly? It goes down so smooth." Now that she was tiddly, the South had begun to resurface in Martha's voice like a child creeping out of its hiding place.

Darcy poured most of the remaining champagne into Martha's glass. Martha held it up by the stem, looking through the liquid, enjoying the way it turned the subdued afternoon light in Le Cinq to gold. Then she drank a little, set the glass down, and laughed that bitter, jagged laugh again.

"You don't have the slightest idea what I'm talking about, do you?"

"No, honey, I don't."

"Well, I'm going to tell you," Martha said. "After all these years I have to tell someone—now more'n ever, now that he's published his book and broken through after all those years of gettin ready for it to happen. God knows I can't tell him—him least of all. But then, lucky sons never know how much their mothers love them, or the sacrifices they make, do they?"

"I guess not," Darcy said. "Martha, hon, maybe you ought to think about if you really want to tell me whatever it is you—"

"No, they don't have a clue," Martha said, and Darcy realized her friend hadn't heard a single word she'd said. Martha Rosewall was off in some world of her own. When her eyes came back to Darcy, a peculiar little smile—one Darcy didn't like much—touched the corners of her mouth. "Not a clue," she repeated. "If you want to know what that word dedication really means, I think you have to ask a mother. What do you think, Darcy?"

But Darcy could only shake her head, unsure what to say. Martha nodded, however, as if Darcy had agreed completely, and then she began to speak.

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There was no need for her to go over the basic facts. The two women had worked together at Le Palais for eleven years and had been close friends for most of that time.

The most basic of those basic facts, Darcy would have said (at least until that day in Le Cinq she would have said it), was that Marty had married a man who wasn't much good, one who was a lot more interested in his booze and his dope—not to mention just about any woman who happened to flip a hip in his direction—than he was in the woman he had married.

Martha had been in New York only a few months when she met him, just a babe in the woods, and she had been two months pregnant when she said I do. Pregnant or not, she had told Darcy more than once, she had thought carefully before agreeing to marry Johnny. She was grateful he wanted to stick by her (she was wise enough, even then, to know that many men would have been down the road and gone five minutes after the words “I'm pregnant” were out of the little lady's mouth), but she was not entirely blind to his shortcomings. She had a good idea what her mother and father—especially her father—would make of Johnny Rosewall with his black T-Bird and his tu-tone airtip shoes, bought because Johnny had seen Memphis Slim wearing a pair exactly like them when Slim played the Apollo.

That first child Martha had lost in the third month. After another five months or so, she had decided to chalk the marriage up to profit and loss—mostly loss. There had been too many late nights, too many weak excuses, too many black eyes. Johnny, she said, fell in love with his fists when he was drunk.

“He always looked good,” she told Darcy once, “but a good-lookin shitheel is still a shitheel.”

Before she could pack her bags, Martha discovered she was pregnant again. Johnny’s reaction this time was immediate and hostile: he socked her in the belly with the handle of a broom in an effort to make her miscarry. Two nights later he and a couple of his friends—men who shared Johnny’s affection for bright clothes and tu-tone shoes—tried to stick up a liquor store on East 116th Street. The proprietor had a shotgun under the counter. He brought it out. Johnny Rosewall was packing a nickel-plated .32 he’d gotten God knew where. He pointed it at the proprietor, pulled the trigger, and the pistol blew up. One of the fragments of the barrel entered his brain by way of his right eye, killing him instantly.

Martha had worked on at Le Palais until her seventh month (this was long before Darcy Sagamore’s time, of course), and then Mrs. Proulx told her to go home before she dropped the kid in the tenth-floor corridor or maybe the laundry elevator. You’re a good little worker and you can have your job back later on if you want it, Roberta Proulx told her, but for right now you get yourself gone, girl.

Martha did, and two months later she had borne a seven-pound boy whom she had named Peter, and Peter had, in the fullness of time, written a novel called *Blaze of Glory*, which everyone—including the Book-of-the-Month Club and Universal Pictures—thought destined for fame and fortune.

All this Darcy had heard before. The rest of it—the unbelievable rest of it—she heard about that afternoon and evening, beginning in Le Cinq, with champagne glasses before them and the advance copy of Pete’s novel in the canvas tote by Martha Rosewall’s feet.

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“We were living uptown, of course,” Martha said, looking down at her champagne glass and twirling it between her fingers. “On Stanton

Street, up by Station Park. I've been back since. It's worse than it was—a lot worse—but it was no beauty spot even back then.

“There was a spooky old woman who lived at the Station Park end of Stanton Street back then—folks called her Mama Delorme and lots of them swore she was a bruja woman. I didn't believe in anything like that myself, and once I asked Octavia Kinsolving, who lived in the same building as me and Johnny, how people could go on believing such trash in a day when space satellites went whizzing around the earth and there was a cure for just about every disease under the sun. 'Tavia was an educated woman—had been to Juilliard—and was only living on the fatback side of 110th because she had her mother and three younger brothers to support. I thought she would agree with me but she only laughed and shook her head.

” ‘Are you telling me you believe in bruja?’ ” I asked her.

” ‘No,’ she said, ‘but I believe in her. She is different. Maybe for every thousand—or ten thousand—or million—women who claim to be witchy, there's one who really is. If so, Mama Delorme's the one.’

“I just laughed. People who don't need bruja can afford to laugh at it, the same way that people who don't need prayer can afford to laugh at that. I'm talkin 'bout when I was first married, you know, and in those days I still thought I could straighten Johnny out. Can you dig it?”

Darcy nodded.

“Then I had the miscarriage. Johnny was the main reason I had it, I guess, although I didn't like to admit that even to myself back then. He was beating on me most the time, and drinking all the time. He'd take the money I gave him and then he'd take more out of my purse. When I told him I wanted him to quit hooking from my bag he'd get all woundfaced and claim he hadn't done any such thing. That was if he was sober. If he was drunk he'd just laugh.

“I wrote my momma down home—it hurt me to write that letter, and it shamed me, and I cried while I was writing it, but I had to know what she thought. She wrote back and told me to get out of it, to go right away before he put me in the hospital or even worse. My older sister, Cassandra (we always called her Kissy), went that one better. She sent me a Greyhound bus ticket with two words written on the envelope in pink lipstick—GO NOW, it said.”

Martha took another small sip of her champagne.

“Well, I didn’t. I liked to think I had too much dignity. I suppose it was nothing but stupid pride. Either way, it turned out the same. I stayed. Then, after I lost the baby, I went and got pregnant again—only I didn’t know at first. I didn’t have any morning sickness, you see ... but then, I never did with the first one, either.”

“You didn’t go to this Mama Delorme because you were pregnant?” Darcy asked. Her immediate assumption had been that Martha had thought maybe the witch-woman would give her something that would make her miscarry ... or that she’d decided on an out-and-out abortion.

“No,” Martha said. “I went because ‘Tavia said Mama Delorme could tell me for sure what the stuff was I found in Johnny’s coat pocket. White powder in a little glass bottle.”

“Oh-oh,” Darcy said.

Martha smiled without humor. “You want to know how bad things can get?” she asked. “Probably you don’t but I’ll tell you anyway. Bad is when your man drinks and don’t have no steady job. Really bad is when he drinks, don’t have no job, and beats on you. Even worse is when you reach into his coat pocket, hoping to find a dollar to buy toilet paper with down at the Sunland Market, and find a little glass bottle with a spoon on it instead. And do you know what’s worst of all? Looking at that little bottle and just hoping the stuff inside it is cocaine and not horse.”

“You took it to Mama Delorme?”

Martha laughed pityingly.

“The whole bottle? No ma’am. I wasn’t getting much fun out of life, but I didn’t want to die. If he’d come home from wherever he was at and found that two-gram bottle gone, he would have plowed me like a pea-field. What I did was take a little and put it in the cellophane from off a cigarette pack. Then I went to ‘Tavia and ‘Tavia told me to go to Mama Delorme and I went.”

“What was she like?”

Martha shook her head, unable to tell her friend exactly what Mama Delorme had been like, or how strange that half-hour in the woman’s third-floor apartment had been, or how she’d nearly run down the crazily leaning stairs to the street, afraid that the woman was following her. The apartment had been dark and smelly, full of the smell of candles and old wallpaper and cinnamon and soured sachet. There had been a picture of Jesus on one wall, Nostradamus on another.

“She was a weird sister if there ever was one,” Martha said finally. “I don’t have any idea even today how old she was; she might have been seventy, ninety, or a hundred and ten. There was a pink-white scar that went up one side of her nose and her forehead and into her hair. Looked like a burn. It had pulled her right eye down in a kind of droop that looked like a wink. She was sitting in a rocker and she had knitting in her lap. I came in and she said, ‘I have three things to tell you, little lady. The first is that you don’t believe in me. The second is the bottle you found in your husband’s coat is full of White Angel heroin. The third is you’re three weeks gone with a boy-child you’ll name after his natural father.’ “

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Martha looked around to make sure no one had taken a seat at one of the nearby tables, satisfied herself that they were still alone, and

then leaned toward Darcy, who was looking at her with silent fascination.

“Later, when I could think straight again, I told myself that as far as those first two things went, she hadn’t done anything that a good stage magician couldn’t do—or one of those mentalist fellows in the white turbans. If ‘Tavia Kinsolving had called the old lady to say I was coming, she might have told her why I was coming, too. You see how simple it could have been? And to a woman like Mama Delorme, those little touches would be important, because if you want to be known as a bruja woman, you have to act like a bruja woman.”

“I suppose that’s right,” Darcy said.

“As for her telling me that I was pregnant, that might have been just a lucky guess. Or... well... some ladies just know.”

Darcy nodded. “I had an aunt who was damned good at knowing when a woman had caught pregnant. She’d know sometimes before the woman knew, and sometimes before the woman had any business being pregnant, if you see what I mean.”

Martha laughed and nodded.

“She said their smell changed,” Darcy went on, “and sometimes you could pick up that new smell as soon as a day after the woman in question had caught, if your nose was keen.”

“Uh-huh,” Martha said. “I’ve heard the same thing, but in my case none of that applied. She just knew, and down deep, underneath the part of me that was trying to make believe it was all just a lot of hokum, I knew she knew. To be with her was to believe in bruja—her bruja, anyway. And it didn’t go away, that feeling, the way a dream does when you wake up, or the way your belief in a good faker goes away when you’re out of his spell.”

“What did you do?”

“Well, there was a chair with a saggy old cane seat near the door and I guess that was lucky for me, because when she said what she did, the world kind of grayed over and my knees came unbolted. I was going to sit down no matter what, but if the chair hadn’t been there I would have sat on the floor.

“She just waited for me to get myself back together and went on knitting. It was like she had seen it all a hundred times before. I suppose she had.

“When my heart finally began to slow down I opened my mouth and what came out was ‘I’m going to leave my husband.’

” ‘No,’ she came back right away, ‘he gonna leave you. You gonna see him out, is all. Stick around, woman. There be a little money. You gonna think he hoit the baby but he dint be doin it.’

” ‘How,’ I said, but that was all I could say, it seemed like, and so I kept saying it over and over. ‘How-how-how,’ just like John Lee Hooker on some old blues record. Even now, twenty-six years later, I can smell those old burned candles and kerosene from the kitchen and the sour smell of dried wallpaper, like old cheese. I can see her, small and frail in this old blue dress with little polka-dots that used to be white but had gone the yellowy color of old newspapers by the time I met her. She was so little, but there was such a feeling of power that came from her, like a bright, bright light—”

Martha got up, went to the bar, spoke with Ray, and came back with a large glass of water. She drained most of it at a draught.

“Better?” Darcy asked.

“A little, yeah.” Martha shrugged, then smiled. “It doesn’t do to go on about it, I guess. If you’d been there, you’d’ve felt it. You’d’ve felt her.

” ‘How I do anythin or why you married that country piece of shit in the first place ain’t neither of them important now,’ Mama Delorme

said to me. 'What's important now is you got to find the child's natural father.'

"Anyone listening would have thought she was as much as saying I'd been screwing around on my man, but it never even occurred to me to be mad at her; I was too confused to be mad. 'What do you mean?' I asked. 'Johnny's the child's natural father.'

"She kind of snorted and flapped her hand at me, like she was saying Pshaw. 'Ain't nothin natural about that man.'

"Then she leaned in closer to me and I started to feel a little scared. There was so much knowing in her, and it felt like not very much of it was nice.

" 'Any child a woman get, the man shoot it out'n his pecker, girl,' she said. 'You know that, don't you?'

"I didn't think that was the way they put it in the medical books, but I felt my head going up n down just the same, as if she'd reached across the room with hands I couldn't see and nodded it for me.

" 'That's right,' she said, nodding her ownself. 'That's the way God planned it to be... like a seesaw. A man shoots cheerun out'n his pecker, so them cheerun mostly his. But it's a woman who carries em and bears em and has the raisin of em, so them cheerun mostly hers. That's the way of the world, but there's a 'ception to every rule, one that proves the rule, and this is one of em. The man who put you with child ain't gonna be no natural father to that child—he wouldn't be no natural father to it even if he was gonna be around. He'd hate it, beat it to death before its foist birthday, mos' likely, because he'd know it wasn't his. A man can't always smell that out, or see it, but he will if the child is different enough ... and this child goan be as different from piss-ignorant Johnny Rosewall as day is from night. So tell me, girl: who is the child's natural father?' And she kind of leaned toward me.

“All I could do was shake my head and tell her I didn’t know what she was talking about. But I think that something in me—something way back in that part of your mind that only gets a real chance to think in your dreams—did know. Maybe I’m only making that up because of all I know now, but I don’t think so. I think that for just a moment or two his name fluttered there in my head.

“I said, ‘I don’t know what it is you want me to say—I don’t know anything about natural fathers or unnatural ones. I don’t even know for sure if I’m pregnant, but if I am it has to be Johnny’s, because he’s the only man I’ve ever slept with!’

“Well, she sat back for a minute, and then she smiled. Her smile was like sunshine, and it eased me a little. ‘I didn’t mean to scare you, honey,’ she said. ‘That wasn’t none of what I had in my mind at all. It’s just that I got the sight, and sometime it’s strong. I’ll just brew us a cup of tea, and that’ll calm you down. You’ll like it. It’s special to me.’

“I wanted to tell her I didn’t want any tea, but it seemed like I couldn’t. Seemed like too much of an effort to open my mouth, and all the strength had gone out of my legs.

“She had a greasy little kitchenette that was almost as dark as a cave. I sat in the chair by the door and watched her spoon loose tea into an old chipped china pot and put a kettle on the gas ring. I sat there thinking I didn’t want anything that was special to her, nor anything that came out of that greasy little kitchenette either. I was thinking I’d take just a little sip to be mannerly and then get my ass out of there as fast as I could and never come back.

“But then she brought over two little china cups just as clean as snow and a tray with sugar and cream and fresh-baked bread-rolls. She poured the tea and it smelled good and hot and strong. It kind of waked me up and before I knew it I’d drunk two cups and eaten one of the bread-rolls, too.

“She drank a cup and ate a roll and we got talking along on more natural subjects—who we knew on the street, whereabouts in Alabama I came from, where I liked to shop, and all that. Then I looked at my watch and seen over an hour and a half had gone by. I started to get up and a dizzy feeling ran through me and I plopped right back in my chair again.”

Darcy was looking at her, eyes round.

” ‘You doped me,’ I said, and I was scared, but the scared part of me was way down inside.

” ‘Girl, I want to help you,’ she said, ‘but you don’t want to give up what I need to know and I know damn well you ain’t gonna do what you need to do even once you do give it up—not without a push. So I fixed her. You gonna take a little nap, is all, but before you do you’re gonna tell me the name of your babe’s natural father.’

“And, sitting there in that chair with its saggy cane bottom and hearing all of uptown roaring and racketing just outside her living-room window, I saw him as clear as I’m seeing you now, Darcy. His name was Peter Jefferies, and he was just as white as I am black, just as tall as I am short, just as educated as I am ignorant. We were as different as two people could be except for one thing—we both come from Alabama, me from Babylon down in the toolies by the Florida state line, him from Birmingham. He didn’t even know I was alive—I was just the nigger woman who cleaned the suite where he always stayed on the eleventh floor of this hotel. And as for me, I only thought of him to stay out of his way because I’d heard him talk and seen him operate and I knew well enough what sort of man he was. It wasn’t just that he wouldn’t use a glass a black person had used before him without it had been washed; I’ve seen too much of that in my time to get worked up about it. It was that once you got past a certain point in that man’s character, white and black didn’t have anything to do with what he was. He belonged to the son-of-a-bitch tribe, and that particular bunch comes in all skin-colors.

“You know what? He was like Johnny in a lot of ways, or the way Johnny would have been if he’d been smart and had an education and if God had thought to give Johnny a great big slug of talent inside of him instead of just a head for dope and a nose for wet pussy.

“I thought nothing of him but to steer clear of him, nothing at all. But when Mama Delorme leaned over me, so close I felt like the smell of cinnamon comin out of her pores was gonna suffocate me, it was his name that came out with never a pause. ‘Peter Jefferies,’ I said. ‘Peter Jefferies, the man who stays in 1163 when he ain’t writing his books down there in Alabama. He’s the natural father. But he’s white! ‘

“She leaned closer and said, ‘No he ain’t, honey. No man’s white. Inside where they live, they’s all black. You don’t believe it, but that’s true. It’s midnight inside em all, any hour of God’s day. But a man can make light out of night, and that’s why what comes out of a man to make a baby in a woman is white. Natural got nothing to do with color. Now you close your eyes, honey, because you tired—you so tired. Now! Say! Now! Don’t you fight! Mama Delorme ain’t goan put nothin over on you, child! Just got somethin I goan to put in your hand. Now—no, don’t look, just close your hand over it.’ I did what she said and felt something square. Felt like glass or plastic.

” ‘You gonna remember everythin when it’s time for you to remember. For now, just go on to sleep. Shhh ... go to sleep... shhh... .’

“And that’s just what I did,” Martha said. “Next thing I remember, I was running down those stairs like the devil was after me. I didn’t remember what I was running from, but that didn’t make any difference; I ran anyway. I only went back there one more time, and I didn’t see her when I did.”

Martha paused and they both looked around like women freshly awakened from a shared dream. Le Cinq had begun to fill up—it was almost five o’clock and executives were drifting in for their after-work

drinks. Although neither wanted to say so out loud, both suddenly wanted to be somewhere else. They were no longer wearing their uniforms but neither felt she belonged among these men with their briefcases and their talk of stocks, bonds, and debentures.

“I’ve got a casserole and a six-pack at my place,” Martha said, suddenly timid. “I could warm up the one and cool down the other ... if you want to hear the rest.”

“Honey, I think I got to hear the rest,” Darcy said, and laughed a little nervously.

“And I think I’ve got to tell it,” Martha replied, but she did not laugh. Or even smile.

“Just let me call my husband. Tell him I’ll be late.”

“You do that,” Martha said, and while Darcy used the telephone, Martha checked in her bag one more time just to make sure the precious book was still there.

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The casserole—as much of it as the two of them could use, anyway—was eaten, and they had each had a beer. Martha asked Darcy again if she was sure she wanted to hear the rest. Darcy said she did.

“Because some of it ain’t very nice. I got to be up front with you about that. Some of it’s worse’n the sort of magazines the single men leave behind em when they check out.”

Darcy knew the sort of magazines she meant, but could not imagine her trim, clean little friend in connection with any of the things pictured in them. She got them each a fresh beer, and Martha began to speak again.

*

“I was back home before I woke up all the way, and because I couldn’t remember hardly any of what had gone on at Mama Delorme’s, I decided the best thing—the safest thing—was to believe it had all been a dream. But the powder I’d taken from Johnny’s bottle wasn’t a dream; it was still in my dress pocket, wrapped up in the cellophane from the cigarette pack. All I wanted to do right then was get rid of it, and never mind all the bruja in the world. Maybe I didn’t make a business of going through Johnny’s pockets, but he surely made a business of going through mine, ‘case I was holding back a dollar or two he might want.

“But that wasn’t all I found in my pocket—there was something else, too. I took it out and looked at it and then I knew for sure I’d seen her, although I still couldn’t remember much of what had passed between us.

“It was a little square plastic box with a top you could see through and open. There wasn’t nothing in it but an old dried-up mushroom—except after hearing what ‘Tavia had said about that woman, I thought maybe it might be a toadstool instead of a mushroom, and probably one that would give you the night-gripes so bad you’d wish it had just killed you outright like some of em do.

“I decided to flush it down the commode along with that powder he’d been sniffing up his nose, but when it came right down to it, I couldn’t. Felt like she was right there in the room with me, telling me not to. I was even scairt to look into the livin-room mirror, case I might see her standin behind me.

“In the end, I dumped the little bit of powder I’d taken down the kitchen sink, and I put the little plastic box in the cabinet over the sink. I stood on tiptoe and pushed it in as far as I could—all the way to the back, I guess. Where I forgot all about it.”

*

She stopped for a moment, drumming her fingers nervously on the table, and then said, “I guess I ought to tell you a little more about

Peter Jefferies. My Pete's novel is about Viet Nam and what he knew of the Army from his own hitch; Peter Jefferies's books were about what he always called Big Two, when he was drunk and partying with his friends. He wrote the first one while he was still in the service, and it was published in 1946. It was called Blaze of Heaven."

Darcy looked at her for a long time without speaking and then said, "Is that so?"

"Yes. Maybe you see where I'm going now. Maybe you get a little more what I mean about natural fathers. Blaze of Heaven, Blaze of Glory."

"But if your Pete had read this Mr. Jefferies's book, isn't it possible that—"

"Course it's possible," Martha said, making that pshaw gesture herself this time, "but that ain't what happened. I ain't going to try and convince you of that, though. You'll either be convinced when I get done or you won't. I just wanted to tell you about the man, a little."

"Go to it," Darcy said.

"I saw him pretty often from 1957 when I started working at Le Palais right through until 1968 or so, when he got in trouble with his heart and liver. The way the man drank and carried on, I was only surprised he didn't get in trouble with himself earlier on. He was only in half a dozen times in 1969, and I remember how bad he looked—he was never fat, but he'd lost enough weight by then so he wasn't no more than a stuffed string. Went right on drinking, though, yellow face or not. I'd hear him coughing and puking in the bathroom and sometimes crying with the pain and I'd think, Well, that's it; that's all; he's got to see what he's doing to himself; he'll quit now. But he never. In 1970 he was only in twice. He had a man with him that he leaned on and who took care of him. He was still drinking, too,

although anybody who took even half a glance at him knew he had no business doing it.

“The last time he came was in February of 1971. It was a different man he had with him, though; I guess the first one must have played out. Jefferies was in a wheelchair by then. When I come in to clean and looked in the bathroom, I seen what was hung up to dry on the shower-curtain rail—continence pants. He’d been a handsome man, but those days were long gone. The last few times I saw him, he just looked raddled. Do you know what I’m talking about?”

Darcy nodded. You saw such creatures creeping down the street sometimes, with their brown bags under their arms or tucked into their shabby old coats.

“He always stayed in 1163, one of those corner suites with the view that looks toward the Chrysler Building, and I always used to do for him. After awhile, it got so’s he would even call me by name, but it didn’t really signify—I wore a name-tag and he could read, that was all. I don’t believe he ever once really saw me. Until 1960 he always left two dollars on top of the television when he checked out. Then, until ‘64, it was three. At the very end it was five. Those were very good tips for those days, but he wasn’t really tipping me; he was following a custom. Custom’s important for people like him. He tipped for the same reason he’d hold the door for a lady; for the same reason he no doubt used to put his milk-teeth under his pillow when he was a little fellow. Only difference was, I was the Cleanin Fairy instead of the Tooth Fairy.

“He’d come in to talk to his publishers or sometimes movie and TV people, and he’d call up his friends—some of them were in publishing, too, others were agents or writers like him—and there’d be a party. Always a party. Most I just knew about by the messes I had to clean up the next day—dozens of empty bottles (mostly Jack Daniel’s), millions of cigarette butts, wet towels in the sinks and the tub, leftover room service everywhere. Once I found a whole platter of jumbo shrimp turned into the toilet bowl. There were glass-rings on everything, and people snoring on the sofa and floors, like as not.

“That was mostly, but sometimes there were parties still going on when I started to clean at ten-thirty in the morning. He’d let me in and I’d just kinda clean up around em. There weren’t any women at those parties; those ones were strictly stag, and all they ever did was drink and talk about the war. How they got to the war. Who they knew in the war. Where they went in the war. Who got killed in the war. What they saw in the war they could never tell their wives about (although it was all right if a black maid happened to pick up on some of it). Sometimes—not too often—they’d play high-stakes poker as well, but they talked about the war even while they were betting and raising and bluffing and folding. Five or six men, their faces all flushed the way white men’s faces get when they start really socking it down, sitting around a glass-topped table with their shirts open and their ties pulled way down, the table heaped with more money than a woman like me will make in a lifetime. And how they did talk about their war! They talked about it the way young women talk about their lovers and their boyfriends.”

Darcy said she was surprised the management hadn’t kicked Jefferies out, famous writer or not—they were fairly stiff about such goings-on now and had been even worse in years gone by, or so she had heard.

“No, no, no,” Martha said, smiling a little. “You got the wrong impression. You’re thinking the man and his friends carried on like one of those rock-groups that like to tear up their suites and throw the sofas out the windows. Jefferies wasn’t no ordinary grunt, like my Pete; he’d been to West Point, went in a Lieutenant and came out a Major. He was quality, from one of those old Southern families who have a big house full of old paintings where everyone’s ridin hosses and looking noble. He could tie his tie four different ways and he knew how to bend over a lady’s hand when he kissed it. He was quality, I tell you.”

Martha’s smile took on a little twist as she spoke the word; the twist had a look both bitter and derisive.

“He and his friends sometimes got a little loud, I guess, but they rarely got rowdy—there’s a difference, although it’s hard to explain—and they never got out of control. If there was a complaint from the neighboring room—because it was a corner suite he stayed in, there was only the one—and someone from the front desk had to call Mr. Jefferies’s room and ask him and his guests to tone it down a little, why, they always did. You understand?”

“Yes.”

“And that’s not all. A quality hotel can work for people like Mr. Jefferies. It can protect them. They can go right on partying and having a good time with their booze and their cards or maybe their drugs.”

“Did he take drugs?”

“Hell, I don’t know. He had plenty of them at the end, God knows, but they were all the kind with prescription labels on them. I’m just saying that quality—it’s that white Southern gentleman’s idea of quality I’m talking about now, you know—calls to quality. He’d been coming to Le Palais a long time, and you may think it was important to the management that he was a big famous author, but that’s only because you haven’t been at Le Palais as long as I have. Him being famous was important to them, but it was really just the icing on the cake. What was more important was that he’d been coming there a long time, and his father, who was a big landowner down around Porterville, had been a regular guest before him. The people who ran the hotel back then were people who believed in tradition. I know the ones who run it now say they believe in it, and maybe they do when it suits them, but in those days they really believed in it. When they knew Mr. Jefferies was coming up to New York on the Southern Flyer from Birmingham, you’d see the room right next to that corner suite sort of empty out, unless the hotel was full right up to the scuppers. They never charged him for the empty room next door; they were just trying to spare him the embarrassment of having to tell his cronies to keep it down to a dull roar.”

Darcy shook her head slowly. “That’s amazing.”

“You don’t believe it, honey?”

“Oh yes—I believe it, but it’s still amazing.”

That bitter, derisive smile resurfaced on Martha Rosewall’s face.

“Ain’t nothing too much for quality ... for that Robert E. Lee Stars and Bars charm ... or didn’t used to be. Hell, even I recognized that he was quality, no sort of a man to go hollering Yee-haw out the window or telling Rastus P. Coon jokes to his friends.

“He hated blacks just the same, though, don’t be thinking different ... but remember what I said about him belonging to the son-of-a-bitch tribe? Fact was, when it came to hate, Peter Jefferies was an equal-opportunity employer. When John Kennedy died, Jefferies happened to be in the city and he threw a party. All of his friends were there, and it went on into the next day. I could barely stand to be in there, the things they were saying—about how things would be perfect if only someone would get that brother of his who wouldn’t be happy until every decent white kid in the country was fucking while the Beatles played on the stereo and the colored (that’s what they called black folks, mostly, ‘the colored,’ I used to hate that sissy, pantywaist way of saying so much) were running wild through the streets with a TV under each arm.

“It got so bad that I knew I was going to scream at him. I just kept telling myself to be quiet and do my job and get out as fast as I could; I kept telling myself to remember the man was my Pete’s natural father if I couldn’t remember anything else; I kept telling myself that Pete was only three years old and I needed my job and I would lose it if I couldn’t keep my mouth shut.

“Then one of em said, ‘And after we get Bobby, let’s go get his candy-ass kid brother!’ and one of the others said, ‘Then we’ll get all the male children and really have a party!’

” ‘That’s right!’ Mr. Jefferies said. ‘And when we’ve got the last head up on the last castle wall we’re going to have a party so big I’m going to hire Madison Square Garden!’

“I had to leave then. I had a headache and belly-cramps from trying so hard to keep my mouth shut. I left the room half-cleaned, which is something I never did before nor have since, but sometimes being black has its advantages; he didn’t know I was there, and he sure didn’t know when I was gone. Wasn’t none of them did.”

That bitter derisive smile was on her lips again.

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“I don’t see how you can call a man like that quality, even as a joke,” Darcy said, “or call him the natural father of your unborn child, whatever the circumstances might have been. To me he sounds like a beast.”

“No!” Martha said sharply. “He wasn’t a beast. He was a man. In some ways—in most ways—he was a bad man, but a man is what he was. And he did have that something you could call ‘quality’ without a smirk on your face, although it only came out completely in the things he wrote.”

“Huh!” Darcy looked disdainfully at Martha from below drawn-together brows. “You read one of his books, did you?”

“Honey, I read them all. He’d only written three by the time I went to Mama Delorme’s with that white powder in late 1959, but I’d read two of them. In time I got all the way caught up, because he wrote even slower than I read.” She grinned. “And that’s pretty slow!”

Darcy looked doubtfully toward Martha’s bookcase. There were books there by Alice Walker and Rita Mae Brown, Linden Hills by Gloria Naylor and Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down by Ishmael Reed, but the three shelves were pretty much dominated by paperback romances and Agatha Christie mystery stories.

“Stories about war don’t hardly seem like your pick an glory, Martha, if you know what I mean.”

“Of course I know,” Martha said. She got up and brought them each a fresh beer. “I’ll tell you a funny thing, Dee: if he’d been a nice man, I probably never would have read even one of them. And I’ll tell you an even funnier one: if he’d been a nice man, I don’t think they would have been as good as they were.”

“What are you talking about, woman?”

“I don’t know, exactly. Just listen, all right?”

“All right.”

“Well, it didn’t take me until the Kennedy assassination to figure out what kind of man he was. I knew that by the summer of ‘58. By then I’d seen what a low opinion he had of the human race in general—not his friends, he would’ve died for them, but everyone else. Everyone was out looking for a buck to stroke, he used to say—stroking the buck, stroking the buck, everyone was stroking the buck. It seemed like him and his friends thought stroking the buck was a real bad thing, unless they were playing poker and had a whole mess of em spread out on the table. Seemed to me like they stroked them then, all right. Seemed to me like then they stroked them plenty, him included.

“There was a lot of big ugly under his Southern-gentleman top layer—he thought people who were trying to do good or improve the world were about the funniest things going, he hated the blacks and the Jews, and he thought we ought to H-bomb the Russians out of existence before they could do it to us. Why not? he’d say. They were part of what he called ‘the sub-human strain of the race.’ To him that seemed to mean Jews, blacks, Italians, Indians, and anyone whose family didn’t summer on the Outer Banks.

“I listened to him spout all that ignorance and high-toned filth, and naturally I started to wonder about why he was a famous writer...

how he could be a famous writer. I wanted to know what it was the critics saw in him, but I was a lot more interested in what ordinary folks like me saw in him—the people who made his books best-sellers as soon as they came out. Finally I decided to find out for myself. I went down to the Public Library and borrowed his first book, *Blaze of Heaven*.

“I was expecting it’d turn out to be something like in the story of the Emperor’s new clothes, but it didn’t. The book was about these five men and what happened to them in the war, and what happened to their wives and girlfriends back home at the same time. When I saw on the jacket it was about the war, I kind of rolled my eyes, thinking it would be like all those boring stories they told each other.”

“It wasn’t?”

“I read the first ten or twenty pages and thought, This ain’t so good. It ain’t as bad as I thought it’d be, but nothing’s happening. Then I read another thirty pages and I kind of ... well, I kind of lost myself. Next time I looked up it was almost midnight and I was two hundred pages into that book. I thought to myself, You got to go to bed, Martha. You got to go right now, because five-thirty comes early. But I read another forty pages in spite of how heavy my eyes were getting, and it was quarter to one before I finally got up to brush my teeth.”

Martha stopped, looking off toward the darkened window and all the miles of night outside it, her eyes hazed with remembering, her lips pressed together in a light frown. She shook her head a little.

“I didn’t know how a man who was so boring when you had to listen to him could write so you didn’t never want to close the book, nor ever see it end, either. How a nasty, cold-hearted man like him could still make up characters so real you wanted to cry over em when they died. When Noah got hit and killed by a taxi-cab near the end of *Blaze of Heaven*, just a month after his part of the war was over, I did cry. I didn’t know how a sour, cynical man like Jefferies could make a body care so much about things that weren’t real at all—about things he’d made up out of his own head. And there was something else in

that book ... a kind of sunshine. It was full of pain and bad things, but there was sweetness in it, too... and love... .”

She startled Darcy by laughing out loud.

“There was a fella worked at the hotel back then named Billy Beck, a nice young man who was majoring in English at Fordham when he wasn’t on the door. He and I used to talk sometimes—”

“Was he a brother?”

“God, no!” Martha laughed again. “Wasn’t no black doormen at Le Palais until 1965. Black porters and bellboys and car-park valets, but no black doormen. Wasn’t considered right. Quality people like Mr. Jefferies wouldn’t have liked it.

“Anyway, I asked Billy how the man’s books could be so wonderful when he was such a booger in person. Billy asked me if I knew the one about the fat disc jockey with the thin voice, and I said I didn’t know what he was talking about. Then he said he didn’t know the answer to my question, but he told me something a prof of his had said about Thomas Wolfe. This prof said that some writers—and Wolfe was one of them—were no shakes at all until they sat down to a desk and took up pens in their hands. He said that a pen to fellows like that was like a telephone booth is to Clark Kent. He said that Thomas Wolfe was like a ...” She hesitated, then smiled. “... that he was like a divine wind-chime. He said a wind-chime isn’t nothing on its own, but when the wind blows through it, it makes a lovely noise.

“I think Peter Jefferies was like that. He was quality, he had been raised quality and he was, but the quality in him wasn’t nothing he could take credit for. It was like God banked it for him and he just spent it. I’ll tell you something you probably won’t believe: after I’d read a couple of his books, I started to feel sorry for him.”

“Sorry?”

“Yes. Because the books were beautiful and the man who made em was ugly as sin. He really was like my Johnny, but in a way Johnny was luckier, because he never dreamed of a better life, and Mr. Jefferies did. His books were his dreams, where he let himself believe in the world he laughed at and sneered at when he was awake.”

She asked Darcy if she wanted another beer. Darcy said she would pass.

“Well if you change your mind, just holler. And you might change it because right about here is where the water gets murky.”

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“One other thing about the man,” Martha said. “He wasn’t a sexy man. At least not the way you usually think about a man being sexy.”

“You mean he was a—”

“No, he wasn’t a homosexual, or a gay, or whatever it is you’re supposed to call them these days. He wasn’t sexy for men, but he wasn’t what you could call sexy for women, either. There were two, maybe three times in all the years I did for him when I seen cigarette butts with lipstick on them in the bedroom ashtrays when I cleaned up, and smelled perfume on the pillows. One of those times I also found an eyeliner pencil in the bathroom—it had rolled under the door and into the corner. I reckon they were call-girls (the pillows never smelled like the kind of perfume decent women wear), but two or three times in all those years isn’t much, is it?”

“It sure isn’t,” Darcy said, thinking of all the panties she had pulled out from under beds, all the condoms she had seen floating in unflushed toilets, all the false eyelashes she had found on and under pillows.

Martha sat without speaking for a few moments, lost in thought, then looked up. “I tell you what!” she said. “That man was sexy for

himself! It sounds crazy but it's true. There sure wasn't any shortage of jizz in him—I know that from all the sheets I changed.”

Darcy nodded.

“And there'd always be a little jar of cold cream in the bathroom, or sometimes on the table by his bed. I think he used it when he pulled off. To keep from getting chapped skin.”

The two women looked at each other and suddenly began giggling hysterically.

“You sure he wasn't the other way, honey?” Darcy asked finally.

“I said cold cream, not Vas eline,” Martha said, and that did it; for the next five minutes the two women laughed until they cried.

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But it wasn't really funny, and Darcy knew it. And when Martha went on, she simply listened, hardly believing what she was hearing.

“It was maybe a week after that time at Mama Delorme's, or maybe it was two,” Martha said. “I don't remember. It's been a long time since it all happened. By then I was pretty sure I was pregnant—I wasn't throwing up or nothing, but there's a feeling to it. It don't come from places you'd think. It's like your gums and your toenails and the bridge of your nose figure out what's going on before the rest of you. Or you want something like chop suey at three in the afternoon and you say, ‘Whoa, now! What's this?’ But you know what it is. I didn't say a word to Johnny, though—I knew I'd have to, eventually, but I was scared to.”

“I don't blame you,” Darcy said.

“I was in the bedroom of Jefferies's suite one late morning, and while I did the neatening up I was thinking about Johnny and how I might break the news about the baby to him. Jefferies had gone out

someplace—to one of his publishers' meetings, likely as not. The bed was a double, messed up on both sides, but that didn't mean nothing; he was just a restless sleeper. Sometimes when I came in the groundsheet would be pulled right out from underneath the mattress.

“Well, I stripped off the coverlet and the two blankets underneath—he was thin-blooded and always slept under all he could—and then I started to strip the top sheet off backward, and I seen it right away. It was his spend, mostly dried on there.

“I stood there looking at it for ... oh, I don't know how long. It was like I was hypnotized. I saw him, lying there all by himself after his friends had gone home, lying there smelling nothing but the smoke they'd left behind and his own sweat. I saw him lying there on his back and then starting to make love to Mother Thumb and her four daughters. I saw that as clear as I see you now, Darcy; the only thing I didn't see is what he was thinking about, what sort of pictures he was making in his head... and considering the way he talked and how he was when he wasn't writing his books, I'm glad I didn't.”

Darcy was looking at her, frozen, saying nothing.

“Next thing I knew, this ... this feeling came over me.” She paused, thinking, then shook her head slowly and deliberately. “This compulsion came over me. It was like wanting chop suey at three in the afternoon, or ice cream and pickles at two in the morning, or ... what did you want, Darcy?”

“Rind of bacon,” Darcy said through lips so numb she could hardly feel them. “My husband went out and couldn't find me any, but he brought back a bag of those pork rinds and I just gobbled them.”

Martha nodded and began to speak again. Thirty seconds later Darcy bolted for the bathroom, where she struggled briefly with her gorge and then vomited up all the beer she'd drunk.

Look on the bright side, she thought, fumbling weakly for the flush. No hangover to worry about. And then, on the heels of that: How am I going to look her in the eyes? Just how am I supposed to do that?

It turned out not to be a problem. When she turned around, Martha was standing in the bathroom doorway and looking at her with warm concern.

“You all right?”

“Yes.” Darcy tried a smile, and to her immense relief it felt genuine on her lips. “I ... I just ...”

“I know,” Martha said. “Believe me, I do. Should I finish, or have you heard enough?”

“Finish,” Darcy said decisively, and took her friend by the arm. “But in the living room. I don’t even want to look at the refrigerator, let alone open the door.”

“Amen to that.”

A minute later they were settled on opposite ends of the shabby but comfortable living-room couch.

“You sure, honey?”

Darcy nodded.

“All right.” But Martha sat quiet a moment longer, looking down at the slim hands clasped in her lap, conning the past as a submarine commander might con hostile waters through his periscope. At last she raised her head, turned to Darcy, and resumed her story.

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“I worked the rest of that day in kind of a daze. It was like I was hypnotized. People talked to me, and I answered them, but I seemed to be hearing them through a glass wall and speaking back to them

the same way. I'm hypnotized, all right, I remember thinking. She hypnotized me. That old woman. Gave me one of those post-hypnotic suggestions, like when a stage hypnotist says, 'Someone says the word Chiclets to you, you're gonna get down on all fours and bark like a dog,' and the guy who was hypnotized does it even if no one says Chiclets to him for the next ten years. She put something in that tea and hypnotized me and then told me to do that. That nasty thing.

"I knew why she would, too—an old woman superstitious enough to believe in stump-water cures, and how you could witch a man into love by putting a little drop of blood from your period onto the heel of his foot while he was sleeping, and cross-tie walkers, and God alone knows what else ... if a woman like that with a bee in her bonnet about natural fathers could do hypnotism, hypnotizing a woman like me into doing what I did might be just what she would do. Because she would believe it. And I had named him to her, hadn't I? Yes indeed.

"It never occurred to me then that I hadn't remembered hardly anything at all about going to Mama Delorme's until after I did what I did in Mr. Jefferies's bedroom. It did that night, though.

"I got through the day all right. I mean, I didn't cry or scream or carry on or anything like that. My sister Kissy acted worse the time she was drawing water from the old well round dusk and a bat flew up from it and got caught in her hair. There was just that feeling that I was behind a wall of glass, and I figured if that was all, I could get along with it.

"Then, when I got home, I all at once got thirsty. I was thirstier than ever in my life—it felt like a sandstorm was going on in my throat. I started to drink water. It seemed like I just couldn't drink enough. And I started to spit. I just spit and spit and spit. Then I started to feel sick to my stomach. I ran down to the bathroom and looked at myself in the mirror and stuck out my tongue to see if I could see anything there, any sign of what I'd done, and of course I couldn't. I thought, There! Do you feel better now?

“But I didn’t. I felt worse. I knelt down in front of the toilet and I did what you did, Darcy, only I did a lot more of it. I vomited until I thought I was going to pass out. I was crying and begging God to please forgive me, to let me stop puking before I lost the baby, if I really was quick with one. And then I remembered myself standing there in his bedroom with my fingers in my mouth, not even thinking about what I was doing—I tell you I could see myself doing it, as if I was looking at myself in a movie. And then I vomited again.

“Mrs. Parker heard me and came to the door and asked if I was all right. That helped me get hold of myself a little, and by the time Johnny came in that night, I was over the worst of it. He was drunk, spoiling for a fight. When I wouldn’t give him one he hit me in the eye anyway and walked out. I was almost glad he hit me, because it gave me something else to think about.

“The next day when I went into Mr. Jefferies’s suite he was sitting in the parlor, still in his pajamas, scribbling away on one of his yellow legal pads. He always travelled with a bunch of them, held together with a big red rubber band, right up until the end. When he came to Le Palais that last time and I didn’t see them, I knew he’d made up his mind to die. I wasn’t a bit sorry, neither.”

Martha looked toward the living-room window with an expression which held nothing of mercy or forgiveness; it was a cold look, one which reported an utter absence of the heart.

“When I saw he hadn’t gone out I was relieved, because it meant I could put off the cleaning. He didn’t like the maids around when he was working, you see, and so I figured he might not want housekeeping service until Yvonne came on at three.

“I said, ‘I’ll come back later, Mr. Jefferies.’

” ‘Do it now,’ he said. ‘Just keep quiet while you do. I’ve got a bitch of a headache and a hell of an idea. The combination is killing me.’

“Any other time he would have told me to come back, I swear it. It seemed like I could almost hear that old black mama laughing.

“I went into the bathroom and started tidying around, taking out the used towels and putting up fresh ones, replacing the soap with a new bar, putting fresh matches out, and all the time I’m thinking, You can’t hypnotize someone who doesn’t want to be hypnotized, old woman. Whatever it was you put in the tea that day, whatever it was you told me to do or how many times you told me to do it, I’m wise to you—wise to you and shut of you.

“I went into the bedroom and I looked at the bed. I expected it would look to me like a closet does to a kid who’s scared of the bogeyman, but I saw it was just a bed. I knew I wasn’t going to do anything, and it was a relief. So I stripped it and there was another of those sticky patches, still drying, as if he’d woke up horny an hour or so before and just took care of himself.

“I seen it and waited to see if I was going to feel anything about it. I didn’t. It was just the leftovers of a man with a letter and no mailbox to put it in, like you and I have seen a hundred times before. That old woman was no more a bruja woman than I was. I might be pregnant or I might not be, but if I was, it was Johnny’s child. He was the only man I’d ever lain with, and nothin I found on that white man’s sheets—or anywhere else, for that matter—was gonna change that.

“It was a cloudy day, but at the second I thought that, the sun came out like God had put His final amen on the subject. I don’t recall ever feeling so relieved. I stood there thanking God everything was all right, and all the time I was sayin that prayer of gratitude I was scoopin that stuff up off the sheet—all of it I could get, anyway—and stickin it in my mouth and swallowin it down.

“It was like I was standing outside myself and watching again. And a part of me was saying, You’re crazy to be doing that, girl, but you’re even crazier to be doing it with him right there in the next room; he could get up any second and come in here to use the bathroom and see you. Rugs as thick as they are in this place, you’d never hear

him coming. And that would be the end of your job at Le Palais—or any other big hotel in New York, most likely. A girl caught doing a thing like what you're doing would never work in this city again as a chambermaid, at least not in any half-decent hotel.

“But it didn't make any difference. I went on until I was done—or until some part of me was satisfied—and then I just stood there a minute, looking down at the sheet. I couldn't hear nothing at all from the other room, and it came to me that he was right behind me, standing in the doorway. I knew just what the expression on his face'd be. Used to be a travelling show that came to Babylon every August when I was a girl, and they had a man with it—I guess he was a man—that geeked out behind the tent-show. He'd be down a hole and some fella would give a spiel about how he was the missing link and then throw a live chicken down. The geek'd bite the head off it. Once my oldest brother—Bradford, who died in a car accident in Biloxi—said he wanted to go and see the geek. My dad said he was sorry to hear it, but he didn't outright forbid Brad, because Brad was nineteen and almost a man. He went, and me and Kissy meant to ask him what it was like when he came back, but when we saw the expression on his face we never did. That's the expression I thought I'd see on Jefferies's face when I turned around and saw him in the doorway. Do you see what I'm sayin?”

Darcy nodded.

“I knew he was there, too—I just knew it. Finally I mustered up enough courage to turn around, thinking I'd beg him not to tell the Chief Housekeeper—beg him on my knees, if I had to—and he wasn't there. It had just been my guilty heart all along. I walked to the door and looked out and seen he was still in the parlor, writing on his yellow pad faster than ever. So I went ahead and changed the bed and freshened the room just like always, but that feeling that I was behind a glass wall was back, stronger than ever.

“I took care of the soiled towels and bed-linen like you're supposed to—out to the hall through the bedroom door. First thing I learned when I came to work at the hotel is you don't ever take dirty linen

through the sitting room of a suite. Then I came back in to where he was. I meant to tell him I'd do the parlor later, when he wasn't working. But when I saw the way he was acting, I was so surprised that I stopped right there in the doorway, looking at him.

"He was walking around the room so fast that his yellow silk pajamas were whipping around his legs. He had his hands in his hair and he was twirling it every which way. He looked like one of those brainy mathematicians in the old Saturday Evening Post cartoons. His eyes were all wild, like he'd had a bad shock. First thing I thought was that he'd seen what I did after all and it had, you know, made him feel so sick it'd driven him half-crazy.

"Turned out it didn't have nothing to do with me at all ... at least he didn't think so. That was the only time he talked to me, other than to ask me if I'd get some more stationery or another pillow or change the setting on the air-conditioner. He talked to me because he had to. Something had happened to him—something very big—and he had to talk to somebody or go crazy, I guess.

" 'My head is splitting,' he said.

" 'I'm sorry to hear that, Mr. Jefferies,' I said. 'I can get you some aspirin—'

" 'No,' he said. 'That's not it. It's this idea. It's like I went fishing for trout and hooked a marlin instead. I write books for a living, you see. Fiction.'

" 'Yes, sir, Mr. Jefferies,' I said, 'I have read two of them and thought they were fine.'

" 'Did you,' he said, looking at me as if maybe I'd gone crazy. 'Well, that's very kind of you to say, anyway. I woke up this morning and I had an idea.'

"Yes, sir, I was thinking to myself, you had an idea, all right, one so hot and so fresh it just kinda spilled out all over the sheet. But it ain't

there no more, so you don't have to worry. And I almost laughed out loud. Only, Darcy, I don't think he would have noticed if I had.

" 'I ordered up some breakfast,' he said, and pointed at the room-service trolley by the door, 'and as I ate it I thought about this little idea. I thought it might make a short story. There's this magazine, you know ... The New Yorker ... well, never mind.' He wasn't going to explain The New Yorker magazine to a pickaninny like me, you know."

Darcy grinned.

" 'But by the time I'd finished breakfast,' he went on, 'it began to seem more like a novelette. And then ... as I started to rough out some ideas ...' He gave out this shrill little laugh. 'I don't think I've had an idea this good in ten years. Maybe never. Do you think it would be possible for twin brothers—fraternal, not identical—to end up fighting on opposite sides during World War II?'

" 'Well, maybe not in the Pacific,' I said. Another time I don't think I would have had nerve enough to speak to him at all, Darcy—I would have just stood there and gawped. But I still felt like I was under glass, or like I'd had a shot of novocaine at the dentist's and it hadn't quite worn off yet.

"He laughed like it was the funniest thing he'd ever heard and said, 'Ha-ha! No, not there, it couldn't happen there, but it might be possible in the ETO. And they could come face-to-face during the Battle of the Bulge.'

" 'Well, maybe—' I started, but by then he was walking fast around the parlor again, running his hands through his hair and making it look wilder and wilder.

" 'I know it sounds like Orpheum Circuit melodrama,' he said, 'some silly piece of claptrap like Under Two Flags or Armadale, but the concept of twins ... and it could be explained rationally ... I see just how...' He whirled on me. 'Would it have dramatic impact?'

” ‘Yes, sir,’ I said. ‘Everyone likes stories about brothers that don’t know they’re brothers.’

” ‘Sure they do,’ he said. ‘And I’ll tell you something else—’ Then he stopped and I saw the queerest expression come over his face. It was queer, but I could read it letter-perfect. It was like he was waking up to doing something foolish, like a man suddenly realizing he’s spread his face with shaving cream and then taken his electric razor to it. He was talking to a nigger hotel maid about what was maybe the best idea he’d ever had—a nigger hotel maid whose idea of a really good story was probably *The Edge of Night*. He’d forgot me saying I’d read two of his books—”

“Or thought it was just flattery to get a bigger tip,” Darcy murmured.

“Yeah, that’d fit his concept of human nature like a glove, all right. Anyway, that expression said he’d just realized who he was talking to, that was all.

” ‘I think I’m going to extend my stay,’ he said. ‘Tell them at the desk, would you?’ He spun around to start walking again and his leg whanged against the room-service cart. ‘And get this fucking thing out of here, all right?’

” ‘Would you want me to come back later and—’ I started.

” ‘Yes, yes, yes,’ he says, ‘come back later and do whatever you like, but for now just be my good little sweetheart and make everything all gone ... including yourself.’

“I did just that, and I was never so relieved in my life as when the parlor door shut behind me. I wheeled the room-service trolley over to the side of the corridor. He’d had juice and scrambled eggs and bacon. I started to walk away and then I seen there was a mushroom on his plate, too, pushed aside with the last of the eggs and a little bit of bacon. I looked at it and it was like a light went on in my head. I remembered the mushroom she’d given me—old Mama Delorme—in the little plastic box. Remembered it for the first time since that

day. I remembered finding it in my dress pocket, and where I'd put it. The one on his plate looked just the same—wrinkled and sort of dried up, like it might be a toadstool instead of a mushroom, and one that would make you powerful sick.”

She looked at Darcy steadily.

“He'd eaten part of it, too. More than half, I'd say.”

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“Mr. Buckley was on the desk that day and I told him Mr. Jefferies was thinking of extending his stay. Mr. Buckley said he didn't think that would present a problem even though Mr. Jefferies had been planning to check out that very afternoon.

“Then I went down to the room-service kitchen and talked with Bedelia Aaronson—you must remember Bedelia—and asked her if she'd seen anyone out of the ordinary around that morning. Bedelia asked who I meant and I said I didn't really know. She said ‘Why you asking, Marty?’ and I told her I'd rather not say. She said there hadn't been nobody, not even the man from the food service who was always trying to date up the short-order girl.

“I started away and she said, ‘Unless you mean the old Negro lady.’

“I turned back and asked what old Negro lady that was.

” ‘Well,’ Bedelia said, ‘I imagine she came in off the street, looking for the john. Happens once or twice a day. Negroes sometimes won't ask the way because they're afraid the hotel people will kick them out even if they're well-dressed ... which, as I'm sure you know, they often do. Anyway, this poor old soul wandered down here ...’ She stopped and got a look at me. ‘Are you all right, Martha? You look like you're going to faint!’

” ‘I'm not going to faint,’ I said. ‘What was she doing?’

” ‘Just wandering around, looking at the breakfast trolleys like she didn’t know where she was,’ she said. ‘Poor old thing! She was eighty if she was a day. Looked like a strong gust of wind would blow her right up into the sky like a kite ... Martha, you come over here and sit down. You look like the picture of Dorian Gray in that movie.’

” ‘What did she look like? Tell me!’

“‘I did tell you—an old woman. They all look about the same to me. The only thing different about this one was the scar on her face. It ran all the way up into her hair. It—’

“But I didn’t hear any more because that was when I did faint.

“They let me go home early and I’d no more than got there than I started feeling like I wanted to spit again, and drink a lot of water, and probably end up in the john like before, sicking my guts out. But for the time being I just sat there by the window, looking out into the street, and gave myself a talking-to.

“What she’d done to me wasn’t just hypnosis; by then I knew that. It was more powerful than hypnosis. I still wasn’t sure if I believed in any such thing as witchcraft, but she’d done something to me, all right, and whatever it was, I was just going to have to ride with it. I couldn’t quit my job, not with a husband that wasn’t turning out to be worth salt and a baby most likely on the way. I couldn’t even request to be switched to a different floor. A year or two before I could have, but I knew there was talk about making me Assistant Chief Housekeeper for Ten to Twelve, and that meant a raise in pay. More’n that, it meant they’d most likely take me back at the same job after I had the baby.

“My mother had a saying: What can’t be cured must be endured. I thought about going back to see that old black mama and asking her to take it off, but I knew somehow she wouldn’t—she’d made up her mind it was best for me, what she was doing, and one thing I’ve learned as I’ve made my way through this world, Darcy, is that the

only time you can never hope to change someone's mind is when they've got it in their head that they're doing you a help.

"I sat there thinking all that and looking out at the street, all the people coming and going, and I kind of dozed off. Couldn't have been for much more than fifteen minutes, but when I woke up again I knew something else. That old woman wanted me to keep on doing what I'd already done twice, and I couldn't do that if Peter Jefferies went back to Birmingham. So she got into the room-service kitchen and put that mushroom on his tray and he ate part of it and it gave him that idea. Turned out to be a whale of a story, too—Boys in the Mist, it was called. It was about just what he told me that day, twin brothers, one of them an American soldier and the other a German one, that meet at the Battle of the Bulge. It turned out to be the biggest seller he ever had."

She paused and added, "I read that in his obituary."

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"He stayed another week. Every day when I went in he'd be bent over the desk in the parlor, writing away on one of his yellow pads, still wearing his pajamas. Every day I'd ask him if he wanted me to come back later and he'd tell me to go ahead and make up the bedroom but be quiet about it. Never looking up from his writing while he talked. Every day I went in telling myself that this time I wasn't going to do it, and every day that stuff was there on the sheet, still fresh, and every day every prayer and every promise I'd made myself went flying out the window and I found myself doing it again. It really wasn't like fighting a compulsion, where you argue it back and forth and sweat and shiver; it was more like blinking for a minute and finding out it had already happened. Oh, and every day when I came in he'd be holding his head like it was just killing him. What a pair we were! He had my morning-sickness and I had his night-sweats!"

"What do you mean?" Darcy asked.

“It was at night I’d really brood about what I was doing, and spit and drink water and maybe have to throw up a time or two. Mrs. Parker got so concerned that I finally told her I thought I was pregnant but I didn’t want my husband to know until I was sure.

“Johnny Rosewall was one self-centered son of a bitch, but I think even he would have known something was wrong with me if he hadn’t had fish of his own to fry, the biggest trout in the skillet being the liquor store holdup he and his friends were plannin. Not that I knew about that, of course; I was just glad he was keepin out of my way. It made life at least a little easier.

“Then I let myself into 1163 one morning and Mr. Jefferies was gone. He’d packed his bags and headed back to Alabama to work on his book and think about his war. Oh, Darcy, I can’t tell you how happy I was! I felt like Lazarus must have when he found out he was going to have a second go at life. It seemed to me that morning like everything might come right after all, like in a story—I would tell Johnny about the baby and he would straighten up, throw out his dope, and get a regular job. He’d be a proper husband to me and a good father to his son—I was already sure it was going to be a boy.

“I went into the bedroom of Mr. Jefferies’s suite and seen the bedclothes messed up like always, the blankets kicked off the end and the sheet all tangled up in a ball. I walked over there feeling like I was in a dream again and pulled the sheet back. I was thinking, Well, all right, if I have to ... but it’s for the last time.

“Turned out the last time had already happened. There wasn’t a trace of him on that sheet. Whatever spell that old bruja woman had put on us, it had run its course. That’s good enough, I thought. I’m gonna have the baby, he’s gonna have the book, and we’re both shut of her magic. I don’t care a fig about natural fathers, either, as long as Johnny will be a good dad to the one I’ve got coming.”

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“I told Johnny that same night,” Martha said, then added dryly: “He didn’t cotton onto the idea, as I think you already know.”

Darcy nodded.

“Whopped me with the end of that broomstick about five times and then stood over me where I lay crying in the corner and yelled, ‘What are you, crazy? We ain’t having no kid! I think you stone crazy, woman!’ Then he turned around and walked out.

“I laid there for awhile, thinking of the first miscarriage and scared to death the pains would start any minute, and I’d be on my way to having another one. I thought of my momma writing that I ought to get away from him before he put me in the hospital, and of Kissy sending me that Greyhound ticket with GO NOW written on the folder. And when I was sure that I wasn’t going to miscarry the baby, I got up to pack a bag and get the hell out of there—right away, before he could come back. But I was no more than opening the closet door when I thought of Mama Delorme again. I remembered telling her I was going to leave Johnny, and what she said to me: ‘No—he gonna leave you. You gonna see him out, is all. Stick around, woman. There be a little money. You gonna think he hoit the baby but he dint be doin it.’

“It was like she was right there, telling me what to look for and what to do. I went into the closet, all right, but it wasn’t my own clothes I wanted anymore. I started going through his, and I found a couple of things in that same damned sportcoat where I’d found the bottle of White Angel. That coat was his favorite, and I guess it really said everything anyone needed to know about Johnny Rosewall. It was bright satin... cheap-looking. I hated it. Wasn’t no bottle of dope I found this time. Was a straight-razor in one pocket and a cheap little pistol in the other. I took the gun out and looked at it, and that same feeling came over me that came over me those times in the bedroom of Mr. Jefferies’s suite—like I was doing something just after I woke up from a heavy sleep.

“I walked into the kitchen with the gun in my hand and set it down on the little bit of counter I had beside the stove. Then I opened the overhead cupboard and felt around in back of the spices and the tea. At first I couldn’t find what she’d given me and this awful stifflin panic came over me—I was scared the way you get scared in dreams. Then my hand happened on that plastic box and I drew it down.

“I opened it and took out the mushroom. It was a repulsive thing, too heavy for its size, and warm. It was like holding a lump of flesh that hasn’t quite died. That thing I did in Mr. Jefferies’s bedroom? I tell you right now I’d do it two hundred more times before I’d pick up that mushroom again.

“I held it in my right hand and I picked up that cheap little .32 in my left. And then I squeezed my right hand as hard as I could, and I felt the mushroom squelch in my fist, and it sounded... well, I know it’s almost impossible to believe ... but it sounded like it screamed. Do you believe that could be?”

Slowly, Darcy shook her head. She did not, in fact, know if she believed it or not, but she was absolutely sure of one thing: she did not want to believe it.

“Well, I don’t believe it, either. But that’s what it sounded like. And one other thing you won’t believe, but I do, because I saw it: it bled. That mushroom bled. I saw a little stream of blood come out of my fist and splash onto the gun. But the blood disappeared as soon as it hit the barrel.

“After awhile it stopped. I opened my hand, expecting it would be full of blood, but there was only the mushroom, all wrinkled up, with the shapes of my fingers mashed into it. Wasn’t no blood on the mushroom, in my hand, on his gun, nor anywhere. And just as I started to think I’d done nothing but somehow have a dream on my feet, the damned thing twitched in my hand. I looked down at it and for a second or two it didn’t look like a mushroom at all—it looked like a little tiny penis that was still alive. I thought of the blood coming out of my fist when I squeezed it and I thought of her saying, ‘Any

child a woman get, the man shoot it out'n his pecker, girl.' It twitched again—I tell you it did—and I screamed and threw it in the trash. Then I heard Johnny coming back up the stairs and I grabbed his gun and ran back into the bedroom with it and put it back into his coat pocket. Then I climbed into bed with all my clothes on, even my shoes, and pulled the blanket up to my chin. He come in and I seen he was bound to make trouble. He had a rug-beater in one hand. I don't know where he got it from, but I knew what he meant to do with it.

” ‘Ain't gonna be no baby,’ he said. ‘You get on over here.’

” ‘No,’ I told him, ‘there ain't going to be a baby. You don't need that thing, either, so put it away. You already took care of the baby, you worthless piece of shit.’

“I knew it was a risk, calling him that, but I thought maybe it would make him believe me, and it did. Instead of beating me up, this big goony stoned grin spread over his face. I tell you, I never hated him so much as I did then.

” ‘Gone?’ he asked.

” ‘Gone,’ I said.

” ‘Where's the mess?’ he asked.

” ‘Where do you think?’ I said. ‘Halfway to the East River by now, most likely.’

“He came over then and tried to kiss me, for Jesus' sake. Kiss me! I turned my face away and he went upside my head, but not hard.

” ‘You're gonna see I know best,’ he says. ‘There'll be time enough for kids later on.’

“Then he went out again. Two nights later him and his friends tried to pull that liquor store job and his gun blew up in his face and killed

him.”

“You think you witched that gun, don’t you?” Darcy said.

“No,” Martha said calmly. “She did ... by way of me, you could say. She saw I wouldn’t help myself, and so she made me help myself.”

“But you do think the gun was witched.”

“I don’t just think so,” Martha said calmly.

Darcy went into the kitchen for a glass of water. Her mouth was suddenly very dry.

“That’s really the end,” Martha said when she came back. “Johnny died and I had Pete. Wasn’t until I got too pregnant to work that I found out just how many friends I had. If I’d known sooner, I think I would have left Johnny sooner ... or maybe not. None of us really knows the way the world works, no matter what we think or say.”

“But that’s not everything, is it?” Darcy asked.

“Well, there are two more things,” Martha said. “Little things.” But she didn’t look as if they were little, Darcy thought.

“I went back to Mama Delorme’s about four months after Pete was born. I didn’t want to but I did. I had twenty dollars in an envelope. I couldn’t afford it but I knew, somehow, that it belonged to her. It was dark. Stairs seemed even narrower than before, and the higher I climbed the more I could smell her and the smells of her place: burned candles and dried wallpaper and the cinnamony smell of her tea.

“That feeling of doing something in a dream—of being behind a glass wall—came over me for the last time. I got up to her door and knocked. There was no answer, so I knocked again. There was still no answer, so I knelt down to slip the envelope under the door. And her voice came from right on the other side, as if she was knelt

down, too. I was never so scared in my life as I was when that papery old voice came drifting out of the crack under that door—it was like hearing a voice coming out of a grave.

” ‘He goan be a fine boy,’ she said. ‘Goan be just like he father. Like he natural father.’

” ‘I brought you something,’ I said. I could barely hear my own voice.

” ‘Slip it through, dearie,’ she whispered. I slipped the envelope halfway under and she pulled it the rest of the way. I heard her tear it open and I waited. I just waited.

” ‘It’s enough,’ she whispered. ‘You get on out of here, dearie, and don’t you ever come back to Mama Delorme’s again, you hear?’

“I got up and ran out of there just as fast as I could.”

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Martha went over to the bookcase, and came back a moment or two later with a hardcover. Darcy was immediately struck by the similarity between the artwork on this jacket and that on the jacket of Peter Rosewall’s book. This one was *Blaze of Heaven* by Peter Jefferies, and the cover showed a pair of GIs charging an enemy pillbox. One of them had a grenade; the other was firing an M-1.

Martha rummaged in her blue canvas tote-bag, brought out her son’s book, removed the tissue paper in which it was wrapped, and laid it tenderly next to the Jefferies book. *Blaze of Heaven*; *Blaze of Glory*. Side by side, the points of comparison were inescapable.

“This was the other thing,” Martha said.

“Yes,” Darcy said doubtfully. “They do look similar. What about the stories? Are they ... well ...”

She stopped in some confusion and looked up at Martha from beneath her lashes. She was relieved to see Martha was smiling.

“You askin if my boy copied that nasty honky’s book?” Martha asked without the slightest bit of rancor.

“No!” Darcy said, perhaps a little too vehemently.

“Other than that they’re both about war, they’re nothing alike,” Martha said. “They’re as different as ... well, as different as black and white.” She paused and then added: “But there’s a feel about them every now and then that’s the same... somethin you seem to almost catch around corners. It’s that sunshine I told you about—that feeling that the world is mostly a lot better than it looks, especially better than it looks to those people who are too smart to be kind.”

“Then isn’t it possible that your son was inspired by Peter Jefferies... that he read him in college and ...”

“Sure,” Martha said. “I suppose my Peter did read Jefferies’s books—that’d be more likely than not even if it was just a case of like calling to like. But there’s something else—something that’s a little harder to explain.”

She picked up the Jefferies novel, looked at it reflectively for a moment, then looked at Darcy.

“I went and bought this copy about a year after my son was born,” she said. “It was still in print, although the bookstore had to special-order it from the publisher. When Mr. Jefferies was in on one of his visits, I got up my courage and asked if he would sign it for me. I thought he might be put out by me asking, but I think he was actually a little flattered. Look here.”

She turned to the dedication page of *Blaze of Heaven*.

Darcy read what was printed there and felt an eerie doubling in her mind. This book is dedicated to my mother, ALTHEA DIXMONT JEFFERIES, the finest woman I have ever known. And below that, Jefferies had written in black fountain-pen ink that was now fading, “For Martha Rosewall, who cleans up my clutter and never

complains.” Below this he had signed his name and jotted August ‘61.

The wording of the penned dedication struck her first as contemptuous ... then as eerie. But before she had a chance to think about it, Martha had opened her son’s book, *Blaze of Glory*, to the dedication page and placed it beside the Jefferies book. Once again Darcy read the printed matter: This book is dedicated to my mother, MARTHA ROSEWALL. Mom, I couldn’t have done it without you. Below that he had written in a pen which looked like a fine-line Flair: “And that’s no lie. Love you, Mom! Pete.”

But she didn’t really read this; she only looked at it. Her eyes went back and forth, back and forth, between the dedication page which had been inscribed in August of 1961 and the one which had been inscribed in April of 1985.

“You see?” Martha asked softly.

Darcy nodded. She saw.

The thin, sloping, somehow old-fashioned backhand script was the same in both books ... and so, given the variations afforded by love and familiarity, were the signatures themselves. Only the tone of the written messages varied, Darcy thought, and there the difference was as clear as the difference between black and white.

NIGHTMARES & DREAMSCAPES
THE DOCTOR'S CASE



THE DOCTOR'S CASE

Stephen King

I believe there was only one occasion upon which I actually solved a crime before my slightly fabulous friend, Mr. Sherlock Holmes. I say believe because my memory began to grow hazy about the edges as I entered my ninth decade; now, as I approach my centennial, the whole has become downright misty. There may have been another occasion, but if so I do not remember it.

I doubt that I shall ever forget this particular case no matter how murky my thoughts and memories may become, and I thought I might as well set it down before God caps my pen forever. It cannot humiliate Holmes now, God knows; he is forty years in his grave. That, I think, is long enough to leave the tale untold. Even Lestrade, who used Holmes upon occasion but never had any great liking for him, never broke his silence in the matter of Lord Hull—he hardly could have done so, considering the circumstances. Even if the circumstances had been different, I somehow doubt he would have. He and Holmes baited each other, and I believe that Holmes may have harbored actual hate in his heart for the policeman (although he never would have admitted to such a low emotion), but Lestrade had a queer respect for my friend.

It was a wet, dreary afternoon and the clock had just rung half past one. Holmes sat by the window, holding his violin but not playing it, looking silently out into the rain. There were times, especially once his cocaine days were behind him, when Holmes would grow moody to the point of surliness when the skies remained stubbornly gray for a week or more, and he had been doubly disappointed on this day, for the glass had been rising since late the night before and he had confidently predicted clearing skies by ten this morning at the latest. Instead, the mist which had been hanging in the air when I arose had thickened into a steady rain, and if there was anything which rendered Holmes moodier than long periods of rain, it was being wrong.

Suddenly he straightened up, tweaking a violin string with a fingernail, and smiled sardonically. “Watson! Here’s a sight! The wettest bloodhound you ever saw!”

It was Lestrade, of course, seated in the back of an open wagon with water running into his close-set, fiercely inquisitive eyes. The wagon had no more than stopped before he was out, flinging the driver a coin, and striding toward 221B Baker Street. He moved so quickly that I thought he should run into our door like a battering ram.

I heard Mrs. Hudson remonstrating with him about his decidedly damp condition and the effect it might have on the rugs both downstairs and up, and then Holmes, who could make Lestrade look like a tortoise when the urge struck him, leaped across to the door and called down, "Let him up, Mrs. H.—I'll put a newspaper under his boots if he stays long, but I somehow think, yes, I really do think that ..."

Then Lestrade was bounding up the stairs, leaving Mrs. Hudson to expostulate below. His color was high, his eyes burned, and his teeth—decidedly yellowed by tobacco—were bared in a wolfish grin.

"Inspector Lestrade!" Holmes cried jovially. "What brings you out on such a—"

No further did he get. Still panting from his climb, Lestrade said, "I've heard gypsies say the devil grants wishes. Now I believe it. Come at once if you'd have a try, Holmes; the corpse is still fresh and the suspects all in a row."

"You frighten me with your ardor, Lestrade!" Holmes cried, but with a sardonic little waggle of his eyebrows.

"Don't play the shrinking violet with me, man—I've come at the run to offer you the very thing for which you in your pride have wished a hundred times or more in my own hearing: the perfect locked-room mystery!"

Holmes had started into the corner, perhaps to get the awful gold-tipped cane which he was for some reason affecting that season. Now he whirled upon our damp visitor, his eyes wide. "Lestrade! Are you serious?"

“Would I have risked wet-lung croup riding here in an open wagon if I were not?” Lestrade countered.

Then, for the only time in my hearing (despite the countless times the phrase has been attributed to him), Holmes turned to me and cried: “Quick, Watson! The game’s afoot!”

*

On our way, Lestrade commented sourly that Holmes also had the luck of the devil; although Lestrade had commanded the wagon-driver to wait, we had no more than emerged from our lodgings when that exquisite rarity clip-clopped down the street: an empty hackney in what had become a driving rain. We climbed in and were off in a trice. As always, Holmes sat on the left-hand side, his eyes darting restlessly about, cataloguing everything, although there was precious little to see on that day ... or so it seemed, at least, to the likes of me. I’ve no doubt every empty street corner and rain-washed shop window spoke volumes to Holmes.

Lestrade directed the driver to an address in Savile Row, and then asked Holmes if he knew Lord Hull.

“I know of him,” Holmes said, “but have never had the good fortune of meeting him. Now I suppose I never shall. Shipping, wasn’t it?”

“Shipping,” Lestrade agreed, “but the good fortune was yours. Lord Hull was, by all accounts (including those of his nearest and—ahem!—dearest), a thoroughly nasty fellow, and as dotty as a puzzle-picture in a child’s novelty book. He’s finished practicing both nastiness and dottiness for good, however; around eleven o’clock this morning, just”—he pulled out his turnip of a pocket watch and looked at it—“two hours and forty minutes ago, someone put a knife in his back as he sat in his study with his will on the blotter before him.”

“So,” Holmes said thoughtfully, lighting his pipe, “you believe the study of this unpleasant Lord Hull is the perfect locked room of my

dreams, do you?” His eyes gleamed skeptically through a rising rafter of blue smoke.

“I believe,” Lestrade said quietly, “that it is.”

“Watson and I have dug such holes before and never struck water,” Holmes remarked, and he glanced at me before returning to his ceaseless catalogue of the streets through which we passed. “Do you recall the ‘Speckled Band,’ Watson?”

I hardly needed to answer him. There had been a locked room in that business, true enough, but there had also been a ventilator, a poisonous snake, and a killer fiendish enough to introduce the latter into the former. It had been the work of a cruelly brilliant mind, but Holmes had seen to the bottom of the matter in almost no time at all.

“What are the facts, Inspector?” Holmes asked.

Lestrade began to lay them before us in the clipped tones of a trained policeman. Lord Albert Hull had been a tyrant in business and a despot at home. His wife had gone in fear of him, and had apparently been justified in doing so. The fact that she had borne him three sons seemed in no way to have moderated his savage approach toward their domestic affairs in general and toward her in particular. Lady Hull had been reluctant to speak of these matters, but her sons had no such reservations; their papa, they said, had missed no opportunity to dig at her, to criticize her, or to jest at her expense ... all of this when they were in company. When they were alone, he virtually ignored her. Except, Lestrade added, when he felt moved to beat her, which was by no means an uncommon occurrence.

“William, the eldest, told me she always gave out the same story when she came to the breakfast table with a swollen eye or a mark on her cheek: that she had forgotten to put on her spectacles and had run into a door. ‘She ran into doors once and twice a week,’ William said. ‘I didn’t know we had that many doors in the house.’ “

“Hmmm,” Holmes said. “A cheery fellow! The sons never put a stop to it?”

“She wouldn’t allow it,” Lestrade said.

“Insanity,” I returned. A man who would beat his wife is an abomination; a woman who would allow it an abomination and a perplexity.

“There was a method in her madness, though,” Lestrade said. “Method and what you might call ‘an informed patience.’ She was, after all, twenty years younger than her lord and master. Also, Hull was a heavy drinker and a champion diner. At age seventy, five years ago, he developed gout and angina.”

“Wait for the storm to end and then enjoy the sunshine,” Holmes remarked.

“Yes,” Lestrade said, “but it’s an idea which has led many a man and woman through the devil’s door, I’ll be bound. Hull made sure his family knew both his worth and the provisions of his will. They were little better than slaves.”

“With the will as their document of indenture,” Holmes murmured.

“Exactly so, old boy. At the time of his death, Hull’s worth was three hundred thousand pounds. He never asked them to take his word for this; he had his chief accountant to the house quarterly to detail the balance sheets of Hull Shipping, although he kept the purse-strings firmly in his own hands and tightly closed.”

“Devilish!” I exclaimed, thinking of the cruel boys one sometimes sees in Eastcheap or Piccadilly, boys who will hold out a sweet to a starving dog to see it dance ... and then gobble it themselves while the hungry animal watches. I was shortly to find this comparison even more apt than I would have thought possible.

“On his death, Lady Rebecca was to receive one hundred and fifty thousand pund’. William, the eldest, was to receive fifty thousand; Jory, the middler, forty; and Stephen, the youngest, thirty.”

“And the other thirty thousand?” I asked.

“Small bequests, Watson: to a cousin in Wales, an aunt in Brittany (not a cent for Lady Hull’s relatives, though), five thousand in assorted bequests to the servants. Oh, and—you’ll like this, Holmes—ten thousand pounds to Mrs. Hemphill’s Home for Abandoned Pussies.”

“You’re joking!” I cried, although if Lestrade expected a similar reaction from Holmes, he was disappointed. Holmes merely re-lighted his pipe and nodded as if he had expected this... this or something like it. “With babies dying of starvation in the East End and twelve-year-old children working fifty hours a week in the mills, this fellow left ten thousand pounds to a ... a boarding-hotel for cats?”

“Exactly so,” Lestrade said pleasantly. “Furthermore, he should have left twenty-seven times that amount to Mrs. Hemphill’s Abandoned Pussies if not for whatever happened this morning—and whoever did the business.”

I could only gape at this, and try to multiply in my head. While I was coming to the conclusion that Lord Hull had intended to disinherit both wife and children in favor of a rest-home for felines, Holmes was looking sourly at Lestrade and saying something which sounded to me like a total non sequitur. “I am going to sneeze, am I not?”

Lestrade smiled. It was a smile of transcendent sweetness. “Yes, my dear Holmes! Often and profoundly, I fear.”

Holmes removed his pipe, which he had just gotten drawing to his satisfaction (I could tell by the way he settled back slightly in his seat), looked at it for a moment, and then held it out into the rain.

More dumbfounded than ever, I watched him knock out the damp and smouldering tobacco.

“How many?” Holmes asked.

“Ten,” Lestrade said with a fiendish grin.

“I suspected it was more than this famous locked room of yours that brought you out in the back of an open wagon on such a wet day,” Holmes said sourly.

“Suspect as you like,” Lestrade said gaily. “I’m afraid I must go on to the scene of the crime—duty calls, you know—but if you’d like, I could let you and the good doctor out here.”

“You are the only man I ever met,” Holmes said, “whose wit seems to be sharpened by foul weather. Does that perhaps say something about your character, I wonder? But never mind—that is, perhaps, a subject for another day. Tell me this, Lestrade: when did Lord Hull become sure that he was going to die?”

“Die?” I said. “My dear Holmes, whatever gives you the idea that the man believed—”

“It’s obvious, Watson,” Holmes said. “C.I.B., as I have told you at least a thousand times—character indexes behavior. It amused him to keep them in bondage by means of his will...” He looked an aside at Lestrade. “No trust arrangements, I take it? No entailments of any sort?”

Lestrade shook his head. “None whatever.”

“Extraordinary!” I said.

“Not at all, Watson; character indexes behavior, remember. He wanted them to soldier along in the belief that all would be theirs when he did them the courtesy of dying, but he never actually

intended any such thing. Such behavior would, in fact, have run completely across the grain of his character. D'you agree, Lestrade?"

"As a matter of fact, I do," Lestrade replied.

"Then we are very well to this point, Watson, are we not? All is clear? Lord Hull realizes he is dying. He waits ... makes absolutely sure that this time it's no mistake, no false alarm ... and then he calls his beloved family together. When? This morning, Lestrade?"

Lestrade grunted an affirmative.

Holmes steepled his fingers beneath his chin. "He calls them together and tells them he's made a new will, one which disinherits all of them... all, that is, save for the servants, his few distant relatives, and, of course, the pussies."

I opened my mouth to speak, only to discover I was too outraged to say anything. The image which kept returning to my mind was that of those cruel boys, making the starving East End curs jump with a bit of pork or a crumb of crust from a meat pie. I must add it never occurred to me to ask whether such a will could be disputed before the bar. Today a man would have a deuce of a time slighting his closest relatives in favor of a cat-hotel, but in 1899, a man's will was a man's will, and unless many examples of insanity—not eccentricity but outright insanity—could be proved, a man's will, like God's, was done.

"This new will was properly witnessed?" Holmes asked.

"Indeed it was," Lestrade replied. "Yesterday Lord Hull's solicitor and one of his assistants appeared at the house and were shown into Hull's study. There they remained for about fifteen minutes. Stephen Hull says the solicitor once raised his voice in protest about something—he could not tell what—and was silenced by Hull. Jory, the middle son, was upstairs, painting, and Lady Hull was calling on a friend. But both Stephen and William Hull saw these legal fellows enter, and leave a short time later. William said that they left with

their heads down, and although William spoke, asking Mr. Barnes—the solicitor—if he was well, and making some social remark about the persistence of the rain, Barnes did not reply and the assistant seemed actually to cringe. It was as if they were ashamed, William said.”

Well, so much for that possible loophole, I thought.

“Since we are on the subject, tell me about the boys,” Holmes invited.

“As you like. It goes pretty much without saying that their hatred for the pater was exceeded only by the pater’s boundless contempt for them ... although how he could hold Stephen in contempt is ... well, never mind, I’ll keep things in their proper order.”

“Yes, please be so kind as to do that,” Holmes said dryly.

“William is thirty-six. If his father had given him any sort of allowance, I suppose he would be a bounder. As he had little or none, he has spent his days in various gymnasiums, involved in what I believe is called ‘physical culture’—he appears to be an extremely muscular fellow—and his nights in various cheap coffee-houses, for the most part. If he did happen to have a bit of money in his pockets, he was apt to take himself off to a card-parlor, where he would lose it quickly enough. Not a pleasant man, Holmes. A man who has no purpose, no skill, no hobby, and no ambition (save to outlive his father) could hardly be a pleasant man. I had the queerest idea while talking to him that I was interrogating not a man but an empty vase upon which the face of Lord Hull had been lightly stamped.”

“A vase waiting to be filled up with pounds sterling,” Holmes commented.

“Jory is another matter,” Lestrade went on. “Lord Hull saved most of his contempt for him, calling him from his earliest childhood by such endearing pet-names as ‘Fish-Face’ and ‘Keg-Legs’ and ‘Stoat-Belly.’ It’s not hard to understand such names, unfortunately; Jory

Hull stands no more than five feet tall, if that, is bow-legged, and of a remarkably ugly countenance. He looks a bit like that poet fellow. The pouf.”

“Oscar Wilde?” asked I.

Holmes turned a brief, amused glance upon me. “I think Lestrade means Algernon Swinburne,” he said. “Who, I believe, is no more a pouf than you are, Watson.”

“Jory Hull was born dead,” Lestrade said. “After he remained blue and still for an entire minute, the doctor pronounced him so and put a napkin over his misshapen body. Lady Hull, in her one moment of heroism, sat up, removed the napkin, and dipped the baby’s legs into the hot water which had been brought to be used at the birth. The baby began to squirm and squall.”

Lestrade grinned and lit a cigarillo with a flourish.

“Hull claimed this immersion had caused the boy’s bowed legs, and when he was in his cups, he taxed his wife with it. Told her she should have left well enough alone. Better Jory had been born dead than lived to be what he was, he sometimes said—a scuttling creature with the legs of a crab and the face of a cod.”

Holmes’s only reaction to this extraordinary (and to my physician’s mind rather suspect) story was to comment that Lestrade had gotten a remarkably large body of information in a remarkably short period of time.

“That points up one of the aspects of the case which I thought would appeal to you, my dear Holmes,” Lestrade said as we swept into Rotten Row with a splash and a swirl. “They need no coercion to speak; coercion’s what it would take to shut em up. They’ve had to remain silent all too long. And then there’s the fact that the new will is gone. Relief loosens tongues beyond measure, I find.”

“Gone!” I exclaimed, but Holmes took no notice; his mind still ran upon Jory, the misshapen middle child.

“Is he ugly, then?” he asked Lestrade.

“Hardly handsome, but not as bad as some I’ve seen,” Lestrade replied comfortably. “I believe his father continually heaped vituperation on his head because—”

“—because he was the only one who had no need of his father’s money to make his way in the world,” Holmes finished for him.

Lestrade started. “The devil! How did you know that?”

“Because Lord Hull was reduced to carping at Jory’s physical faults. How it must have chafed the old devil to be faced with a potential target so well armored in other respects! Baiting a man for his looks or his posture may be fine for schoolboys or drunken louts, but a villain like Lord Hull had no doubt become used to higher sport. I would venture the opinion that he may have been rather afraid of his bow-legged middle son. What was Jory’s key to the cell door?”

“Haven’t I told you? He paints,” Lestrade said.

“Ah!”

Jory Hull was, as the canvases in the lower halls of Hull House later proved, a very good painter indeed. Not great; I do not mean that at all. But his renderings of his mother and brothers were faithful enough so that, years later, when I saw color photographs for the first time, my mind flashed back to that rainy November afternoon in 1899. And the one of his father perhaps was a work of greatness. Certainly it startled (almost intimidated) with the malevolence that seemed to waft out of the canvas like a breath of dank graveyard air. Perhaps it was Algernon Swinburne that Jory resembled, but his father’s likeness—at least as seen through the middle son’s hand and eye—reminded me of an Oscar Wilde character: that nearly immortal rōu, Dorian Gray.

His canvases were long, slow processes, but he was able to quick-sketch with such nimble rapidity that he might come home from Hyde Park on a Saturday afternoon with as much as twenty pounds in his pockets.

“I’ll wager his father enjoyed that,” Holmes said. He reached automatically for his pipe, then put it back again. “The son of a Peer quick-sketching wealthy American tourists and their sweethearts like a French Bohemian.”

Lestrade laughed heartily. “He raged over it, as you may imagine. But Jory—good for him!—wouldn’t give over his selling stall in Hyde Park ... not, at least, until his father agreed to an allowance of thirty-five pounds a week. He called it low blackmail.”

“My heart bleeds,” I said.

“As does mine, Watson,” Holmes said. “The third son, Lestrade, quickly—we’ve almost reached the house, I believe.”

As Lestrade had intimated, surely Stephen Hull had the greatest cause to hate his father. As his gout grew worse and his head more muddled, Lord Hull surrendered more and more of the company affairs to Stephen, who was only twenty-eight at the time of his father’s death. The responsibilities devolved upon Stephen, and the blame also devolved upon him if his least decision proved amiss. Yet no financial gain accrued to him should he decide well and his father’s affairs prosper.

Lord Hull should have looked with favor upon Stephen, as the only one of his children with an interest in and an aptitude for the business he had founded; Stephen was a perfect example of what the Bible calls “the good son.” Yet instead of displaying love and gratitude, Lord Hull repaid the young man’s largely successful efforts with scorn, suspicion, and jealousy. On many occasions during the last two years of his life, the old man had offered the charming opinion that Stephen “would steal the pennies from a dead man’s eyes.”

“The b---d!” I cried, unable to contain myself.

“Ignore the new will for a moment,” Holmes said, steeping his fingers again, “and return to the old one. Even under the conditions of that marginally more generous document, Stephen Hull would have had cause for resentment. In spite of all his labors, which had not only saved the family fortune but increased it, his reward was still to have been the youngest son’s share of the spoils. What, by the way, was to have been the disposition of the shipping company under the provisions of what we might call the Pussy Will?”

I looked carefully at Holmes, but, as always, it was difficult to tell if he had attempted a small bon mot. Even after all the years I spent with him and all the adventures we shared, Sherlock Holmes’s sense of humor remains a largely undiscovered country, even to me.

“It was to be handed over to the Board of Directors, with no provision for Stephen,” Lestrade said, and pitched his cigarillo out the window as the hackney swept up the curving drive of a house which looked extraordinarily ugly to me just then, as it stood amid its brown lawns in the driving rain. “Yet with the father dead and the new will nowhere to be found, Stephen Hull has what the Americans call ‘leverage.’ The company will have him as managing director. They should have done anyway, but now it will be on Stephen Hull’s terms.”

“Yes,” Holmes said. “Leverage. A good word.” He leaned out into the rain. “Stop short, driver!” he cried. “We’ve not quite done!”

“As you say, guv’nor,” the driver returned, “but it’s devilish wet out here.”

“And you’ll go with enough in your pocket to make your innards as wet and devilish as your out’ards,” Holmes said. This seemed to satisfy the man, and he stopped thirty yards from the front door of the great house. I listened to the rain tip-tapping on the sides of the coach while Holmes cogitated and then said: “The old will—the one he teased them with—that document isn’t missing, is it?”

“Absolutely not. It was on his desk, near his body.”

“Four excellent suspects! Servants need not apply ... or so it seems now. Finish quickly, Lestrade—the final circumstances, and the locked room.”

Lestrade complied, consulting his notes from time to time. A month previous, Lord Hull had observed a small black spot on his right leg, directly behind the knee. The family doctor was called. His diagnosis was gangrene, an unusual but far from rare result of gout and poor circulation. The doctor told him the leg would have to come off, and well above the site of the infection.

Lord Hull laughed until tears streamed down his cheeks. The doctor, who had expected any reaction but this, was struck speechless. “When they stick me in my coffin, sawbones,” Hull said, “it will be with both legs still attached, thank you very much.”

The doctor told him that he sympathized with Lord Hull’s wish to keep his leg, but that without amputation he would be dead in six months, and he would spend the last two in exquisite pain. Lord Hull asked the doctor what his chances of survival should be if he were to undergo the operation. He was still laughing, Lestrade said, as though it were the best joke he had ever heard. After some hemming and hawing, the doctor said the odds were even.

“Bunk,” said I.

“Exactly what Lord Hull said,” Lestrade replied, “except he used a term more often used in dosses than in drawing-rooms.”

Hull told the doctor that he himself reckoned his chances at no better than one in five. “As to the pain, I don’t think it will come to that,” he went on, “as long as there’s laudanum and a spoon to stir it with in stumping distance.”

The next day, Hull finally sprang his nasty surprise—that he was thinking of changing his will. Just how he did not immediately say.

“Oh?” Holmes said, looking at Lestrade from those cool gray eyes that saw so much. “And who, pray, was surprised?”

“None of them, I should think. But you know human nature, Holmes; how people hope against hope.”

“And how some plan against disaster,” Holmes said dreamily.

This very morning Lord Hull had called his family into the parlor, and when all were settled, he performed an act few testators are granted, one which is usually performed by the wagging tongues of their solicitors after their own have been forever silenced. In short, he read them his new will, leaving the balance of his estate to Mrs. Hemphill’s wayward pussies. In the silence which followed he rose, not without difficulty, and favored them all with a death’s-head grin. And leaning over his cane, he made the following declaration, which I find as astoundingly vile now as I did when Lestrade recounted it to us in that hackney cab: “So! All is fine, is it not? Yes, very fine! You have served me quite faithfully, woman and boys, for some forty years. Now I intend, with the clearest and most serene conscience imaginable, to cast you hence. But take heart! Things could be worse! If there was time, the pharaohs had their favorite pets—cats, for the most part—killed before they died, so the pets might be there to welcome them into the after-life, to be kicked or petted there, at their masters’ whims, forever ... and forever ... and forever.” Then he laughed at them. He leaned over his cane and laughed from his doughy, dying face, the new will—properly signed and properly witnessed, as all of them had seen—clutched in one claw of a hand.

William rose and said, “Sir, you may be my father and the author of my existence, but you are also the lowest creature to crawl upon the face of the earth since the serpent tempted Eve in the Garden.”

“Not at all!” the old monster returned, still laughing. “I know four lower. Now, if you will pardon me, I have some important papers to put away in my safe ... and some worthless ones to burn in the stove.”

“He still had the old will when he confronted them?” Holmes asked. He seemed more interested than startled.

“Yes.”

“He could have burned it as soon as the new one was signed and witnessed,” Holmes mused. “He had all the previous afternoon and evening to do so. But he didn’t, did he? Why not? How say you on that question, Lestrade?”

“He hadn’t had enough of teasing them even then, I suppose. He was offering them a chance—a temptation—he believed all would refuse.”

“Perhaps he believed one of them would not refuse,” Holmes said. “Hasn’t that idea at least crossed your mind?” He turned his head and searched my face with the momentary beam of his brilliant—and somehow chilling—regard. “Either of your minds? Isn’t it possible that such a black creature might hold out such a temptation, knowing that if one of his family were to succumb to it and put him out of his misery—Stephen seems most likely from what you say—that one might be caught ... and swing for the crime of patricide?”

I stared at Holmes in silent horror.

“Never mind,” Holmes said. “Go on, Inspector—it’s time for the locked room to make its appearance, I believe.”

The four of them had sat in paralyzed silence as the old man made his long, slow way up the corridor to his study. There were no sounds but the thud of his cane, the labored rattle of his breathing, the plaintive miaow of a cat in the kitchen, and the steady beat of the pendulum in the parlor clock. Then they heard the squeal of hinges as Hull opened his study door and stepped inside.

“Wait!” Holmes said sharply, sitting forward. “No one actually saw him go in, did they?”

“I’m afraid that’s not so, old chap,” Lestrade returned. “Mr. Oliver Stanley, Lord Hull’s valet, had heard Lord Hull’s progress down the hall. He came from Hull’s dressing chamber, went to the gallery railing, and called down to ask if all was well. Hull looked up—Stanley saw him as plainly as I see you right now, old fellow—and said all was absolutely tip-top. Then he rubbed the back of his head, went in, and locked the study door behind him.

“By the time his father had reached the door (the corridor is quite long and it may have taken him as much as two minutes to make his way up it unaided) Stephen had shaken off his stupor and had gone to the parlor door. He saw the exchange between his father and his father’s man. Of course Lord Hull was back-to, but Stephen heard his father’s voice and described the same characteristic gesture: Hull rubbing the back of his head.”

“Could Stephen Hull and this Stanley fellow have spoken before the police arrived?” I asked—shrewdly, I thought.

“Of course they could,” Lestrade said wearily. “They probably did. But there was no collusion.”

“You feel sure of that?” Holmes asked, but he sounded uninterested.

“Yes. Stephen Hull would lie very well, I think, but Stanley would do it very badly. Accept my professional opinion or not, just as you like, Holmes.”

“I accept it.”

So Lord Hull passed into his study, the famous locked room, and all heard the click of the lock as he turned the key—the only key there was to that sanctum sanctorum. This was followed by a more unusual sound: the bolt being drawn across.

Then, silence.

The four of them—Lady Hull and her sons, so shortly to be blue-blooded paupers—looked at one another in similar silence. The cat miaowed again from the kitchen and Lady Hull said in a distracted voice that if the housekeeper wouldn't give that cat a bowl of milk, she supposed she must. She said the sound of it would drive her mad if she had to listen to it much longer. She left the parlor. Moments later, without a word among them, the three sons also left. William went to his room upstairs, Stephen wandered into the music room, and Jory went to sit upon a bench beneath the stairs where, he had told Lestrade, he had gone since earliest childhood when he was sad or had matters of deep difficulty to think over.

Less than five minutes later a shriek arose from the study. Stephen ran out of the music room, where he had been plinking out isolated notes on the piano. Jory met him at the study door. William was already halfway downstairs and saw them breaking in when Stanley, the valet, came out of Lord Hull's dressing room and went to the gallery railing for the second time. Stanley has testified to seeing Stephen Hull burst into the study; to seeing William reach the foot of the stairs and almost fall on the marble; to seeing Lady Hull come from the dining-room doorway with a pitcher of milk still in one hand. Moments later the rest of the servants had gathered.

“Lord Hull was slumped over his writing-desk with the three brothers standing by. His eyes were open, and the look in them... I believe it was surprise. Again, you are free to accept or reject my opinion just as you like, but I tell you it looked very much like surprise to me. Clutched in his hands was his will ... the old one. Of the new one there was no sign. And there was a dagger in his back.”

With this, Lestrade rapped for the driver to go on.

We entered the house between two constables as stone-faced as Buckingham Palace sentinels. Here to begin with was a very long hall, floored in black and white marble tiles like a chessboard. They led to an open door at the end, where two more constables were posted: the entrance to the infamous study. To the left were the

stairs, to the right two doors: the parlor and the music room, I guessed.

“The family is gathered in the parlor,” Lestrade said.

“Good,” Holmes said pleasantly. “But perhaps Watson and I might first have a look at the scene of the crime?”

“Shall I accompany you?”

“Perhaps not,” Holmes said. “Has the body been removed?”

“It was still here when I left for your lodgings, but by now it almost certainly will be gone.”

“Very good.”

Holmes started away. I followed. Lestrade called, “Holmes!”

Holmes turned, eyebrows raised.

“No secret panels, no secret doors. For the third time, take my word or not, as you like.”

“I believe I’ll wait until ...” Holmes began and then his breath began to hitch. He scrambled in his pocket, found a napkin probably carried absently away from the eating-house where we had dined the previous evening, and sneezed mightily into it. I looked down and saw a large, scarred tomcat, as out of place here in this grand hall as would have been one of those urchins of whom I had been thinking earlier, twining about Holmes’s legs. One of its ears was laid back against its scarred skull. The other was gone, lost in some long-ago alley battle, I supposed.

Holmes sneezed repeatedly and kicked out at the cat. It went with a reproachful backward look rather than with the angry hiss one might have expected from such an old campaigner. Holmes looked at Lestrade over the napkin with reproachful, watery eyes. Lestrade, not in the least put out of countenance, thrust his head forward and

grinned like a monkey. "Ten, Holmes," he said. "Ten. House is full of felines. Hull loved em." And with that he walked off.

"How long have you suffered this affliction, old fellow?" I asked. I was a bit alarmed.

"Always," he said, and sneezed again. The word allergy was hardly known all those years ago, but that, of course, was his problem.

"Do you want to leave?" I asked. I had once seen a case of near asphyxiation as the result of such an aversion, this one to sheep but otherwise similar in all respects.

"He'd like that," Holmes said. I did not need him to tell me whom he meant. Holmes sneezed once more (a large red welt was appearing on his normally pale forehead) and then we passed between the constables at the study door. Holmes closed it behind him.

The room was long and relatively narrow. It was at the end of something like a wing, the main house spreading to either side from an area roughly three-quarters of the way down the hall. There were windows on two sides of the study and it was bright enough in spite of the gray, rainy day. The walls were dotted with colorful shipping charts in handsome teak frames, and among them was mounted an equally handsome set of weather instruments in a brass-bound, glass-fronted case. It contained an anemometer (Hull had the little whirling cups mounted on one of the roofpeaks, I supposed), two thermometers (one registering the outdoor temperature and the other that of the study), and a barometer much like the one which had fooled Holmes into believing the bad weather was about to break. I noticed the glass was still rising, then looked outside. The rain was falling harder than ever, rising glass or no rising glass. We believe we know a great lot, with our instruments and things, but I was old enough then to believe we don't know half as much as we think we do, and old enough now to believe we never will.

Holmes and I both turned to look at the door. The bolt was torn free, but leaning inward, as it should have been. The key was still in the

study-side lock, and still turned.

Holmes's eyes, watering as they were, were everywhere at once, noting, cataloguing, storing.

"You are a little better," I said.

"Yes," he said, lowering the napkin and stuffing it indifferently back into his coat pocket. "He may have loved em, but he apparently didn't allow em in here. Not on a regular basis, anyway. What do you make of it, Watson?"

Although my eyes were slower than his, I was also looking around. The double windows were all locked with thumb-turns and small brass side-bolts. None of the panes had been broken. Most of the framed charts and the box of weather instruments were between these windows. The other two walls were filled with books. There was a small coal-stove but no fireplace; the murderer hadn't come down the chimney like Father Christmas, not unless he was narrow enough to fit through a stovepipe and clad in an asbestos suit, for the stove was still very warm.

The desk stood at one end of this long, narrow, well-lit room; the opposite end was a pleasantly bookish area, not quite a library, with two high-backed upholstered chairs and a coffee-table between them. On this table was a random stack of volumes. The floor was covered with a Turkish rug. If the murderer had come through a trap-door, I hadn't the slightest idea how he'd gotten back under that rug without disarranging it ... and it was not disarranged, not in the slightest: the shadows of the coffee-table legs lay across it without even a hint of a ripple.

"Did you believe it, Watson?" Holmes asked, snapping me out of what was almost a hypnotic trance. Something ... something about that coffee-table ...

"Believe what, Holmes?"

“That all four of them simply walked out of the parlor, in four different directions, four minutes before the murder?”

“I don’t know,” I said faintly.

“I don’t believe it; not for a mo—” He broke off. “Watson! Are you all right?”

“No,” I said in a voice I could hardly hear myself. I collapsed into one of the library chairs. My heart was beating too fast. I couldn’t seem to catch my breath. My head was pounding; my eyes seemed to have suddenly grown too large for their sockets. I could not take them from the shadows of the coffee-table legs upon the rug. “I am most ... definitely not... all right.”

At that moment Lestrade appeared in the study doorway. “If you’ve looked your fill, H—” He broke off. “What the devil’s the matter with Watson?”

“I believe,” said Holmes in a calm, measured voice, “that Watson has solved the case. Have you, Watson?”

I nodded my head. Not the entire case, perhaps, but most of it. I knew who; I knew how.

“Is it this way with you, Holmes?” I asked. “When you ... see?”

“Yes,” he said, “though I usually manage to keep my feet.”

“Watson’s solved the case?” Lestrade said impatiently. “Bah! Watson’s offered a thousand solutions to a hundred cases before this, Holmes, as you very well know, and all of them wrong. It’s his bete noire. Why, I remember just this last summer—”

“I know more about Watson than you ever shall,” Holmes said, “and this time he has hit upon it. I know the look.” He began to sneeze again; the cat with the missing ear had wandered into the room through the door which Lestrade had left open. It moved directly

toward Holmes with an expression of what seemed to be affection on its ugly face.

“If this is how it is for you,” I said, “I’ll never envy you again, Holmes. My heart should burst.”

“One becomes inured even to insight,” Holmes said, with not the slightest trace of conceit in his voice. “Out with it, then... or shall we bring in the suspects, as in the last chapter of a detective novel?”

“No!” I cried in horror. I had seen none of them; I had no urge to. “Only I think I must show you how it was done. If you and Inspector Lestrade will only step out into the hall for a moment ...”

The cat reached Holmes and jumped into his lap, purring like the most satisfied creature on earth.

Holmes exploded into a perfect fusillade of sneezes. The red patches on his face, which had begun to fade, burst out afresh. He pushed the cat away and stood up.

“Be quick, Watson, so we can leave this damned place,” he said in a muffled voice, and left the room with his shoulders in an uncharacteristic hunch, his head down, and with not a single look back. Believe me when I say that a little of my heart went with him.

Lestrade stood leaning against the door, his wet coat steaming slightly, his lips parted in a detestable grin. “Shall I take Holmes’s new admirer, Watson?”

“Leave it,” I said, “and close the door when you go out.”

“I’d lay a fiver you’re wasting our time, old man,” Lestrade said, but I saw something different in his eyes: if I’d offered to take him up on the wager, he would have found a way to squirm out of it.

“Close the door,” I repeated. “I shan’t be long.”

He closed the door. I was alone in Hull's study ... except for the cat, of course, which was now sitting in the middle of the rug, tail curled neatly about its paws, green eyes watching me.

I felt in my pockets and found my own souvenir from last night's dinner—men on their own are rather untidy people, I fear, but there was a reason for the bread other than general slovenliness. I almost always kept a crust in one pocket or the other, for it amused me to feed the pigeons that landed outside the very window where Holmes had been sitting when Lestrade drove up.

"Pussy," said I, and put the bread beneath the coffee-table—the coffee-table to which Lord Hull would have presented his back when he sat down with his two wills, the wretched old one and the even more wretched new one. "Puss-puss-puss."

The cat rose and walked languidly beneath the table to investigate the crust.

I went to the door and opened it. "Holmes! Lestrade! Quickly!"

They came in.

"Step over here," I said, and walked to the coffee-table.

Lestrade looked about and began to frown, seeing nothing; Holmes, of course, began to sneeze again. "Can't we have that wretched thing out of here?" he managed from behind the table-napkin, which was now quite soggy.

"Of course," said I. "But where is the wretched thing, Holmes?"

A startled expression filled his wet eyes. Lestrade whirled, walked toward Hull's writing-desk, and peered behind it. Holmes knew his reaction should not have been so violent if the cat had been on the far side of the room. He bent and looked beneath the coffee-table, saw nothing but the rug and the bottom row of the two bookcases opposite, and straightened up again. If his eyes had not been

spouting like fountains, he should have seen all then; he was, after all, right on top of it. But one must also give credit where credit is due, and the illusion was devilishly good. The empty space beneath his father's coffee-table had been Jory Hull's masterpiece.

"I don't—" Holmes began, and then the cat, who found my friend much more to its liking than any stale crust of bread, strolled out from beneath the table and began once more to twine ecstatically about his ankles. Lestrade had returned, and his eyes grew so wide I thought they might actually fall out. Even having understood the trick, I myself was amazed. The scarred tomcat seemed to be materializing out of thin air; head, body, white-tipped tail last.

It rubbed against Holmes's leg, purring as Holmes sneezed.

"That's enough," I said. "You've done your job and may leave."

I picked it up, took it to the door (getting a good scratch for my pains), and tossed it unceremoniously into the hall. I shut the door behind it.

Holmes was sitting down. "My God," he said in a nasal, clogged voice. Lestrade was incapable of any speech at all. His eyes never left the table and the faded Turkish rug beneath its legs: an empty space that had somehow given birth to a cat.

"I should have seen," Holmes was muttering. "Yes ... but you... how did you understand so quickly?" I detected the faintest hurt and pique in that voice, and forgave it at once.

"It was those," I said, and pointed at the rug.

"Of course!" Holmes nearly groaned. He slapped his welted forehead. "Idiot! I'm a perfect idiot!"

"Nonsense," I said tartly. "With a houseful of cats—and one who has apparently picked you out for a special friend—I suspect you were seeing ten of everything."

“What about the rug?” Lestrade asked impatiently. “It’s very nice, I’ll grant, and probably expensive, but—”

“Not the rug,” I said. “The shadows.”

“Show him, Watson,” Holmes said wearily, lowering the napkin into his lap.

So I bent and picked one of them off the floor.

Lestrade sat down in the other chair, hard, like a man who has been unexpectedly punched.

*

“I kept looking at them, you see,” I said, speaking in a tone which could not help being apologetic. This seemed all wrong. It was Holmes’s job to explain the whos and hows at the end of the investigation. Yet while I saw that he now understood everything, I knew he would refuse to speak in this case. And I suppose a part of me—the part that knew I would probably never have another chance to do something like this—wanted to be the one to explain. And the cat was rather a nice touch, I must say. A magician could have done no better with a rabbit and a top-hat.

“I knew something was wrong, but it took a moment for it to sink in. This room is extremely bright, but today it’s pouring down rain. Look around and you’ll see that not a single object in this room casts a shadow ... except for these table-legs.”

Lestrade uttered an oath.

“It’s rained for nearly a week,” I said, “but both Holmes’s barometer and the late Lord Hull’s”—I pointed to it—“said that we could expect sun today. In fact, it seemed a sure thing. So he added the shadows as a final touch.”

“Who did?”

“Jory Hull,” Holmes said in that same weary tone. “Who else?”

I bent down and reached my hand beneath the right end of the coffee-table. It disappeared into thin air, just as the cat had appeared. Lestrade uttered another startled oath. I tapped the back of the canvas stretched tightly between the forward legs of the coffee-table. The books and the rug bulged and rippled, and the illusion, nearly perfect as it had been, was instantly dispelled.

Jory Hull had painted the nothing under his father’s coffee-table, had crouched behind the nothing as his father entered the room, locked the door, and sat at his desk with his two wills, and at last had rushed out from behind the nothing, dagger in hand.

“He was the only one who could execute such an extraordinary piece of realism,” I said, this time running my hand down the face of the canvas. We could all hear the low rasping sound it made, like the purr of a very old cat. “The only one who could execute it, and the only one who could hide behind it: Jory Hull, who was no more than five feet tall, bow-legged, slump-shouldered.

“As Holmes said, the surprise of the new will was no surprise. Even if the old man had been secretive about the possibility of cutting the relatives out of the will, which he wasn’t, only simpletons could have mistaken the import of the visit from the solicitor and, more important, the assistant. It takes two witnesses to make a will a valid document at Chancery. What Holmes said about some people preparing for disaster was very true. A canvas as perfect as this was not made overnight, or in a month. You may find he had it ready, should it need to be used, for as long as a year—”

“Or five,” Holmes interpolated.

“I suppose. At any rate, when Hull announced that he wanted to see his family in the parlor this morning, I imagine Jory knew the time had come. After his father had gone to bed last night, he would have come down here and mounted his canvas. I suppose he may have put down the faux shadows at the same time, but if I had been Jory I

should have tip-toed in here for another peek at the glass this morning, before the previously announced parlor gathering, just to make sure it was still rising. If the door was locked, I suppose he filched the key from his father's pocket and returned it later."

"Wasn't locked," Lestrade said laconically. "As a rule he kept the door shut to keep the cats out, but rarely locked it."

"As for the shadows, they are just strips of felt, as you now see. His eye was good, they are about where they would have been at eleven this morning ... if the glass had been right."

"If he expected the sun to be shining, why did he put down shadows at all?" Lestrade grumped. "Sun puts em down as a matter of course, just in case you've never noticed your own, Watson."

Here I was at a loss. I looked at Holmes, who seemed grateful to have any part in the answer.

"Don't you see? That is the greatest irony of all! If the sun had shone as the glass suggested it would, the canvas would have blocked the shadows. Painted shadow-legs don't cast them, you know. He was caught by shadows on a day when there were none because he was afraid he would be caught by none on a day when his father's barometer said they would almost certainly be everywhere else in the room."

"I still don't understand how Jory got in here without Hull seeing him," Lestrade said.

"That puzzles me as well," Holmes said—dear old Holmes! I doubt that it puzzled him a bit, but that was what he said. "Watson?"

"The parlor where Lord Hull met with his wife and sons has a door which communicates with the music room, does it not?"

"Yes," Lestrade said, "and the music room has a door which communicates with Lady Hull's morning room, which is next in line

as one goes toward the back of the house. But from the morning room one can only go back into the hall, Doctor Watson. If there had been two doors into Hull's study, I should hardly have come after Holmes on the run as I did."

He said this last in tones of faint self-justification.

"Oh, Jory went back into the hall, all right," I said, "but his father didn't see him."

"Rot!"

"I'll demonstrate," I said, and went to the writing-desk, where the dead man's cane still leaned. I picked it up and turned toward them. "The very instant Lord Hull left the parlor, Jory was up and on the run."

Lestrade shot a startled glance at Holmes; Holmes gave the inspector a cool, ironic look in return. I did not understand those looks then, nor give them much thought at all, if the whole truth be told. I did not fully understand the wider implications of the picture I was drawing for yet awhile. I was too wrapped up in my own recreation, I suppose.

"He nipped through the first connecting door, ran across the music room, and entered Lady Hull's morning room. He went to the hall door then and peeked out. If Lord Hull's gout had gotten so bad as to have brought on gangrene, he would have progressed no more than a quarter of the way down the hall, and that is optimistic. Now mark me, Inspector Lestrade, and I will show you the price a man pays for a lifetime of rich food and strong drink. If you harbor any doubts when I've done, I shall parade a dozen gout sufferers before you, and each one will show the same ambulatory symptoms I now intend to demonstrate. Please notice above all how fixed my attention is ... and where."

With that I began to stump slowly across the room toward them, both hands clamped tightly on the ball of the cane. I would raise one foot

quite high, bring it down, pause, and then draw the other leg along. Never did my eyes look up. Instead, they alternated between the cane and that forward foot.

“Yes,” Holmes said quietly. “The good doctor is exactly right, Inspector Lestrade. The gout comes first; then the loss of balance; then (if the sufferer lives long enough), the characteristic stoop brought on by always looking down.”

“Jory would have been very aware of how his father fixed his attention when he walked from place to place,” I said. “As a result, what happened this morning was diabolically simple. When Jory reached the morning room, he peeped out the door, saw his father studying his feet and the tip of his cane—just as always—and knew he was safe. He stepped out, right in front of his unseeing father, and simply nipped into the study. The door, Lestrade informs us, was unlocked, and really, how great would the risk have been? They were in the hall together for no more than three seconds, and probably a little less.” I paused. “That hall floor is marble, isn’t it? He must have kicked off his shoes.”

“He was wearing slippers,” Lestrade said in a strangely calm tone of voice, and for the second time, his eyes met Holmes’s.

“Ah,” I said. “I see. Jory gained the study well ahead of his father and hid behind his cunning stage-flat. Then he withdrew the dagger and waited. His father reached the end of the hall. Jory heard Stanley call down to him, and heard his father call back that he was fine. Then Lord Hull entered his study for the last time ... closed the door ... and locked it.”

They were both looking at me intently, and I understood some of the godlike power Holmes must have felt at moments like these, telling others what only he could know. And yet, I must repeat that it is a feeling I should not have wanted to have too often. I believe the urge to repeat such a feeling would have corrupted most men—men with less iron in their souls than was possessed by my friend Sherlock Holmes.

“Old Keg-Legs would have made himself as small as possible before the locking-up happened, perhaps knowing (or only suspecting) that his father would have one good look round before turning the key and shooting the bolt. He may have been gouty and going a bit soft about the edges, but that doesn’t mean he was going blind.”

“Stanley says his eyes were top-hole,” Lestrade said. “One of the first things I asked.”

“So he looked round,” I said, and suddenly I could see it, and I suppose this was also the way it was with Holmes; this reconstruction which, while based only upon facts and deduction, seemed to be half a vision. “He saw nothing to alarm him; nothing but the study as it always was, empty save for himself. It is a remarkably open room—I see no closet door, and with the windows on both sides, there are no dark nooks and crannies even on such a day as this.

“Satisfied that he was alone, he closed the door, turned his key, and shot the bolt. Jory would have heard him stump his way across to the desk. He would have heard the heavy thump and wheeze of the chair cushion as his father landed on it—a man in whom gout is well-advanced does not sit so much as position himself over a soft spot and then drop onto it, seat-first—and then Jory would at last have risked a look out.”

I glanced at Holmes.

“Go on, old man,” he said warmly. “You are doing splendidly. Absolutely first rate.” I saw he meant it. Thousands would have called him cold, and they would not have been wrong, precisely, but he also had a large heart. Holmes simply protected it better than most men do.

“Thank you. Jory would have seen his father put his cane aside, and place the papers—the two packets of papers—on the blotter. He did not kill his father immediately, although he could have done; that’s what’s so gruesomely pathetic about this business, and that’s why I

wouldn't go into that parlor where they are for a thousand pounds. I wouldn't go in unless you and your men dragged me."

"How do you know he didn't do it immediately?" Lestrade asked.

"The scream came several minutes after the key was turned and the bolt drawn; you said so yourself, and I assume you have enough testimony on that point not to doubt it. Yet it can only be a dozen long paces from door to desk. Even for a gouty man like Lord Hull, it would have taken half a minute, forty seconds at the outside, to cross to the chair and sit down. Add fifteen seconds for him to prop his cane where you found it, and put his wills on the blotter.

"What happened then? What happened during that last minute or two, a short time which must have seemed—to Jory Hull, at least—almost endless? I believe Lord Hull simply sat there, looking from one will to the other. Jory would have been able to tell the difference between the two easily enough; the differing colors of the parchment would have been all the clew he needed.

"He knew his father intended to throw one of them into the stove; I believe he waited to see which one it would be. There was, after all, a chance that the old devil was only having a cruel practical joke at his family's expense. Perhaps he would burn the new will, and put the old one back in the safe. Then he could have left the room and told his family the new will was safely put away. Do you know where it is, Lestrade? The safe?"

"Five of the books in that case swing out," Lestrade said briefly, pointing to a shelf in the library area.

"Both family and old man would have been satisfied then; the family would have known their earned inheritances were safe, and the old man would have gone to his grave believing he had perpetrated one of the cruellest practical jokes of all time... but he would have gone as God's victim or his own, and not Jory Hull's."

Yet a third time that queer look, half-amused and half-revolted, passed between Holmes and Lestrade.

“Myself, I rather think the old man was only savoring the moment, as a man may savor the prospect of an after-dinner drink in the middle of the afternoon or a sweet after a long period of abstinence. At any rate, the minute passed, and Lord Hull began to rise ... but with the darker parchment in his hand, and facing the stove rather than the safe. Whatever his hopes may have been, there was no hesitation on Jory’s part when the moment came. He burst from hiding, crossed the distance between the coffee-table and the desk in an instant, and plunged the knife into his father’s back before he was fully up.

“I suspect the post-mortem will show the thrust clipped through the heart’s right ventricle and into the lung—that would explain the quantity of blood expelled onto the desktop. It also explains why Lord Hull was able to scream before he died, and that’s what did for Mr. Jory Hull.”

“How so?” Lestrade asked.

“A locked room is a bad business unless you intend to pass murder off as suicide,” I said, looking at Holmes. He smiled and nodded at this maxim of his. “The last thing Jory would have wanted was for things to look as they did ... the locked room, the locked windows, the man with a knife in him where the man himself never could have put it. I think he had never foreseen his father dying with such a squawl. His plan was to stab him, burn the new will, rifle the desk, unlock one of the windows, and escape that way. He would have entered the house by another door, resumed his seat under the stairs, and then, when the body was finally discovered, it would have looked like robbery.”

“Not to Hull’s solicitor,” Lestrade said.

“He might well have kept his silence, however,” Holmes mused, and then added brightly, “I’ll bet our artistic friend intended to add a few

tracks, too. I have found that the better class of murderer almost always likes to throw in a few mysterious tracks leading away from the scene of the crime.” He uttered a brief, humorless sound that was more bark than laugh, then looked back from the window nearest the desk to Lestrade and me. “I think we all agree it would have seemed a suspiciously convenient murder, under the circumstances, but even if the solicitor spoke up, nothing could have been proved.”

“By screaming, Lord Hull spoiled everything,” I said, “as he had been spoiling things all his life. The house was roused. Jory must have been in a total panic, frozen to the spot the way a deer is by a bright light. It was Stephen Hull who saved the day... or Jory’s alibi, at least, the one which had him sitting on the bench under the stairs when his father was murdered. Stephen rushed down the hall from the music room, smashed the door open, and must have hissed at Jory to get over to the desk with him, at once, so it would look as if they had broken in together—”

I broke off, thunderstruck. At last I understood the glances which had been flashing between Holmes and Lestrade. I understood what they must have seen from the moment I showed them the trick hiding place: it could not have been done alone. The killing, yes, but the rest ...

“Stephen said he and Jory met at the study door,” I said slowly. “That he, Stephen, burst it in and they entered together, discovered the body together. He lied. He might have done it to protect his brother, but to lie so well when one doesn’t know what has happened seems ... seems ...”

“Impossible,” Holmes said, “is the word for which you are searching, Watson.”

“Then Jory and Stephen went in on it together,” I said. “They planned it together ... and in the eyes of the law, both are guilty of their father’s murder! My God!”

“Not both of them, my dear Watson,” Holmes said in a tone of curious gentleness. “All of them.”

I could only gape.

He nodded. “You have shown remarkable insight this morning, Watson; you have, in fact, burned with a deductive heat I’ll wager you’ll never generate again. My cap is off to you, dear fellow, as it is to any man who is able to transcend his normal nature, no matter how briefly. But in one way you have remained the same dear chap you’ve always been: while you understand how good people can be, you have no understanding of how black they may be.”

I looked at him silently, almost humbly.

“Not that there was much blackness here, if half of what we’ve heard of Lord Hull was true,” Holmes said. He rose and began to pace irritably about the study. “Who testifies that Jory was with Stephen when the door was smashed in? Jory, naturally. Stephen, naturally. But there are two other faces in this family portrait. One belongs to William, the third brother. Do you concur, Lestrade?”

“Yes,” Lestrade said. “If this is the straight of the matter, William also had to be in on it. He said he was halfway down the stairs when he saw the two of them go in together, Jory a little ahead.”

“How interesting!” Holmes said, eyes gleaming. “Stephen breaks in the door—as the younger and stronger of course he must—and so one would expect simple forward momentum would have carried him into the room first. Yet William, halfway down the stairs, saw Jory enter first. Why was that Watson?”

I could only shake my head numbly.

“Ask yourself whose testimony, and whose testimony alone, we can trust here. The answer is the only witness who is not part of the family: Lord Hull’s man, Oliver Stanley. He approached the gallery railing in time to see Stephen enter the room, and that is just as it

should have been, since Stephen was alone when he broke it in. It was William, with a better angle from his place on the stairs, who said he saw Jory precede Stephen into the study. William said so because he had seen Stanley and knew what he must say. It boils down to this, Watson: we know Jory was inside this room. Since both of his brothers testify he was outside, there was, at the very least collusion. But as you say, the smooth way they all pulled together suggests something far more serious.”

“Conspiracy,” I said.

“Yes. Do you recall my asking you, Watson, if you believed all four of them simply walked wordlessly out of that parlor in four different directions after they heard the study door locked?”

“Yes. Now I do.”

“The four of them.” He looked briefly at Lestrade, who nodded, and then back at me. “We know Jory had to have been up and off and about his business the moment the old man left the parlor in order to reach the study ahead of him, yet all four of the surviving family—including Lady Hull—say they were in the parlor when Lord Hull locked his study door. The murder of Lord Hull was very much a family affair, Watson.”

I was too staggered to say anything. I looked at Lestrade and saw an expression on his face I had never seen there before nor ever did again; a kind of tired sickened gravity.

“What may they expect?” Holmes said, almost genially.

“Jory will certainly swing,” Lestrade said. “Stephen will go to jail for life. William Hull may get life, but will more likely get twenty years in Wormwood Scrubs, a kind of living death.”

Holmes bent and stroked the canvas stretched between the legs of the coffee-table. It made that odd hoarse purring noise.

“Lady Hull,” Lestrade went on, “may expect to spend the next five years of her life in Beechwood Manor, more commonly known to the inmates as Pox Palace ... although, having met the lady, I rather suspect she will find another way out. Her husband’s laudanum would be my guess.”

“All because Jory Hull missed a clean strike,” Holmes remarked, and sighed. “If the old man had had the common decency to die silently, all would have been well. Jory would, as Watson says, have left by the window, taking his canvas with him, of course... not to mention his trumpery shadows. Instead, he raised the house. All the servants were in, exclaiming over the dead master. The family was in confusion. How shabby their luck was, Lestrade! How close was the constable when Stanley summoned him?”

“Closer than you would believe,” Lestrade said. “Hurrying up the drive to the door, as a matter of fact. He was passing on his regular rounds, and heard a scream from the house. Their luck was shabby.”

“Holmes,” I said, feeling much more comfortable in my old role, “how did you know a constable was so nearby?”

“Simplicity itself, Watson. If not, the family would have shooed the servants out long enough to hide the canvas and ‘shadows.’ “

“Also to unlatch at least one window, I should think,” Lestrade added in a voice uncustomarily quiet.

“They could have taken the canvas and the shadows,” I said suddenly.

Holmes turned toward me. “Yes.”

Lestrade raised his eyebrows.

“It came down to a choice,” I said to him. “There was time enough to burn the new will or get rid of the huggermugger ... this would have been just Stephen and Jory, of course, in the moments after Stephen

burst in the door. They—or, if you’ve got the temperature of the characters right, and I suppose you do, Stephen—decided to burn the will and hope for the best. I suppose there was just enough time to chuck it into the stove.”

Lestrade turned, looked at it, then looked back. “Only a man as black as Hull would have found strength enough to scream at the end,” he said.

“Only a man as black as Hull would have required a son to kill him,” Holmes rejoined.

He and Lestrade looked at each other, and again something passed between them, some perfectly silent communication from which I myself was excluded.

“Have you ever done it?” Holmes asked, as if picking up on an old conversation.

Lestrade shook his head. “Once came damned close,” he said. “There was a girl involved, not her fault, not really. I came close. Yet ... that was only one.”

“And here there are four,” Holmes returned, understanding him perfectly. “Four people illused by a villain who should have died within six months anyway.”

At last I understood what they were discussing.

Holmes turned his gray eyes on me. “What say you, Lestrade? Watson has solved this one, although he did not see all the ramifications. Shall we let Watson decide?”

“All right,” Lestrade said gruffly. “Just be quick. I want to get out of this damned room.”

Instead of answering, I bent down, picked up the felt shadows, rolled them into a ball, and put them in my coat pocket. I felt quite odd

doing it: much as I had felt when in the grip of the fever which almost took my life in India.

“Capital fellow, Watson!” Holmes cried. “You’ve solved your first case, become an accessory to murder, and it’s not even tea-time! And here’s a souvenir for myself—an original Jory Hull. I doubt it’s signed, but one must be grateful for whatever the gods send us on rainy days.” He used his pen-knife to loosen the artist’s glue holding the canvas to the legs of the coffee-table. He made quick work of it; less than a minute later he was slipping a narrow canvas tube into the inner pocket of his voluminous greatcoat.

“This is a dirty piece of work,” Lestrade said, but he crossed to one of the windows and, after a moment’s hesitation, released the locks which held it and opened it half an inch or so.

“Say it’s dirty work undone,” Holmes said in a tone of almost hectic gaiety. “Shall we go, gentlemen?”

We crossed to the door. Lestrade opened it. One of the constables asked him if there was any progress.

On another occasion Lestrade might have shown the man the rough side of his tongue. This time he said shortly, “Looks like attempted robbery gone to something worse. I saw it at once, of course; Holmes a moment later.”

“Too bad!” the other constable ventured.

“Yes,” Lestrade said, “but at least the old man’s scream sent the thief packing before he could steal anything. Carry on.”

We left. The parlor door was open, but I kept my head down as we passed it. Holmes looked, of course; there was no way he could not have done. It was just the way he was made. As for me, I never saw any of the family. I never wanted to.

Holmes was sneezing again. His friend was twining around his legs and miaowing blissfully. "Let me out of here," he said, and bolted.

*

An hour later we were back at 221B Baker Street, in much the same positions we had occupied when Lestrade came driving up: Holmes in the window-seat, myself on the sofa.

"Well, Watson," Holmes said presently, "how do you think you'll sleep tonight?"

"Like a top," I said. "And you?"

"Likewise, I'm sure," he said. "I'm glad to be away from those damned cats, I can tell you that."

"How will Lestrade sleep, d'you think?"

Holmes looked at me and smiled. "Poorly tonight. Poorly for a week, perhaps. But then he'll be all right. Among his other talents, Lestrade has a great one for creative forgetting."

That made me laugh.

"Look, Watson!" Holmes said. "Here's a sight!" I got up and went to the window, somehow sure I would see Lestrade riding up in the wagon once more. Instead I saw the sun breaking through the clouds, bathing London in a glorious late-afternoon light.

"It came out after all," Holmes said. "Marvellous, Watson! Makes one happy to be alive!" He picked up his violin and began to play, the sun strong on his face.

I looked at his barometer and saw it was falling. That made me laugh so hard I had to sit down. When Holmes asked—in tones of mild irritation—what the matter was, I could only shake my head. I am not, in truth, sure he would have understood, anyway. It was not the way his mind worked.

NIGHTMARES & DREAMSCAPES
THE END OF THE WHOLE MESS



THE END OF THE WHOLE MESS

Stephen King

I want to tell you about the end of war, the degeneration of mankind, and the death of the Messiah—an epic story, deserving thousands of pages and a whole shelf of volumes, but you (if there are any “you” later on to read this) will have to settle for the freeze-dried version. The direct injection works very fast. I figure I’ve got somewhere between forty-five minutes and two hours, depending on my blood-type. I think it’s A, which should give me a little more time, but I’ll be goddamned if I can remember for sure. If it turns out to be O, you could be in for a lot of blank pages, my hypothetical friend.

In any event, I think maybe I’d better assume the worst and go as fast as I can.

I’m using the electric typewriter—Bobby’s word-processor is faster, but the genny’s cycle is too irregular to be trusted, even with the line suppressor. I’ve only got one shot at this; I can’t risk getting most of the way home and then seeing the whole thing go to data heaven because of an oHm drop, or a surge too great for the suppressor to cope with.

My name is Howard Forno. I was a freelance writer. My brother, Robert Forno, was the Messiah. I killed him by shooting him up with his own discovery four hours ago. He called it The Calmative. A Very Serious Mistake might have been a better name, but what’s done is done and can’t be undone, as the Irish have been saying for centuries ... which proves what assholes they are.

Shit, I can’t afford these digressions.

After Bobby died I covered him with a quilt and sat at the cabin’s single living-room window for some three hours, looking out at the woods. Used to be you could see the orange glow of the hi-intensity arc-sodiums from North Conway, but no more. Now there’s just the White Mountains, looking like dark triangles of crepe paper cut out by a child, and the pointless stars.

I turned on the radio, dialed through four bands, found one crazy guy, and shut it off. I sat there thinking of ways to tell this story. My mind kept sliding away toward all those miles of dark pinewoods, all that nothing. Finally I realized I needed to get myself off the dime and shoot myself up. Shit. I never could work without a deadline.

And I've sure-to-God got one now.

*

Our parents had no reason to expect anything other than what they got: bright children. Dad was a history major who had become a full professor at Hofstra when he was thirty. Ten years later he was one of six vice-administrators of the National Archives in Washington, D.C., and in line for the top spot. He was a helluva good guy, too—had every record Chuck Berry ever cut and played a pretty mean blues guitar himself. My dad filed by day and rocked by night.

Mom graduated magna cum laude from Drew. Got a Phi Beta Kappa key she sometimes wore on this funky fedora she had. She became a successful CPA in D.C., met my dad, married him, and took in her shingle when she became pregnant with yours truly. I came along in 1980. By '84 she was doing taxes for some of my dad's associates—she called this her "little hobby." By the time Bobby was born in 1987, she was handling taxes, investment portfolios, and estate-planning for a dozen powerful men. I could name them, but who gives a wad? They're either dead or driveling idiots by now.

I think she probably made more out of "her little hobby" each year than my dad made at his job, but that never mattered—they were happy with what they were to themselves and to each other. I saw them squabble lots of times, but I never saw them fight. When I was growing up, the only difference I saw between my mom and my playmates' moms was that their moms used to read or iron or sew or talk on the phone while the soaps played on the tube, and my mom used to run a pocket calculator and write down numbers on big green sheets of paper while the soaps played on the tube.

I was no disappointment to a couple of people with Mensa Gold Cards in their wallets. I maintained A's and B's through my public-school career (the idea that either I or my brother might go to a private school was never even discussed so far as I know). I also wrote well early, with no effort at all. I sold my first magazine piece when I was twenty—it was on how the Continental Army wintered at Valley Forge. I sold it to an airline magazine for four hundred fifty dollars. My dad, whom I loved deeply, asked me if he could buy that check from me. He gave me his own personal check and had the check from the airline magazine framed and hung it over his desk. A romantic genius, if you will. A romantic blues-playing genius, if you will. Take it from me, a kid could do a lot worse. Of course he and my mother both died raving and pissing in their pants late last year, like almost everyone else on this big round world of ours, but I never stopped loving either of them.

I was the sort of child they had every reason to expect—a good boy with a bright mind, a talented boy whose talent grew to early maturity in an atmosphere of love and confidence, a faithful boy who loved and respected his mom and dad.

Bobby was different. Nobody, not even Mensa types like our folks, ever expects a kid like Bobby. Not ever.

*

I potty-trained two full years earlier than Bob, and that was the only thing in which I ever beat him. But I never felt jealous of him; that would have been like a fairly good American Legion League pitcher feeling jealous of Nolan Ryan or Roger Clemens. After a certain point the comparisons that cause feelings of jealousy simply cease to exist. I've been there, and I can tell you: after a certain point you just stand back and shield your eyes from the flashburns.

Bobby read at two and began writing short essays (“Our Dog,” “A Trip to Boston with Mother”) at three. His printing was the straggling, struggling galvanic constructions of a six-year-old, and that was startling enough in itself, but there was more: if transcribed so that

his still-developing motor control no longer became an evaluative factor, you would have thought you were reading the work of a bright, if extremely naive, fifth-grader. He progressed from simple sentences to compound sentences to complex ones with dizzying rapidity, grasping clauses, sub-clauses, and modifying clauses with an intuitiveness that was eerie. Sometimes his syntax was garbled and his modifiers misplaced, but he had such flaws—which plague most writers all their lives—pretty well under control by the age of five.

He developed headaches. My parents were afraid he had some sort of physical problem—a brain-tumor, perhaps—and took him to a doctor who examined him carefully, listened to him even more carefully, and then told my parents there was nothing wrong with Bobby except stress: he was in a state of extreme frustration because his writing-hand would not work as well as his brain.

“You got a kid trying to pass a mental kidney stone,” the doctor said. “I could prescribe something for his headaches, but I think the drug he really needs is a typewriter.” So Mom and Dad gave Bobby an IBM. A year later they gave him a Commodore 64 with WordStar for Christmas and Bobby’s headaches stopped. Before going on to other matters, I only want to add that he believed for the next three years or so that it was Santa Claus who had left that word-cruncher under our tree. Now that I think of it, that was another place where I beat Bobby: I Santa-trained earlier, too.

*

There’s so much I could tell you about those early days, and I suppose I’ll have to tell you a little, but I’ll have to go fast and make it brief. The deadline. Ah, the deadline. I once read a very funny piece called “The Essential Gone with the Wind” that went something like this:

” ‘A war?’ laughed Scarlett. ‘Oh, fiddle-de-dee!’

“Boom! Ashley went to war! Atlanta burned! Rhett walked in and then walked out!

” ‘Fiddle-de-dee,’ said Scarlett through her tears, ‘I will think about it tomorrow, for tomorrow is another day.’ “

I laughed heartily over that when I read it; now that I’m faced with doing something similar, it doesn’t seem quite so funny. But here goes:

“A child with an IQ immeasurable by any existing test?” smiled India Forno to her devoted husband, Richard. “Fiddle-de-dee! We’ll provide an atmosphere where his intellect—not to mention that of his not-exactly-stupid older brother—can grow. And we’ll raise them as the normal all-American boys they by gosh are!”

Boom! The Forno boys grew up! Howard went to the University of Virginia, graduated cum laude, and settled down to a freelance writing career! Made a comfortable living! Stepped out with a lot of women and went to bed with quite a few of them! Managed to avoid social diseases both sexual and pharmacological! Bought a Mitsubishi stereo system! Wrote home at least once a week! Published two novels that did pretty well! “Fiddle-de-dee,” said Howard, “this is the life for me!”

And so it was, at least until the day Bobby showed up unexpectedly (in the best mad-scientist tradition) with his two glass boxes, a bees’ nest in one and a wasps’ nest in the other, Bobby wearing a Mumford Phys Ed tee-shirt inside-out, on the verge of destroying human intellect and just as happy as a clam at high tide.

*

Guys like my brother Bobby come along only once every two or three generations, I think—guys like Leonardo da Vinci, Newton, Einstein, maybe Edison. They all seem to have one thing in common: they are like huge compasses which swing aimlessly for a long time, searching for some true north and then homing on it with

fearful force. Before that happens such guys are apt to get up to some weird shit, and Bobby was no exception.

When he was eight and I was fifteen, he came to me and said he had invented an airplane. By then I knew Bobby too well to just say “Bullshit” and kick him out of my room. I went out to the garage, where there was this weird plywood contraption sitting on his American Flyer red wagon. It looked a little like a fighter plane, but the wings were raked forward instead of back. He had mounted the saddle from his rocking horse on the middle of it with bolts. There was a lever on the side. There was no motor. He said it was a glider. He wanted me to push him down Carrigan’s Hill, which was the steepest grade in D.C.’s Grant Park—there was a cement path down the middle of it for old folks. That, Bobby said, would be his runway.

“Bobby,” I said, “you got this puppy’s wings on backward.”

“No,” he said. “This is the way they’re supposed to be. I saw something on Wild Kingdom about hawks. They dive down on their prey and then reverse their wings coming up. They’re double-jointed, see? You get better lift this way.”

“Then why isn’t the Air Force building them this way?” I asked, blissfully unaware that both the American and the Russian air forces had plans for such forward-wing fighter planes on their drawing boards.

Bobby just shrugged. He didn’t know and didn’t care.

We went over to Carrigan’s Hill and he climbed into the rocking-horse saddle and gripped the lever. “Push me hard,” he said. His eyes were dancing with that crazed light I knew so well—Christ, his eyes used to light up that way in his cradle sometimes. But I swear to God I never would have pushed him down the cement path as hard as I did if I thought the thing would actually work.

But I didn’t know, and I gave him one hell of a shove. He went freewheeling down the hill, whooping like a cowboy just off a

traildrive and headed into town for a few cold beers. An old lady had to jump out of his way, and he just missed an old geezer leaning over a walker. Halfway down he pulled the handle and I watched, wide-eyed and bullshit with fear and amazement, as his splintery plywood plane separated from the wagon. At first it only hovered inches above it, and for a second it looked like it was going to settle back. Then there was a gust of wind and Bobby's plane took off like someone had it on an invisible cable. The American Flyer wagon ran off the concrete path and into some bushes. All of a sudden Bobby was ten feet in the air, then twenty, then fifty. He went gliding over Grant Park on a steepening upward plane, whooping cheerily.

I went running after him, screaming for him to come down, visions of his body tumbling off that stupid rocking-horse saddle and impaling itself on a tree, or one of the park's many statues, standing out with hideous clarity in my head. I did not just imagine my brother's funeral; I tell you I attended it.

"BOBBY!" I shrieked. "COME DOWN!"

"WHEEEEEEEEE!" Bobby screamed back, his voice faint but clearly ecstatic. Startled chess-players, Frisbee-throwers, book-readers, lovers, and joggers stopped whatever they were doing to watch.

"BOBBY THERE'S NO SEATBELT ON THAT FUCKING THING!" I screamed. It was the first time I ever used that particular word, so far as I can remember.

"lyyyy'll beeee all riiyyyht ..." He was screaming at the top of his lungs, but I was appalled to realize I could barely hear him. I went running down Carrigan's Hill, shrieking all the way. I don't have the slightest memory of just what I was yelling, but the next day I could not speak above a whisper. I do remember passing a young fellow in a neat three-piece suit standing by the statue of Eleanor Roosevelt at the foot of the hill. He looked at me and said conversationally, "Tell you what, my friend, I'm having one hell of an acid flashback."

I remember that odd misshapen shadow gliding across the green floor of the park, rising and rippling as it crossed park benches, litter baskets, and the upturned faces of the watching people. I remember chasing it. I remember how my mother's face crumpled and how she started to cry when I told her that Bobby's plane, which had no business flying in the first place, turned upside down in a sudden eddy of wind and Bobby finished his short but brilliant career splattered all over D Street.

The way things turned out, it might have been better for everyone if things had actually turned out that way, but they didn't.

Instead, Bobby banked back toward Carrigan's Hill, holding nonchalantly onto the tail of his own plane to keep from falling off the damned thing, and brought it down toward the little pond at the center of Grant Park. He went air-sliding five feet over it, then four ... and then he was skiing his sneakers along the surface of the water, sending back twin white wakes, scaring the usually complacent (and overfed) ducks up in honking indignant flurries before him, laughing his cheerful laugh. He came down on the far side, exactly between two park benches that snapped off the wings of his plane. He flew out of the saddle, thumped his head, and started to bawl.

That was life with Bobby.

*

Not everything was that spectacular—in fact, I don't think anything was ... at least until *The Calmative*. But I told you the story because I think, this time at least, the extreme case best illustrates the norm: life with Bobby was a constant mind-fuck. By the age of nine he was attending quantum physics and advanced algebra classes at Georgetown University. There was the day he blanked out every radio and TV on our street—and the surrounding four blocks—with his own voice; he had found an old portable TV in the attic and turned it into a wide-band radio broadcasting station. One old black-and-white Zenith, twelve feet of hi-fi flex, a coathanger mounted on the roofpeak of our house, and presto! For about two hours four

blocks of Georgetown could receive only WBOB... which happened to be my brother, reading some of my short stories, telling moron jokes, and explaining that the high sulfur content in baked beans was the reason our dad farted so much in church every Sunday morning. "But he gets most of em off pretty quiet," Bobby told his listening audience of roughly three thousand, "or sometimes he holds the real bangers until it's time for the hymns."

My dad, who was less than happy about all this, ended up paying a seventy-five-dollar FCC fine and taking it out of Bobby's allowance for the next year.

Life with Bobby, oh yeah... and look here, I'm crying. Is it honest sentiment, I wonder, or the onset? The former, I think—Christ knows how much I loved him—but I think I better try to hurry up a little just the same.

*

Bobby had graduated high school, for all practical purposes, by the age of ten, but he never got a B.A. or B.S., let alone any advanced degree. It was that big powerful compass in his head, swinging around and around, looking for some true north to point at.

He went through a physics period, and a shorter period when he was nutty for chemistry ... but in the end, Bobby was too impatient with mathematics for either of those fields to hold him. He could do it, but it—and ultimately all so-called hard science—bored him.

By the time he was fifteen, it was archaeology—he combed the White Mountain foothills around our summer place in North Conway, building a history of the Indians who had lived there from arrowheads, flints, even the charcoal patterns of long-dead campfires in the mesolithic caves in the mid-New Hampshire regions.

But that passed, too, and he began to read history and anthropology. When he was sixteen my father and my mother gave their reluctant

approval when Bobby requested that he be allowed to accompany a party of New England anthropologists on an expedition to South America.

He came back five months later with the first real tan of his life; he was also an inch taller, fifteen pounds lighter, and much quieter. He was still cheerful enough, or could be, but his little-boy exuberance, sometimes infectious, sometimes wearisome, but always there, was gone. He had grown up. And for the first time I remember him talking about the news ... how bad it was, I mean. That was 2003, the year a PLO splinter group called the Sons of the Jihad (a name that always sounded to me hideously like a Catholic community service group somewhere in western Pennsylvania) set off a Squirt Bomb in London, polluting sixty per cent of it and making the rest of it extremely unhealthy for people who ever planned to have children (or to live past the age of fifty, for that matter). The year we tried to blockade the Philippines after the Cedeno administration accepted a “small group” of Red Chinese advisors (fifteen thousand or so, according to our spy satellites), and only backed down when it became clear that (a) the Chinese weren't kidding about emptying the holes if we didn't pull back, and (b) the American people weren't all that crazy about committing mass suicide over the Philippine Islands. That was also the year some other group of crazy motherfuckers—Albanians, I think—tried to air-spray the AIDS virus over Berlin.

This sort of stuff depressed everybody, but it depressed the shit out of Bobby.

“Why are people so goddam mean?” he asked me one day. We were at the summer place in New Hampshire, it was late August, and most of our stuff was already in boxes and suitcases. The cabin had that sad, deserted look it always got just before we all went our separate ways. For me it meant back to New York, and for Bobby it meant Waco, Texas, of all places... he had spent the summer reading sociology and geology texts—how's that for a crazy salad?—and said he wanted to run a couple of experiments down there. He

said it in a casual, offhand way, but I had seen my mother looking at him with a peculiar thoughtful scrutiny in the last couple of weeks we were all together. Neither Dad nor I suspected, but I think my mom knew that Bobby's compass needle had finally stopped swinging and had started pointing.

"Why are they so mean?" I asked. "I'm supposed to answer that?"

"Someone better," he said. "Pretty soon, too, the way things are going."

"They're going the way they always went," I said, "and I guess they're doing it because people were built to be mean. If you want to lay blame, blame God."

"That's bullshit. I don't believe it. Even that doubleX-chromosome stuff turned out to be bullshit in the end. And don't tell me it's just economic pressures, the conflict between the haves and have-nots, because that doesn't explain all of it, either."

"Original sin," I said. "It works for me—it's got a good beat and you can dance to it."

"Well," Bobby said, "maybe it is original sin. But what's the instrument, big brother? Have you ever asked yourself that?"

"Instrument? What instrument? I'm not following you."

"I think it's the water," Bobby said moodily.

"Say what?"

"The water. Something in the water."

He looked at me.

"Or something that isn't."

The next day Bobby went off to Waco. I didn't see him again until he showed up at my apartment wearing the inside-out Mumford shirt and carrying the two glass boxes. That was three years later.

*

"Howdy, Howie," he said, stepping in and giving me a nonchalant swat on the back as if it had been only three days.

"Bobby!" I yelled, and threw both arms around him in a bear-hug. Hard angles bit into my chest, and I heard an angry hive-hum.

"I'm glad to see you too," Bobby said, "but you better go easy. You're upsetting the natives."

I stepped back in a hurry. Bobby set down the big paper bag he was carrying and unslung his shoulder-bag. Then he carefully brought the glass boxes out of the bag. There was a beehive in one, a wasps' nest in the other. The bees were already settling down and going back to whatever business bees have, but the wasps were clearly unhappy about the whole thing.

"Okay, Bobby," I said. I looked at him and grinned. I couldn't seem to stop grinning. "What are you up to this time?"

He unzipped the tote-bag and brought out a mayonnaise jar which was half-filled with a clear liquid.

"See this?" he said.

"Yeah. Looks like either water or white lightning."

"It's actually both, if you can believe that. It came from an artesian well in La Plata, a little town forty miles east of Waco, and before I turned it into this concentrated form, there were five gallons of it. I've got a regular little distillery running down there, Howie, but I don't think the government will ever bust me for it." He was grinning, and

now the grin broadened. “Water’s all it is, but it’s still the goddamndest popskull the human race has ever seen.”

“I don’t have the slightest idea what you’re talking about.”

“I know you don’t. But you will. You know what, Howie?”

“What?”

“If the idiotic human race can manage to hold itself together for another six months, I’m betting it’ll hold itself together for all time.”

He lifted the mayonnaise jar, and one magnified Bobby-eye stared at me through it with huge solemnity. “This is the big one,” he said. “The cure for the worst disease to which Homo sapiens falls prey.”

“Cancer?”

“Nope,” Bobby said. “War. Barroom brawls. Drive-by shootings. The whole mess. Where’s your bathroom, Howie? My back teeth are floating.”

When he came back he had not only turned the Mumford tee-shirt right-side out, he had combed his hair—nor had his method of doing this changed, I saw. Bobby just held his head under the faucet for awhile then raked everything back with his fingers.

He looked at the two glass boxes and pronounced the bees and wasps back to normal. “Not that a wasps’ nest ever approaches anything even closely resembling ‘normal,’ Howie. Wasps are social insects, like bees and ants, but unlike bees, which are almost always sane, and ants, which have occasional schizoid lapses, wasps are total full-bore lunatics.” He smiled. “Just like us good old Homo saps.” He took the top off the glass box containing the beehive.

“Tell you what, Bobby,” I said. I was smiling, but the smile felt much too wide. “Put the top back on and just tell me about it, what do you say? Save the demonstration for later. I mean, my landlord’s a real

pussycat, but the super's this big bull dyke who smokes Odie Perode cigars and has thirty pounds on me. She—"

"You'll like this," Bobby said, as if I hadn't spoken at all—a habit as familiar to me as his Ten Fingers Method of Hair Grooming. He was never impolite but often totally absorbed. And could I stop him? Aw shit, no. It was too good to have him back. I mean I think I knew even then that something was going to go totally wrong, but when I was with Bobby for more than five minutes, he just hypnotized me. He was Lucy holding the football and promising me this time for sure, and I was Charlie Brown, rushing down the field to kick it. "In fact, you've probably seen it done before—they show pictures of it in magazines from time to time, or in TV wildlife documentaries. It's nothing very special, but it looks like a big deal because people have got these totally irrational prejudices about bees."

And the weird thing was, he was right—I had seen it before.

He stuck his hand into the box between the hive and the glass. In less than fifteen seconds his hand had acquired a living black-and-yellow glove. It brought back an instant of total recall: sitting in front of the TV, wearing footie pajamas and clutching my Paddington Bear, maybe half an hour before bedtime (and surely years before Bobby was born), watching with mingled horror, disgust, and fascination as some beekeeper allowed bees to cover his entire face. They had formed a sort of executioner's hood at first, and then he had brushed them into a grotesque living beard.

Bobby winced suddenly, sharply, then grinned.

"One of em stung me," he said. "They're still a little upset from the trip. I hooked a ride with the local insurance lady from La Plata to Waco—she's got an old Piper Cub—and flew some little commuter airline, Air Asshole, I think it was, up to New Orleans from there. Made about forty connections, but I swear to God it was the cab ride from LaGarbage that got em crazy. Second Avenue's still got more potholes than the Bergenstrasse after the Germans surrendered."

“You know, I think you really ought to get your hand out of there, Bobs,” I said. I kept waiting for some of them to fly out—I could imagine chasing them around with a rolled-up magazine for hours, bringing them down one by one, as if they were escapees in some old prison movie. But none of them had escaped... at least so far.

“Relax, Howie. You ever see a bee sting a flower? Or even hear of it, for that matter?”

“You don’t look like a flower.”

He laughed. “Shit, you think bees know what a flower looks like? Un-uh! No way, man! They don’t know what a flower looks like any more than you or I know what a cloud sounds like. They know I’m sweet because I excrete sucrose dioxin in my sweat ... along with thirty-seven other dioxins, and those’re just the ones we know about.”

He paused thoughtfully.

“Although I must confess I was careful to, uh, sweeten myself up a little tonight. Ate a box of chocolate-covered cherries on the plane—”

“Oh Bobby, Jesus!”

“—and had a couple of MallowCremes in the taxi coming here.”

He reached in with his other hand and carefully began to brush the bees away. I saw him wince once more just before he got the last of them off, and then he eased my mind considerably by replacing the lid on the glass box. I saw a red swelling on each of his hands: one in the cup of the left palm, another high up on the right, near what the palmists call the Bracelets of Fortune. He’d been stung, but I saw well enough what he’d set out to show me: what looked like at least four hundred bees had investigated him. Only two had stung.

He took a pair of tweezers out of his jeans watch-pocket, and went over to my desk. He moved the pile of manuscript beside the Wang Micro I was using in those days and trained my Tensor lamp on the

place where the pages had been—fiddling with it until it formed a tiny hard spotlight on the cherry wood.

“Writin anything good, Bowwow?” he asked casually, and I felt the hair stiffen on the back of my neck. When was the last time he’d called me Bowwow? When he was four? Six? Shit, man, I don’t know. He was working carefully on his left hand with the tweezers. I saw him extract a tiny something that looked like a nostril hair and place it in my ashtray.

“Piece on art forgery for Vanity Fair,” I said. “Bobby, what in hell are you up to this time?”

“You want to pull the other one for me?” he asked, offering me the tweezers, his right hand, and an apologetic smile. “I keep thinking if I’m so goddam smart I ought to be ambidextrous, but my left hand has still got an IQ of about six.”

Same old Bobby.

I sat down beside him, took the tweezers, and pulled the bee stinger out of the red swelling near what in his case should have been the Bracelets of Doom, and while I did it he told me about the differences between bees and wasps, the difference between the water in La Plata and the water in New York, and how, goddam! everything was going to be all right with his water and a little help from me.

And oh shit, I ended up running at the football while my laughing, wildly intelligent brother held it, one last time.

*

“Bees don’t sting unless they have to, because it kills them,” Bobby said matter-of-factly. “You remember that time in North Conway, when you said we kept killing each other because of original sin?”

“Yes. Hold still.”

“Well, if there is such a thing, if there’s a God who could simultaneously love us enough to serve us His own Son on a cross and send us all on a rocket-sled to hell just because one stupid bitch bit a bad apple, then the curse was just this: He made us like wasps instead of bees. Shit, Howie, what are you doing?”

“Hold still,” I said, “and I’ll get it out. If you want to make a lot of big gestures, I’ll wait.”

“Okay,” he said, and after that he held relatively still while I extracted the stinger. “Bees are nature’s kamikaze pilots, Bowwow. Look in that glass box, you’ll see the two who stung me lying dead at the bottom. Their stingers are barbed, like fishhooks. They slide in easy. When they pull out, they disembowel themselves.”

“Gross,” I said, dropping the second stinger in the ashtray. I couldn’t see the barbs, but I didn’t have a microscope.

“It makes them particular, though,” he said.

“I bet.”

“Wasps, on the other hand, have smooth stingers. They can shoot you up as many times as they like. They use up the poison by the third or fourth shot, but they can go right on making holes if they like ... and usually they do. Especially wall-wasps. The kind I’ve got over there. You gotta sedate em. Stuff called Noxon. It must give em a hell of a hangover, because they wake up madder than ever.”

He looked at me somberly, and for the first time I saw the dark brown wheels of weariness under his eyes and realized my kid brother was more tired than I had ever seen him.

“That’s why people go on fighting, Bowwow. On and on and on. We got smooth stingers. Now watch this.”

He got up, went over to his tote-bag, rummaged in it, and came up with an eye-dropper. He opened the mayonnaise jar, put the dropper

in, and drew up a tiny bubble of his distilled Texas water.

When he took it over to the glass box with the wasps' nest inside, I saw the top on this one was different—there was a tiny plastic slide-piece set into it. I didn't need him to draw me a picture: with the bees, he was perfectly willing to remove the whole top. With the wasps, he was taking no chances.

He squeezed the black bulb. Two drops of water fell onto the nest, making a momentary dark spot that disappeared almost at once. "Give it about three minutes," he said.

"What—"

"No questions," he said. "You'll see. Three minutes."

In that period, he read my piece on art forgery ... although it was already twenty pages long.

"Okay," he said, putting the pages down. "That's pretty good, man. You ought to read up a little on how Jay Gould furnished the parlor-car of his private train with fake Manets, though—that's a hoot." He was removing the cover of the glass box containing the wasps' nest as he spoke.

"Jesus, Bobby, cut the comedy!" I yelled.

"Same old wimp," Bobby laughed, and pulled the nest, which was dull gray and about the size of a bowling ball, out of the box. He held it in his hands. Wasps flew out and lit on his arms, his cheeks, his forehead. One flew across to me and landed on my forearm. I slapped it and it fell dead to the carpet. I was scared—I mean really scared. My body was wired with adrenaline and I could feel my eyes trying to push their way out of their sockets.

"Don't kill em," Bobby said. "You might as well be killing babies, for all the harm they can do you. That's the whole point." He tossed the nest from hand to hand as if it were an overgrown softball. He lobbed

it in the air. I watched, horrified, as wasps cruised the living room of my apartment like fighter planes on patrol.

Bobby lowered the nest carefully back into the box and sat down on my couch. He patted the place next to him and I went over, nearly hypnotized. They were everywhere: on the rug, the ceiling, the drapes. Half a dozen of them were crawling across the front of my big-screen TV.

Before I could sit down, he brushed away a couple that were on the sofa cushion where my ass was aimed. They flew away quickly. They were all flying easily, crawling easily, moving fast. There was nothing drugged about their behavior. As Bobby talked, they gradually found their way back to their spit-paper home, crawled over it, and eventually disappeared inside again through the hole in the top.

“I wasn’t the first one to get interested in Waco,” he said. “It just happens to be the biggest town in the funny little nonviolent section of what is, per capita, the most violent state in the union. Texans love to shoot each other, Howie—I mean, it’s like a state hobby. Half the male population goes around armed. Saturday night in the Fort Worth bars is like a shooting gallery where you get to plonk away at drunks instead of clay ducks. There are more NRA card-carriers than there are Methodists. Not that Texas is the only place where people shoot each other, or carve each other up with straight-razors, or stick their kids in the oven if they cry too long, you understand, but they sure do like their firearms.”

“Except in Waco,” I said.

“Oh, they like em there, too,” he said. “It’s just that they use em on each other a hell of a lot less often.”

*

Jesus. I just looked up at the clock and saw the time. It feels like I’ve been writing for fifteen minutes or so, but it’s actually been over an

hour. That happens to me sometimes when I'm running at white-hot speed, but I can't allow myself to be seduced into these specifics. I feel as well as ever—no noticeable drying of the membranes in the throat, no groping for words, and as I glance back over what I've done I see only the normal typos and strikeouts. But I can't kid myself. I've got to hurry up. "Fiddle-de-dee," said Scarlett, and all of that.

The nonviolent atmosphere of the Waco area had been noticed and investigated before, mostly by sociologists. Bobby said that when you fed enough statistical data on Waco and similar areas into a computer—population density, mean age, mean economic level, mean educational level, and dozens of other factors—what you got back was a whopper of an anomaly. Scholarly papers are rarely jocular, but even so, several of the better than fifty Bobby had read on the subject suggested ironically that maybe it was "something in the water."

"I decided maybe it was time to take the joke seriously," Bobby said. "After all, there's something in the water of a lot of places that prevents tooth decay. It's called fluoride."

He went to Waco accompanied by a trio of research assistants: two sociology grad-students and a full professor of geology who happened to be on sabbatical and ready for adventure. Within six months, Bobby and the sociology guys had constructed a computer program which illustrated what my brother called the world's only calmquake. He had a slightly rumpled printout in his tote. He gave it to me. I was looking at a series of forty concentric rings. Waco was in the eighth, ninth, and tenth as you moved in toward the center.

"Now look at this," he said, and put a transparent overlay on the printout. More rings; but in each one there was a number. Fortieth ring: 471. Thirty-ninth: 420. Thirty-eighth: 418. And so on. In a couple of places the numbers went up instead of down, but only in a couple (and only by a little).

"What are they?"

“Each number represents the incidence of violent crime in that particular circle,” Bobby said. “Murder, rape, assault and battery, even acts of vandalism. The computer assigns a number by a formula that takes population density into account.” He tapped the twenty-seventh circle, which held the number 204, with his finger. “There’s less than nine hundred people in this whole area, for instance. The number represents three or four cases of spouse abuse, a couple of barroom brawls, an act of animal cruelty—some senile farmer got pissed at a pig and shot a load of rock-salt into it, as I recall—and one involuntary manslaughter.”

I saw that the numbers in the central circles dropped off radically: 85, 81, 70, 63, 40, 21, 5. At the epicenter of Bobby’s calmquake was the town of La Plata. To call it a sleepy little town seems more than fair.

The numeric value assigned to La Plata was zero.

“So here it is, Bowwow,” Bobby said, leaning forward and rubbing his long hands together nervously, “my nominee for the Garden of Eden. Here’s a community of fifteen thousand, twenty-four per cent of which are people of mixed blood, commonly called Indios. There’s a moccasin factory, a couple of little motor courts, a couple of scrub farms. That’s it for work. For play there’s four bars, a couple of dance-halls where you can hear any kind of music you want as long as it sounds like George Jones, two drive-ins, and a bowling alley.” He paused and added, “There’s also a still. I didn’t know anybody made whiskey that good outside of Tennessee.”

In short (and it is now too late to be anything else), La Plata should have been a fertile breeding-ground for the sort of casual violence you can read about in the Police Blotter section of the local newspaper every day. Should have been but wasn’t. There had been only one murder in La Plata during the five years previous to my brother’s arrival, two cases of assault, no rapes, no reported incidents of child abuse. There had been four armed robberies, but all four turned out to have been committed by transients ... as the murder and one of the assaults had been. The local Sheriff was a fat old Republican who did a pretty fair Rodney Dangerfield imitation.

He had been known, in fact, to spend whole days in the local coffee shop, tugging the knot in his tie and telling people to take his wife, please. My brother said he thought it was a little more than lame humor; he was pretty sure the poor guy was suffering first-stage Alzheimer's Disease. His only deputy was his nephew. Bobby told me the nephew looked quite a lot like Junior Samples on the old Hee-Haw show.

"Put those two guys in a Pennsylvania town similar to La Plata in every way but the geographical," Bobby said, "and they would have been out on their asses fifteen years ago. But in La Plata, they're gonna go on until they die ... which they'll probably do in their sleep."

"What did you do?" I asked. "How did you proceed?"

"Well, for the first week or so after we got our statistical shit together, we just sort of sat around and stared at each other," Bobby said. "I mean, we were prepared for something, but nothing quite like this. Even Waco doesn't prepare you for La Plata." Bobby shifted restlessly and cracked his knuckles.

"Jesus, I hate it when you do that," I said.

He smiled. "Sorry, Bowwow. Anyway, we started geological tests, then microscopic analysis of the water. I didn't expect a hell of a lot; everyone in the area has got a well, usually a deep one, and they get their water tested regularly to make sure they're not drinking borax, or something. If there had been something obvious, it would have turned up a long time ago. So we went on to submicroscopy, and that was when we started to turn up some pretty weird stuff."

"What kind of weird stuff?"

"Breaks in chains of atoms, subdynamic electrical fluctuations, and some sort of unidentified protein. Water ain't really H₂O, you know—not when you add in the sulfides, irons, God knows what else happens to be in the aquifer of a given region. And La Plata water—you'd have to give it a string of letters like the ones after a professor

emeritus's name." His eyes gleamed. "But the protein was the most interesting thing, Bowwow. So far as we know, it's only found in one other place: the human brain."

*

Uh-oh.

It just arrived, between one swallow and the next: the throat-dryness. Not much as yet, but enough for me to break away and get a glass of ice-water. I've got maybe forty minutes left. And oh Jesus, there's so much I want to tell! About the wasps' nests they found with wasps that wouldn't sting, about the fender-bender Bobby and one of his assistants saw where the two drivers, both male, both drunk, and both about twenty-four (sociological bull moose, in other words), got out, shook hands, and exchanged insurance information amicably before going into the nearest bar for another drink.

Bobby talked for hours—more hours than I have. But the upshot was simple: the stuff in the mayonnaise jar.

"We've got our own still in La Plata now," he said. "This is the stuff we're brewing, Howie; pacifist white lightning. The aquifer under that area of Texas is deep but amazingly large; it's like this incredible Lake Victoria driven into the porous sediment which overlays the Moho. The water is potent, but we've been able to make the stuff I squirted on the wasps even more potent. We've got damn near six thousand gallons now, in these big steel tanks. By the end of the year, we'll have fourteen thousand. By next June we'll have thirty thousand. But it's not enough. We need more, we need it faster ... and then we need to transport it."

"Transport it where?" I asked him.

"Borneo, to start with."

I thought I'd either lost my mind or misheard him. I really did.

“Look, Bowwow ... sorry. Howie.” He was scrumming through his tote-bag again. He brought out a number of aerial photographs and handed them over to me. “You see?” he asked as I looked through them. “You see how fucking perfect it is? It’s as if God Himself suddenly busted through our business-as-usual transmissions with something like ‘And now we bring you a special bulletin! This is your last chance, assholes! And now we return you to Days of Our Lives.’”

“I don’t get you,” I said. “And I have no idea what I’m looking at.” Of course I knew; it was an island—not Borneo itself but an island lying to the west of Borneo identified as Gulantio—with a mountain in the middle and a lot of muddy little villages lying on its lower slopes. It was hard to see the mountain because of the cloud cover. What I meant was that I didn’t know what I was looking for.

“The mountain has the same name as the island,” he said.
“Gulantio. In the local patois it means grace, or fate, or destiny, or take your pick. But Duke Rogers says it’s really the biggest time-bomb on earth ... and it’s wired to go off by October of next year. Probably earlier.”

*

The crazy thing’s this: the story’s only crazy if you try to tell it in a speed-rap, which is what I’m trying to do now. Bobby wanted me to help him raise somewhere between six hundred thousand and a million and a half dollars to do the following: first, to synthesize fifty to seventy thousand gallons of what he called “the high-test”; second, to airlift all of this water to Borneo, which had landing facilities (you could land a hang-glider on Gulantio, but that was about all); third, to ship it over to this island named Fate, or Destiny, or Grace; fourth, to truck it up the slope of the volcano, which had been dormant (save for a few puffs in 1938) since 1804, and then to drop it down the muddy tube of the volcano’s caldera. Duke Rogers was actually John Paul Rogers, the geology professor. He claimed that Gulantio was going to do more than just erupt; he claimed that it was going to explode, as Krakatoa had done in the nineteenth

century, creating a bang that would make the Squirt Bomb that poisoned London look like a kid's firecracker.

The debris from the Krakatoa blow-up, Bobby told me, had literally encircled the globe; the observed results had formed an important part of the Sagan Group's nuclear winter theory. For three months afterward sunsets and sunrises half a world away had been grotesquely colorful as a result of the ash whirling around in both the jet stream and the Van Allen Currents, which lie forty miles below the Van Allen Belt. There had been global changes in climate which lasted five years, and nipa palms, which previously had grown only in eastern Africa and Micronesia, suddenly showed up in both South and North America.

"The North American nipas all died before 1900," Bobby said, "but they're alive and well below the equator. Krakatoa seeded them there, Howie... the way I want to seed La Plata water all over the earth. I want people to go out in La Plata water when it rains—and it's going to rain a lot after Gulandio goes bang. I want them to drink the La Plata water that falls in their reservoirs, I want them to wash their hair in it, bathe in it, soak their contact lenses in it. I want whores to douche in it."

"Bobby," I said, knowing he was not, "you're crazy."

He gave me a crooked, tired grin. "I ain't crazy," he said. "You want to see crazy? Turn on CNN, Bow ... Howie. You'll see crazy in living color."

*

But I didn't need to turn on Cable News (what a friend of mine had taken to calling The Organ-Grinder of Doom) to know what Bobby was talking about. The Indians and the Pakistanis were poised on the brink. The Chinese and the Afghans, ditto. Half of Africa was starving, the other half on fire with AIDS. There had been border skirmishes along the entire Tex-Mex border in the last five years, since Mexico went Communist, and people had started calling the

Tijuana crossing point in California Little Berlin because of the wall. The saber-rattling had become a din. On the last day of the old year the Scientists for Nuclear Responsibility had set their black clock to fifteen seconds before midnight.

“Bobby, let’s suppose it could be done and everything went according to schedule,” I said. “It probably couldn’t and wouldn’t, but let’s suppose. You don’t have the slightest idea what the long-term effects might be.”

He started to say something and I waved it away.

“Don’t even suggest that you do, because you don’t! You’ve had time to find this calmquake of yours and isolate the cause, I’ll give you that. But did you ever hear about thalidomide? That nifty little acne-stopper and sleeping pill that caused cancer and heart attacks in thirty-year-olds? Don’t you remember the AIDS vaccine in 1997?”

“Howie?”

“That one stopped the disease, except it turned the test subjects into incurable epileptics who all died within eighteen months.”

“Howie?”

“Then there was—”

“Howie?”

I stopped and looked at him.

“The world,” Bobby said, and then stopped. His throat worked. I saw he was struggling with tears. “The world needs heroic measures, man. I don’t know about long-term effects, and there’s no time to study them, because there’s no long-term prospect. Maybe we can cure the whole mess. Or maybe—”

He shrugged, tried to smile, and looked at me with shining eyes from which two single tears slowly tracked.

“Or maybe we’re giving heroin to a patient with terminal cancer. Either way, it’ll stop what’s happening now. It’ll end the world’s pain.” He spread out his hands, palms up, so I could see the stings on them. “Help me, Bowwow. Please help me.”

So I helped him.

And we fucked up. In fact I think you could say we fucked up big-time. And do you want the truth? I don’t give a shit. We killed all the plants, but at least we saved the greenhouse. Something will grow here again, someday. I hope.

Are you reading this?

*

My gears are starting to get a little sticky. For the first time in years I’m having to think about what I’m doing. The motor-movements of writing. Should have hurried more at the start.

Never mind. Too late to change things now.

We did it, of course: distilled the water, flew it in, transported it to Gulandio, built a primitive lifting system—half motor-winch and half cog railway—up the side of the volcano, and dropped over twelve thousand five-gallon containers of La Plata water—the brain-buster version—into the murky misty depths of the volcano’s caldera. We did all of this in just eight months. It didn’t cost six hundred thousand dollars, or a million and a half; it cost over four million, still less than a sixteenth of one per cent of what America spent on defense that year. You want to know how we razed it? I’d tell you if I had more thyme, but my head’s falling apart so never mend. I raised most of it myself if it matters to you. Some by hoof and some by croof. Tell you the truth, I din’t know I could do it muself until I did. But we did it and somehow the world held together and that volcano—whatever its name wuz, I can’t exactly remember now and there izzunt time to go back over the manuscript—it blue just when it was spo

*

Wait

*

Okay. A little better. Digitalin. Bobby had it. Heart's beating like crazy but I can think again.

The volcano—Mount Grace, we called it—blue just when Dook Rogers said it would. Everything when skihi and for awhile everyone's attention turned away from whatever and toward the skys. And bimmel-dee-dee, said Strapless!

It happened pretty fast like sex and checks and special effex and everybody got healthy again. I mean

wait

*

Jesus please let me finish this.

I mean that everybody stood down. Everybody started to get a little purstective on the situation. The wurld started to get like the wasps in Bobbys nest the one he showed me where they didn't stink too much. There was three yerz like an Indian sumer. People getting together like in that old Youngbloods song that went cmon everybody get together rite now, like what all the hippeez wanted, you no, peets and luv and

wt

*

Big blast. Feel like my heart is coming out thru my ears. But if I concentrate every bit of my force, my concentration—

*

It was like an Indian summer, that's what I meant to say, like three years of Indian summer. Bobby went on with his resurch. La Plata. Sociological background *etc.* You remember the local Sheriff? Fat old Republican with a good Rodney Youngblood imitashun? How Bobby said he had the preliminary simptoms of Rodney's Disease?

*

concentrate asshole

*

Wasn't just him; turned out like there was a lot of that going around in that part of Texas. All's Hallows Disease is what I mean. For three yerz me and Bobby were down there. Created a new program. New graff of circkles. I saw what was happen and came back here. Bobby and his to asistants stayed on. One shot hissself Boby said when he showed up here.

Wait one more blas

*

All right. Last time. Heart beating so fast I can hardly breathe. The new graph, the last graph, really only whammed you when it was laid over the calmquake graph. The calmquake graph showed an axis of violence going down as you approached La Plata in the middle; the Alzheimer's graph showed incidence of premature senility going up as you approached La Plata. People there were getting very silly very young.

Me and Bobo were careful as we could be for next three years, drink only Parrier Water and wear big long sleekers in the rain. So no war and when everybody started to get seely we did and I came back here because he my brother I can't remember what his name

Bobby

Bobby when he came here tonight cryeen and I sed Bobby I luv you
Bobby sed lme sorry Bowwow lme sorry I made the hole world ful of
foals and dumbbels and I sed better fouls and bells than a big black
sinder in spaz and he cryed and I cryed Bobby I luv you and he sed
will you give me a shot of the spacial wadder and I sed yez and he
said wil you ride it down and I sed yez an I think I did but I cant reely
remember I see wurds but dont no what they mean

I have a Bobby his nayme is bruther and I theen I an dun riding and I
have a bocks to put this into thats Bobby sd full of quiyet air to last a
milyun yrz so gudboy gudboy everybrother, Im goin to stob gudboy
bobby i love you it wuz not yor falt i love you

forgivyyu

love yu

sinned (for the wurld),

AN EVENING AT GOD'S

Stephen King

A one-minute play

DARK STAGE. Then a spotlight hits a papier-mache globe, spinning all by itself in the middle of darkness. Little by little, the stage lights COME UP, and we see a bare-stage representation of a living room: an easy chair with a table beside it (there's an open bottle of beer on the table), and a console TV

across the room. There's a picnic cooler-full of beer under the table. Also, a great many empties. GOD is feeling pretty good. At stage left, there's a door.

GOD - a big guy with a white beard - is sitting in the chair, alternately reading a book (When Bad Things Happen to Good People) and watching the tube. He has to crane whenever he wants to look at the set, because the floating globe (actually hung on a length of string, I imagine) is in his line of vision.

There's a sitcom on TV. Every now and then GOD chuckles along with the laugh-track.

There is a knock at the door.

GOD (big amplified voice)

Come in! Verily, it is open unto you!

The door opens. In comes ST. PETER, dressed in a snazzy white robe. He's also carrying a briefcase.

GOD

Peter! I thought you were on vacation!

ST. PETER

Leaving in half an hour, but I thought I'd bring the papers for you to sign.

How are you, GOD?

GOD

Better. I should know better than to eat those chili peppers. They burn me at both ends. Are those the letters of transmission from hell?

An Evening at GOD's

ST. PETER

Yes, finally. Thank GOD. Excuse the pun.

He removes some papers from his briefcase. GOD scans them, then holds out his hand impatiently, ST

PETER has been looking at the floating globe. He looks back, sees GOD is waiting, and puts a pen in his out-stretched hand. GOD scribbles his signature. As he does, ST. PETER goes back to gazing at the globe.

ST. PETER

So Earth's still there, Huh? After All these years.

GOD hands the papers back and looks up at it. His gaze is rather irritated.

GOD

Yes, the housekeeper is the most forgetful bitch in the universe.

An EXPLOSION OF LAUGHTER from the TV. GOD cranes to see.
Too late.

GOD

Damm, was that Alan Alda?

ST. PETER

It may have been, sir - I really couldn't see.

GOD

Me, either.

He leans forward and crushes the floating globe to powder.

GOD (inmensely satisfied)

There. Been meaning to do that for a long time. Now I can see the TV..

ST. PETER looks sadly at the crushed remains of the earth.

An Evening at GOD's

ST. PETER

Umm... I believe that was alan Alda's world, GOD.

GOD

So? (Chuckles at the TV) Robin Williams! I LOVE Robin Williams!

ST. PETER

I believe both Alda and Williams Were on it when you..umm...
passed Judgement, sir.

GOD

Oh, I've got all the videotapes. No problem. Want a beer?

As ST. PETER takes one, the stage-lights begin to dim. A spotlight come up on the remains on the globe.

ST. PETER

I actually sort of liked that one, GOD - Earth, I mean.

GOD

It wasn't bad, but there's more where that came from. Now - let's
Drink to your vacation!

They are just shadows in the dimness now, although it's a little
easier to see GOD, because there's a faint nimbus of light around
his head. They clink bottles. A roar of laughter from the TV.

GOD

Look! It's Richard Pryor! That guy kills me! I suppose he was...

ST. PETER

Ummm... yessir.

GOD

Shit. (Pause) Maybe I better cut Down on my drinking. (Pause)
Still... It WAS in the way.

An Evening at GOD's

Fade to black, except for the spotlight on the ruins of the floating globe.

ST. PETER

Yessir.

GOD (muttering)

My son got back, didn't he?

ST. PETER

Yessir, some time ago.

GOD

Good. Everything's hunky-dory, then.

THE SPOTLIGHT GOES OUT.

(Author's note: GOD'S VOICE should be as loud as possible.)

THE FIFTH QUARTER

Stephen King

I parked the heap around the corner from Keenan's house, sat in the dark for a moment, then turned off the key and got out. When I slammed the door, I could hear rust flaking off the rocker panels and dropping onto the street. It wasn't going to be like that much longer.

The gun was in a bandolier holster and lay against my ribcage like a fist. It was Barney's .45, and I was glad of that. It lent the whole crazy business a touch of irony. Maybe even a sense of justice.

Keenan's house was an architectural monstrosity spread over a quarter-acre of land, all slanting angles and steep-sloped roofs behind an iron fence. He'd left the gate unlocked, as I'd hoped. Earlier I'd seen him calling someone from the living room, and a hunch too strong to deny told me it had been either Jagger or the Sarge. Probably the Sarge. The waiting was over; this was my night.

I walked to the driveway, staying close to the shrubbery and listening for any strange sound over the cutting whine of the January wind. There wasn't any. It was Friday night, and Keenan's sleepin' maid would be out having a jolly time at somebody's Tupperware party. Nobody home but that bastard Keenan. Waiting for the Sarge. Waiting—although he didn't know it yet—for me.

The carport was open and I slipped inside. The ebony shadow of Keenan's Impala loomed. I tried the back door. The car was also open. Keenan wasn't cut out to be a villain, I reflected; he was much too trusting. I got in the car, sat down, and waited.

Now I could hear the faint sound of jazz on the wind, very quiet, very good. Miles Davis, maybe. Keenan listening to Miles Davis and holding a gin fizz in one manicured hand. Nice for him.

It was a long wait. The hands on my watch crawled from eight-thirty to nine to ten. Time for a lot of thinking. I mostly thought about Barney, and that wasn't strictly a matter of choice. I thought about how he looked in that small boat when I found him, staring up at me and making meaningless cawing noises. He'd been adrift for two

days and looked like a boiled lobster. There was black blood encrusted across his midsection where he'd been shot.

He'd steered toward the cottage as best he could, but still it had been mostly luck. Lucky he'd gotten there, lucky he could still talk for a little while. I'd had a fistful of sleeping pills ready if he couldn't talk. I didn't want him to suffer. Not unless there was a reason for it, anyway. As it turned out, there was. He had a story to tell, a real whopper, and he told me almost all of it.

When he was dead, I went back to the boat and got his .45. It was hidden aft in a small compartment, wrapped in a waterproof pouch. Then I towed his boat out into deep water and sank it. If I could have put an epitaph over his head, it would have been the one about how there's a sucker born every minute. Most of them are pretty nice guys, too, I bet—just like Barney. Instead, I started trying to find the men who capped him. It had taken six months to find Keenan and to ascertain that Sarge was, at least, somewhere close by, but I'm a persistent little pup, and here I was.

At ten-twenty, headlights splashed up the curving driveway and I lay on the floor of the Impala. The newcomer drove into the carport, snuggling up close to Keenan's car. It sounded like one of the old Volkswagens. The little engine died and I could hear Sarge grunting softly as he fought his way out of the little car. The porch light went on, and the sound of the door clicking open came to me.

Keenan: "Sarge! You're late! Come on in and have a drink."

Sarge: "Scotch."

I'd unrolled the window before. Now I stuck Barney's .45 through it, holding the stock with both hands. "Stand still," I said.

The Sarge was halfway up the porch steps. Keenan, the perfect host, had come out and was looking down at him, waiting for him to come up so he could after-you him into the house. They were both perfect silhouettes in the light spilling through from inside. I doubted

if they could see much of me in the dark, but they could see the gun. It was a big gun.

“Who the hell are you?” Keenan asked.

“Jerry Tarkanian,” I said. “Move and I’ll put a hole in you big enough to watch television through.”

“You sound like a punk,” Sarge said. He didn’t move, though.

“Just don’t move. That’s all you’ve got to worry about.” I opened the Impala’s back door and got out carefully. The Sarge was staring at me over his shoulder and I could see the glitter of his little eyes. One hand was creeping up the lapel of his 1943-model double-breasted suit.

“Oh, please,” I said. “Get your fucking hands up, asshole.”

The Sarge put his hands up. Keenan’s already were.

“Come down to the foot of the steps. Both of you.”

They came down, and out of the direct glare of the light I could see their faces. Keenan looked scared, but the Sarge might have been listening to a lecture on Zen and the art of motorcycle maintenance. He was probably the one who had jobbed Barney.

“Face the wall and lean on it. Both of you.”

Keenan: “If you’re after money ...”

I laughed. “Well, I was going to start off by offering you a cut-rate deal on Tupperware, work my way up to the big stuff gradually, but you saw through me. Yeah, I’m after money. Four hundred and eighty thousand dollars, actually. Buried on a little island off Bar Harbor called Carmen’s Folly.”

Keenan jerked as if he’d been shot, but the Sarge’s dipped-in-concrete face never twitched. He turned around and put his hands

on the wall, leaning his weight on them. Keenan reluctantly followed suit. I frisked him first and got a stupid little .32 with a three-inch barrel. A gun like that, you could put the muzzle against a guy's head and still miss when you pulled the trigger. I threw it over my shoulder and heard it bounce off one of the cars. Sarge was clean—and it was a relief to step away from him.

“We’re going into the house. You first, Keenan, then Sarge, then me. Without incident, okay?”

We all trooped up the steps and into the kitchen. It was one of those germless chrome-and-tile jobs that looks like it was spit whole out of some mass-production womb in the Midwest somewhere, the work of hearty Methodist assholes who all look like Mr. Goodwrench and smell like Cherry Blend tobacco. I doubt if it ever needed anything so vulgar as cleaning; Keenan probably just closed the doors and turned on the hidden sprinklers once a week.

I paraded them through into the living room, another treat for the eyes. It had apparently been done by a pansy decorator who never got over his crush on Ernest Hemingway. There was a flagstone fireplace almost as big as an elevator car, a teak buffet table with a moosehead mounted above it, and a drinks cart stashed below a gunrack loaded with premium artillery. The stereo had turned itself off.

I waved the gun at the couch. “One on each end.”

They sat, Keenan on the right, Sarge on the left. The Sarge looked even bigger sitting down. An ugly, dented scar twisted its way through his slightly overgrown crewcut. I put his weight at about two-thirty, and wondered why a man with the size and physical presence of Mike Tyson owned a Volkswagen.

I grabbed an easy chair and dragged it over Keenan’s quicksand-colored rug until it was in front and between them. I sat down and let the .45 rest on my thigh. Keenan stared at it like a bird stares at a

snake. The Sarge, on the other hand, was staring at me like he was the snake and I was the bird. “Now what?” he asked.

“Let’s talk about maps and money,” I said.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Sarge said. “All I know is that little boys shouldn’t play with guns.”

“How’s Cappy MacFarland these days?” I asked casually.

It didn’t get jack shit from the Sarge, but Keenan popped his cork. “He knows. He knows!” The words shot out of him like bullets.

“Shut up!” the Sarge told him. “Shut up your goddam trap!”

Keenan moaned a little. This was one part of the scenario he had never imagined. I smiled. “He’s right, Sarge.” I said. “I know. Almost all of it.”

“Who are you?”

“No one you know. A friend of Barney’s.”

“Barney who?” Sarge asked indifferently. “Barney Google, with the goo-goo-googly eyes?”

“He wasn’t dead, Sarge. Not quite dead.”

Sarge turned a slow and murderous look on Keenan. Keenan shuddered and opened his mouth. “Don’t talk,” Sarge said to him. “Not one fucking word. I’ll snap your neck like a chicken if you do.”

Keenan’s mouth shut with a snap.

Sarge looked at me again. “What does almost all of it mean?”

“Everything but the fine details. I know about the armored car. The island. Cappy MacFarland. How you and Keenan and some bastard named Jagger killed Barney. And the map. I know about that.”

“It wasn’t the way he told you,” Sarge said. “He was going to cross us.”

“He couldn’t cross the street,” I said. “He was just a patsy who could drive.”

He shrugged; it was like watching a minor earthquake. “Okay. Be as dumb as you look.”

“I knew Barney had something on as early as last March. I just didn’t know what. And then one night he had a gun. This gun. How did you connect with him, Sarge?”

“A mutual friend—someone who did time with him. We needed a driver who knew eastern Maine and the Bar Harbor area. Keenan and I went to see him and laid it out for him. He liked it.”

“I did time with him in the Shank,” I said. “I liked him. You couldn’t help but like him. He was dumb, but he was a good kid. He needed a keeper more than a partner.”

“George and Lennie,” Sarge sneered.

“Good to know you spent your own jail time improving what passes for your mind, sweetheart,” I said. “We were thinking about a bank in Lewiston. He couldn’t wait for me to finish doping it out. So now he’s underground.”

“Jeepers, this is really sad,” Sarge said. “I’m gettin, like, all soft and mushy inside.”

I picked up the gun and showed him the muzzle, and for a second or two he was the bird and it was the snake. “One more wisecrack and I’ll put a bullet in your belly. Do you believe that?”

His tongue flickered in and out with startling quickness, lapped across his lower lip, and disappeared again. He nodded. Keenan was frozen. He looked like he wanted to retch but didn’t quite dare.

“He told me it was big time, a big score,” I resumed. “That’s all I could get out of him. He took off on April third. Two days later four guys knock over the Portland-Bangor Federated truck just outside of Carmel. All three guards dead. The newspapers said the robbers ran two roadblocks in a souped-up ‘78 Plymouth. Barney had a ‘78 up on blocks, thinking about turning it into a stocker. I’m betting Keenan put up the front money for him to turn it into something a little better and a lot faster.”

I looked at him. Keenan’s face was the color of cheese.

“On May sixth I get a card postmarked Bar Harbor, but that doesn’t mean anything—there are dozens of little islands that channel their mail through there. A mailboat does the circuit, picks it up. The card says: ‘Mom and family fine, store doing good. See you in July.’ It was signed with Barney’s middle name. I leased a cottage on the coast, because Barney knew that would be the deal. July comes and goes, no Barney.”

“Musta had a terminal hard-on by then, kid, right?” Sarge said. I guess he wanted me to be sure I hadn’t buffaloed him.

I looked at him remotely. “He showed up in early August. Courtesy of your buddy Keenan, Sarge. He forgot about the automatic bilge pump in the boat. You thought the chop would sink it quick enough, right, Keenan? But you thought he was dead, too. I had a yellow blanket spread out on Frenchman’s Point every day. Visible for miles. Easy to spot. Still, he was lucky.”

“Too lucky,” Sarge almost spat.

“One thing I’m curious about—did he know before the job that the money was new, all the serial numbers recorded? That you couldn’t even sell it to a currency-junker in the Bahamas for three or four years?”

“He knew,” the Sarge rumbled, and I was surprised to find myself believing him. “And nobody was planning to junk the dough. He

knew that, too, kid. I think he was counting on that Lewiston job you mentioned for ready cash, but whatever he was or wasn't counting on, he knew the score and said he could live with it. Christ, why not? Say we had to wait ten years to go back for that dough and split it up. What's ten years to a kid like Barney? Shit, he would have been all of thirty-five. I'd be sixty-one."

"What about Cappy MacFarland? Did Barney know about him, too?"

"Yes. Cappy came with the deal. A good man. A pro. He got cancer last year. Inoperable. And he owed me a favor."

"So the four of you went out to Cappy's island," I said. "A little nobody-on-it named Carmen's Folly. Cappy buried the money and made a map."

"That part was Jagger's idea," Sarge said. "We didn't want to split hot money—too tempting. But we didn't want to leave all the swag in one pair of hands, either. Cappy MacFarland was the perfect solution."

"Tell me about the map."

"I thought we'd get to that," Sarge said with a wintry smile.

"Don't tell him!" Keenan cried out hoarsely.

Sarge turned to him and gave him a look that would have melted bar steel. "Shut up. I can't lie and I can't stonewall, thanks to you. You know what I hope, Keenan? I hope you weren't really looking forward to seeing in the new century."

"Your name's in a letter," Keenan said wildly. "If anything happens to me, your name's in a letter!"

"Cappy made a good map," the Sarge said, as if Keenan were not there at all. "He had some draftsman training in Joliet. He cut it into quarters. One for each of us. We were going to have a reunion on

July fourth, five years later. Talk it over. Maybe decide to wait another five years, maybe decide to put the pieces together right then. But there was trouble.”

“Yes,” I said. “I guess that’s one way of putting it.”

“If it makes you feel any better, it was all Keenan’s play. I don’t know if Barney knew it or not, but that’s how it was. When Jagger and I took off in Cappy’s boat, Barney was fine.”

“You’re a goddam liar!” Keenan squealed.

“Who’s got two pieces of the map in his wall safe?” Sarge inquired. “Is it you, dear?”

He looked at me again.

“It was still all right. Half the map still wasn’t enough. And am I gonna sit here and say I would have preferred a four-way split to a three-way? I don’t think you’d believe it even if it was true. Then, guess what? Keenan calls. Tells me we ought to have a talk. I was expecting it. Looks like you were, too.”

I nodded. Keenan had been easier to find than the Sarge—he kept a higher profile. I could have tracked Sarge all the way down eventually, I suppose, but I’d been pretty sure that wouldn’t be necessary. Thieves of a feather flock together ... and the feathers have a tendency to fly, too, when one of the birds is a vulture like Keenan.

“Of course,” Sarge went on, “he tells me not to get any lethal ideas. Says he’s taken out an insurance policy, my name in an open-in-event-of-my-death letter he’d sent his lawyer. His idea was that the two of us could probably dope out where Cappy’d buried the money if we put three of the four pieces of the map together.”

“And split the swag fifty-fifty,” I said.

Sarge nodded. Keenan's face was like a moon drifting somewhere in a high stratosphere of terror.

"Where's the safe?" I asked him.

Keenan didn't say anything.

I had done some practicing with the .45. It was a good gun. I liked it. I held it in both hands and shot Keenan in the forearm, just below the elbow. The Sarge didn't even jump. Keenan fell off the couch and curled up in a ball, holding his arm and howling.

"The safe," I said.

Keenan continued to howl.

"I'll shoot you in the knee," I said. "I don't know from personal experience, but I've heard that hurts like a mad bastard."

"The print," he gasped. "The Van Gogh. Don't shoot me anymore, huh?" He looked at me, grinning fearfully.

I motioned to Sarge with the gun. "Stand facing the wall."

The Sarge got up and looked at the wall, arms dangling limply.

"Now you," I said to Keenan. "Go open the safe."

"I'm bleeding to death," Keenan moaned.

I went over and stroked the butt of the .45 up the side of his cheek, laying back skin. "Now you're bleeding," I told him. "Go open the safe or you'll bleed more."

Keenan got up, holding his arm and blubbering. He took the print off its hooks with his good hand, revealing an officegray wall safe. He threw a terrified glance at me and began to twiddle the dial. He made two false starts and had to go back. The third time he got it open. There were some documents and two wads of bills inside. He

reached in, fumbled around, and came up with two squares of paper, about three inches on a side.

I swear I didn't mean to kill him. I planned to tie him up and leave him. He was harmless enough; the maid would find him when she got back from her lingerie party or wherever it was she'd gone in her little Dodge Colt, and Keenan wouldn't dare poke his nose out of his house for a week. But it was like Sarge had said. He did have two. And one of them had blood on it.

I shot him again, this time not in the arm. He went down like an empty laundry bag.

Sarge didn't flinch. "I wasn't crapping you. Keenan jobbed your friend. They were both amateurs. Amateurs are stupid."

I didn't answer. I looked down at the squares and shoved them into my pocket. Neither one had an X-marks-the-spot on it.

"What now?" Sarge asked.

"We go to your place."

"What makes you think my piece of the map is there?"

"I don't know. Telepathy, maybe. Besides, if it isn't, we'll go where it is. I'm in no hurry."

"You've got all the answers, huh?"

"Let's go."

We went back out to the carport. I sat in the back of the VW, on the side away from him. His bulk and the size of the car made a surprise play on his part a joke; it would take him five minutes just to get turned around. Two minutes later we were on the road.

It was starting to snow, big, sloppy flakes that clung to the windshield and turned to instant slush when they struck the pavement. It was

slippery going, but there wasn't much traffic.

After a half hour on Route 10, he turned off onto a secondary road. Fifteen minutes later we were on a rutted dirt track with snow-freighted pines staring at us on either side. Two miles along we turned into a short, trash-littered driveway.

In the limited sweep of the VW's headlights I could make out a rickety backwoods shack with a patched roof and a twisted TV aerial. There was a snow-covered old Ford in a gully to the left. Out in back was an outhouse and a pile of old tires. Hernando's Hideaway.

"Welcome to Bally's East," Sarge said, and killed the engine.

"If this is a con, I'll kill you."

He seemed to fill three-quarters of the tiny vehicle's front seat. "I know that," he said.

"Get out."

Sarge led the way up to the front door. "Open it," I said. "Then stand still."

He opened the door and stood still. I stood still. We stood still for about three minutes, and nothing happened. The only moving thing was a fat gray squirrel that had ventured into the middle of the yard to curse us in lingua rodenta.

"Okay," I said. "Let's go in."

Surprise, it was a dump. The one sixty-watt bulb cast a grungy glow over the whole room, leaving shadows like starved bats in the corners. Newspapers were scattered helter-skelter. Drying clothes were hung on a sagging rope. In one corner there was an ancient Zenith TV. In the opposite corner was a rickety sink and a stark, rust-stained bathtub on claw feet. A hunting rifle stood beside it. The predominant odors were feet, farts, and chili.

“It beats living raw,” Sarge said.

I could have argued the point, but didn't. “Where's your piece of the map?”

“In the bedroom.”

“Let's go get it”

“Not yet.” He turned around slowly, his dipped-in-concrete face hard. “I want your word you ain't going to kill me when you get it.”

“How you going to make me keep it?”

“Fuck, I don't know. I guess I'm just gonna hope it was more than the money that got you cranked up. If it was Barney, too—wanting to clean Barney's slate—you did it, it's clean. Keenan capped him and now Keenan's dead. If you want the bundle, too, okay. Maybe three-quarters will be enough, and you were right—my piece has got a great big X on it. But you don't get it unless you promise I get something, too: my life.”

“How do I know you won't come after me?”

“But I will, sonny,” the Sarge said softly.

I laughed. “All right. Throw in Jagger's address and you've got your promise. I'll keep it, too.”

The Sarge shook his head slowly. “You don't want to play with Jagger, fella, Jagger will eat you up.”

I had dropped the .45 a little. Now I lifted it again.

“All right. He's in Coleman, Massachusetts. A ski lodge. Is that good enough?”

“Yes. Let's get your piece, Sarge.”

The Sarge looked me over once more, closely. Then he nodded. We went into the bedroom.

More Colonial charm. The stained mattress on the floor was littered with stroke-books and the walls were papered with photographs of women who appeared to be wearing nothing but a thin coating of Wesson Oil. One look at this place and Dr. Ruth's head would have exploded.

The Sarge didn't hesitate. He picked up the lamp on the night-table and pried the base off it. His quarter of the map was neatly rolled up inside; he held it out wordlessly.

"Throw it," I invited.

The Sarge smiled thinly. "Cautious little pencil-neck, aren't you?"

"I find it pays. Give it up, Sarge."

He tossed it over to me. "Easy come, easy go," he said.

"I'm going to keep my promise," I said. "Consider yourself lucky. Out in the other room."

Cold light flickered in his eyes. "What are you going to do?"

"See that you stay in one place for awhile. Move."

We went out into the main room, a nifty little parade of two. The Sarge stood underneath the naked lightbulb, back to me, his shoulders hunched, anticipating the gunbarrel that was going to groove his head very shortly. I was just lifting the gun to clout him when the light blinked out.

The shack was suddenly pitch black.

I threw myself to the right; Sarge was already gone like a cool breeze. I could hear the thump and tumble of newspapers as he hit the floor in a flat dive. Then silence. Utter and complete.

I waited for my night vision, but when it came it was no help. The place was a mausoleum in which a thousand dim tombstones loomed. And the Sarge knew every one of them.

I knew about Sarge; material on him hadn't been hard to spade up. He'd been a Green Beret in Vietnam, and no one even bothered with his real name anymore; he was just the Sarge, big and murderous and tough.

Somewhere in the dark he was moving in on me. He must have known the place like the back of his hand, because there wasn't a sound, not a squeaking board, not a foot scrape. But I could feel him getting closer and closer, flanking from the left or the right or maybe pulling a tricky one and coming in straight ahead.

The stock of the gun was very sweaty in my hand, and I had to control the urge to fire it wildly, randomly. I was very aware that I had three-quarters of the pie in my pocket. I didn't bother wondering why the lights had gone out. Not until the powerful flashlight stabbed in through the window, sweeping the floor in a wild, random pattern that just happened to catch the Sarge, frozen in a half-crouch seven feet to my left. His eyes glowed greenly in the bright cone of light, like cat's eyes.

He had a glinting razor blade in his right hand, and I suddenly remembered the way his hand had been spidering up his coat lapel in Keenan's carport.

The Sarge said one word into the flash beam. "Jagger?"

I don't know who got him first. A large-caliber pistol fired once behind the flashlight beam, and I pulled the trigger of Barney's .45 twice—pure reflex. The Sarge was thrown back against the wall with force enough to knock him out of one of his boots.

The flashlight snapped off.

I fired one shot at the window, but hit only glass. I lay on my side in the darkness and realized that I hadn't been the only one waiting around for Keenan's greed to resurface. Jagger had been waiting, too. And, although there were twelve rounds of ammunition back in my car, there was only one left in my gun.

You don't want to play with Jagger, fella, the Sarge had said, Jagger will eat you up.

I had a pretty good picture of the room in my head now. I got up in a crouch and ran, stepping over Sarge's sprawled legs and into the corner. I got into the bathtub and poked my eyes up over the edge. There was no sound, none at all. The bottom of the tub was gritty with flaked-off bathtub ring. I waited.

About five minutes went by. It seemed like five hours.

Then the light flicked on again, this time in the bedroom window. I ducked my head when it glared through the doorway. It probed briefly and clicked off.

Silence again. A long, loud silence. On the dirty surface of Sarge's porcelain bathtub I saw everything. Keenan, grinning desperately. Barney, with the clotted hole in his gut, due east of his navel. Sarge, standing frozen in the flashlight beam, holding the razor blade professionally between thumb and first finger. Jagger, the dark shadow with no face. And me. The fifth quarter.

Suddenly there was a voice, just outside the door. It was soft and cultured, almost womanish, but not effete. It sounded deadly and competent as hell.

"Hey, beautiful."

I kept quiet. He wasn't getting my number without dialing a little.

When the voice came again, it was by the window. "I'm going to kill you, beautiful. I came to kill them, but you'll do fine."

A pause while he shifted position once more. When the voice came again, it came from the window just over my head—the one above the bathtub. My guts crawled into my throat. If he flashed that light now ...

“No fifth wheels need apply,” Jagger said. “Sorry.”

I could barely hear him moving to his next position. It turned out to be back to the doorway. “I’ve got my quarter with me. You want to come and take it?”

I felt an urge to cough and repressed it.

“Come and get it beautiful.” His voice was mocking. “The whole pie. Come and take it away.”

But I didn’t have to, and I suppose he knew it. I was holding the chips. I could find the money now. With his single quarter, Jagger had no chance.

This time the silence really spun out. A half-hour, an hour, forever. Eternity squared. My body started to stiffen. Outside, the wind was tuning up, making it impossible to hear anything but rattling snow against the walls. It was very cold. The tips of my fingers were going numb.

Then, around one-thirty, a ghostly stirring sound like crawling rats in the darkness. I stopped breathing. Somehow Jagger had got in. He was right in the middle of the room ...

Then I got it. Rigor mortis, hurried by the cold, was rearranging Sarge for the last time, that was all. I relaxed a little.

That was when the door rammed open and Jagger charged through, ghostly and visible in a mantle of white snow, tall and loose and gangling. I let him have it and the bullet punched a hole through the side of his head. And in the brief gunflash, I saw that what I had holed was a scarecrow with no face, dressed in some farmer’s

thrown-out pants and shirt. The burlap head fell off the broomstick neck as it hit the floor. Then Jagger was shooting at me.

He was holding a semi-automatic pistol, and the innards of the bathtub were like a great percussive hollow cymbal. Porcelain flew up, bounced off the wall, struck my face. Wood splinters and a single hot spent slug rained down on me.

Then he was charging, never letting up. He was going to shoot me in the tub like a fish in a barrel. I couldn't even put my head up.

It was Sarge who saved me. Jagger stumbled over one big dead foot, staggered, and pumped bullets into the floor instead of over my head. Then I was on my knees. I pretended I was Roger Clemens. I pegged Barney's big .45 at his head.

The gun hit him but didn't stop him. I stumbled over the rim of the tub getting out to tackle him, and Jagger put two groggy shots to my left.

The faint silhouette stepped back, trying to get a bead, one hand holding his ear where the gun had hit him. He shot me through the wrist, and his second shot ripped a groove in my neck. Then, incredibly, he stumbled over Sarge's feet again and fell backward. He brought the gun up again and put one through the roof. It was his last chance. I kicked the gun out of his hand, hearing the wet-wood sound of breaking bones. I kicked him in the groin, doubling him up. I kicked him again, this time in the back of the head, and his feet rattled a fast, unconscious tattoo on the floor. He was as good as dead then, but I kicked him again and again, kicked him until there was nothing but pulp and strawberry jam, nothing anyone could ever identify, not by teeth, not by anything. I kicked him until I couldn't swing my leg anymore, and my toes wouldn't move.

I suddenly realized I was screaming and there was no one to hear me but dead men.

I wiped my mouth and knelt over Jagger's body.

He had been lying about his quarter of the map, as it turned out. It didn't surprise me much. No, I take that back. It didn't surprise me at all.

*

My heap was just where I had left it, around the block from Keenan's house, but now it was just a ghostly hump of snow. I had left Sarge's VW a mile back. I hoped my heater was still working. I was numb all over. I got the door open and winced a little as I sat down inside. The crease in my neck had already clotted over, but my wrist hurt like hell.

The starter cranked for a long time, and the motor finally caught. The heater was working, and the one wiper cleared away most of the snow on the driver's side. Jagger had been lying about his quarter, and it hadn't been in the unobtrusive (and probably stolen) Honda Civic he'd come in. But his address had been in his wallet, and if I actually needed his quarter, I thought there was a pretty good chance I could find it. I didn't think I would; three pieces should be enough, especially since Sarge's quarter was the one with the X.

I pulled out carefully. I was going to be careful for a long time. The Sarge had been right about one thing: Barney had been a dope. The fact that he'd also been my friend didn't matter anymore. The debt had been paid.

In the meantime, I had a lot to be careful for.

FOR THE BIRDS

Stephen King

(From "Bred Any Good Rooks Lately?")

Okay, this is a science fiction joke.

It seems like in 1995 or so the pollution in the atmosphere of London has started to kill off all the rooks. And the city government is very concerned because the rooks roosting on the cornices and the odd little crannies of the public buildings are a big attraction. The Yanks with their Kodaks, if you get it. So they say, "What are we going to do?"

They get a lot of brochures from places with climates similar to Londonas so they can raise the rooks until the pollution problem is finally licked. One place with a similar climate, but low pollution count, turns to be Bangor, Maine. So they put an ad in the paper soliciting bird fanciers and talk to a bunch of guys in the trade. Finally, they engage this one guy at the rate of \$50,000 a year to raise rooks. They send an ornithologist over on the concord with two cases of rook eggs packed in these shatterproof cases - they keep the shipping compartment constantly heated and all that stuff.

So this guy has a new business - North American Rook Farms, Inc. He goes to work right off incubating new rooks so London will not become a rookless city. The only thing is, the London City Council is really impatient, and every day they send him a telegram that says: "Bred Any Good Rooks lately?"

THE GLASS FLOOR

Stephen King

(From: "Weird Tales" Fall, 1990)

INTRODUCTION

In the novel *Deliverance*, by James Dickey, there is a scene where a country fellow who lives way up in the back of beyond whangs his hand with a tool while repairing a car. One of the city men who are looking for a couple of guys to drive their cars downriver asks this fellow, Griner by name, if he's hurt himself. Griner looks at his bloody hand, then mutters: "Naw - it ain't as bad as I thought."

That's the way I felt after re-reading "The Glass Floor," the first story for which I was ever paid, after all these years. Darrell Schweitzer, the editor of *Weird Tales* invited me to make changes if I wanted to, but I decided that would probably be a bad idea. Except for two or three word-changes and the addition of a paragraph break (which was probably a typographical error in the first place), I've left the tale just as it was. If I really did start making changes, the result would be an entirely new story.

"The Glass Floor" was written, to the best of my recollection, in the summer of 1967, when I was about two months shy of my twentieth birthday. I had been trying for about two years to sell a story to Robert A.W. Lowndes, who edited two horror/fantasy magazines for *Health Knowledge* (*The Magazine of Horror and Startling Mystery Stories*) as well as a vastly more popular digest called *Sexology*. He had rejected several submissions kindly (one of them, marginally better than "The Glass Floor," was finally published in *The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction* under the title "Night of the Tiger"), then accepted this one when I finally got around to submitting it. That first check was for thirty-five dollars. I've cashed many bigger ones since then, but none gave me more satisfaction; someone had finally paid me some real money for something I had found in my head!

The first few pages of the story are clumsy and badly written - clearly the product of an unformed story-teller's mind - but the last bit pays off better than I remembered; there is a genuine frisson in what Mr.

Wharton finds waiting for him in the East Room. I suppose that's at least part of the reason I agreed to allow this mostly unremarkable work to be reprinted after all these years. And there is at least a token effort to create characters which are more than paper-doll cutouts; Wharton and Reynard are antagonists, but neither is "the good guy" or "the bad guy." The real villain is behind that plastered-over door. And I also see an odd echo of "The Glass Floor" in a very recent work called "The Library Policeman." That work, a short novel, will be published as part of a collection of short novels called *Four Past Midnight* this fall, and if you read it, I think you'll see what I mean. It was fascinating to see the same image coming around again after all this time.

Mostly I'm allowing the story to be republished to send a message to young writers who are out there right now, trying to be published, and collecting rejection slips from such magazines as *F&SF Midnight Graffiti*, and, of course, *Weird Tales*, which is the granddaddy of them all. The message is simple: you can learn, you can get better, and you can get published.

If that Little spark is there, someone will probably see it sooner or later, gleaming faintly in the dark. And, if you tend the spark nestled in the kindling, it really can grow into a large, blazing fire. It happened to me, and it started here.

I remember getting the idea for the story, and it just came as the ideas come now - casually, with no flourish of trumpets. I was walking down a dirt road to see a friend, and for no reason at all I began to wonder what it would be like to stand in a room whose floor was a mirror. The image was so intriguing that writing the story became a necessity. It wasn't written for money; it was written so I could see better. Of course I did not see it as well as I had hoped; there is still that shortfall between what I hope I will accomplish and what I actually manage. Still, I came away from it with two valuable things: a salable story after five years of rejection slips, and a bit of experience. So here it is, and as that fellow Griner says in Dickey's novel, it ain't really as bad as I thought.

- Stephen King

Wharton moved slowly up the wide steps, hat in hand, craning his neck to get a better look at the Victorian monstrosity that his sister had died in. It wasn't a house at all, he reflected, but a mausoleum - a huge, sprawling mausoleum. It seemed to grow out of the top of the hill like an outsized, perverted toadstool, all gambrels and gables and jutting, blank-windowed cupolas. A brass weathervane surmounted the eighty degree slant of shake-shingled roof, the tarnished effigy of a leering little boy with one hand shading eyes. Wharton was just as glad he could not see.

Then he was on the porch, and the house as a whole was cut off from him. He twisted the old-fashioned bell, and listened to it echo hollowly through the dim recesses within. There was a rose-tinted fanlight over the door, and Wharton could barely make out the date 1770 chiseled into the glass. Tomb is right, he thought.

The door suddenly swung open. "Yes, sir?" The housekeeper stared out at him. She was old, hideously old. Her face hung like limp dough on her skull, and the hand on the door above the chain was grotesquely twisted by arthritis.

"I've come to see Anthony Reynard," Wharton said. He fancied he could even smell the sweetish odor of decay emanating from the rumpled silk of the shapeless black dress she wore.

"Mr Reynard isn't seein' anyone. He's mournin'."

"He'll see me," Wharton said. "I'm Charles Wharton. Janine's brother."

"Oh." Her eyes widened a little, and the loose bow of her mouth worked around the empty ridges of her gums. "Just a minute." She disappeared, leaving the door ajar.

Wharton stared into the dim mahogany shadows, making out high-backed easy chairs, horse-hair upholstered divans, tall narrow-

shelved bookcases, curlicued, floridly carven wainscoting.

Janine, he thought. Janine, Janine, Janine. How could you live here? How in hell could you stand it?

A tall figure materialized suddenly out of the gloom, slope-shouldered, head thrust forward, eyes deeply sunken and downcast.

Anthony Reynard reached out and unhooked the door-chain. "Come in, Mr. Wharton, " he said heavily.

Wharton stepped into the vague dimness of the house, looking up curiously at the man who had married his sister. There were rings beneath the hollows of his eyes, blue and bruised-looking. The suit he wore was wrinkled and hung limp on him, as if he had lost a great deal of weight. He looks tired, Wharton thought. Tired and old.

"My sister has already been buried?" Wharton asked.

"Yes." He shut the door slowly, imprisoning Wharton in the decaying gloom of the house. "My deepest sorrow, sir. Wharton. I loved your sister dearly." He made a vague gesture. "I'm sorry."

He seemed about to add more, then shut his mouth with an abrupt snap. When he spoke again, it was obvious he had bypassed whatever had been on his lips. "Would you care to sit down? I'm sure you have questions.

"I do. Somehow it came out more curtly than he had intended.

Reynard sighed and nodded slowly. He led the Way deeper into the living room and gestured at a chair. Wharton sank deeply into it, and it seemed to gobble him up rather than give beneath him. Reynard sat next to the fireplace and dug for cigarettes. He offered them wordlessly to Wharton, and he shook his head.

He waited until Reynard lit his cigarette, then asked, "Just how did she die? Your letter didn't say much.

Reynard blew out the match and threw it into the fireplace. It landed on one of the ebony iron fire-dogs, a carved gargoyle that stared at Wharton with toad's eyes.

"She fell," he said. "She was dusting in one of the other rooms, up along the eaves. We were planning to paint, and she said it would have to be well-dusted before we could begin. She had the ladder. It slipped. Her neck was broken." There was a clicking sound in his throat as he swallowed.

"She died - instantly?"

"Yes." He lowered his head and placed a hand against his brow. "I was heartbroken.

The gargoyle leered at him, squat torso and flattened, sooty head. Its mouth was twisted upward in a weird, gleeful grin, and its eyes seemed turned inward at some private joke. Wharton looked away from it with an effort. "I want to see where it happened.

Reynard stubbed out his cigarette half-smoked. "You can't.

"I'm afraid I must," Wharton said coldly. "After all, she was my...

"It's not that," Reynard said. "The room has been partitioned off. That should have been done a long time ago.

"If it's just a matter of prising a few boards off a door...

"You don't understand. The room has been plastered off completely. There's nothing but a wall there.

Wharton felt his gaze being pulled inexorably back to the fire-dog. Damn the thing, what did it have to grin about?

"I can't help it. I want to see the room."

Reynard stood suddenly, towering over him. "Impossible."

Wharton also stood. "I'm beginning to wonder if you don't have something to hide in there," he said quietly.

"Just what are you implying?"

Wharton shook his head a little dazedly. What was he implying? That perhaps Anthony Reynard had murdered his Sister in this Revolutionary War-vintage crypt? That there might be Something more sinister here than shadowy corners and hideous iron fire-dogs?

"I don't know what I'm implying, " he said slowly, "except that Janine was shoved under in a hell of a hurry, and that you're acting damn strange now."

For moment the anger blazed brighter, and then it died away, leaving only hopelessness and dumb sorrow. "Leave me alone," he mumbled. "Please leave me alone, Mr. Wharton."

"I can't. I've got to know..."

The aged housekeeper appeared, her face thrusting from the shadowy cavern of the hall. "Supper's ready, Mr. Reynard."

"Thank you, Louise, but I'm not hungry. Perhaps Mr. Wharton ... ?" Wharton shook his head.

"Very well, then. Perhaps we'll have a bite later."

"As you say, sir." She turned to go. "Louise?" "Yes, sir?"

"Come here a moment.

Louise shuffled slowly back into the room, her loose tongue slopping wetly over her lips for a moment and then disappearing. "Sir?"

"Mr. Wharton seems to have some questions about his sister's death. Would you tell him all you know about it?"

“Yes, sir.” Her eyes glittered with alacrity. “She was dustin’, she was. Dustin’ the East Room. Hot on paintin’ it, she was. Mr. Reynard here, I guess he wasn’t much interested, because ...

“Just get to the point, Louise,” Reynard said impatiently.

“No,” Wharton said. “Why wasn’t he much interested?”

Louise looked doubtfully from one to the other.

“Go ahead,” Reynard said tiredly. “He’ll find out in the village if he doesn’t up here.

“Yes, sir.” Again he saw the glitter, caught the greedy purse of the loose flesh of her mouth as she prepared to impart the precious story. “Mr. Reynard didn’t like no one goin’ in the East Room. Said it was dangerous.”

“Dangerous?”

“The floor,” she said. “The floor’s glass. It’s a mirror. The whole floor’s a mirror. “

Wharton turned to Reynard, feeling dark blood suffuse his face. “You mean to tell me you let her go up on a ladder in a room with a glass floor?”

“The ladder had rubber grips,” Reynard began. “That wasn’t why ... “You damned fool,” Wharton whispered. “You damned, bloody fool.

“I tell you that wasn’t the reason!” Reynard shouted suddenly. “I loved your sister! No one is sorrier than I that she is dead! But I warned her! God knows I warned her about that floor!”

Wharton was dimly aware of Louise staring greedily at them, storing up gossip like a squirrel stores up nuts. “Get her out of here,” he said thickly.

“Yes,” Reynard said. “Go see to supper. “

“Yes, sir.” Louise moved reluctantly toward the hall, and the shadows swallowed her.

“Now,” Wharton said quietly. “It seems to me that you have some explaining to do, Reynard. This whole thing sounds funny to me. Wasn’t there even an inquest?”

“No,” Reynard said. He slumped back into his chair suddenly, and he looked blindly into the darkness of the vaulted overhead ceiling. “They know around here about the - East Room.”

“And just what is there to know?” Wharton asked tightly

“The East Room is bad luck,” Reynard said. “Some people might even say it’s cursed.

“Now listen,” Wharton said, his ill temper and unladen grief building up like steam in a teakettle, “I’m not going to be put off, Reynard. Every word that comes out of your mouth makes me more determined to see that room. Now are you going to agree to it or do I have to go down to that village and ... ?”

“Please.” Something in the quiet hopelessness of the word made Wharton look up. Reynard looked directly into his eyes for the first time and they were haunted, haggard eyes. “Please, Mr. Wharton. Take my word that your sister died naturally and go away. I don’t want to see you die!” His voice rose to a wail. “I didn’t want to see anybody die!”

Wharton felt a quiet chill steal over him. His gaze skipped from the grinning fireplace gargoyle to the dusty, empty-eyed bust of Cicero in the corner to the strange wainscoting carvings. And a voice came from within him: Go away from here. A thousand living yet insentient eyes seemed to stare at him from the darkness, and again the voice spoke... “Go away from here.”

Only this time it was Reynard.

“Go away from here,” he repeated. “Your sister is beyond caring and beyond revenge. I give you my word...”

“Damn your word!” Wharton said harshly. “I’m going down to the sheriff, Reynard. And if the sheriff won’t help me, I’ll go to the county commissioner. And if the county commissioner won’t help me ...

“Very well.” The words were like the faraway tolling of a churchyard bell.

“Come.”

Reynard led the way into the hall, down past the kitchen, the empty dining room with the chandelier catching and reflecting the last light of day, past the pantry, toward the blind plaster of the corridor’s end.

This is it, he thought, and suddenly there was a strange crawling in the pit of his stomach.

“I...” he began involuntarily.

“What?” Reynard asked, hope glittering in his eyes.

“Nothing. “

They stopped at the end of the hall, stopped in the twilight gloom. There seemed to be no electric light. On the floor Wharton could see the still-damp plasterer’s trowel Reynard had used to wall up the doorway, and a straggling remnant of Poe’s “Black Cat” clanged through his mind:

“I had walled the monster up within the tomb...”

Reynard handed the trowel to him blindly. “Do whatever you have to do, Wharton. I won’t be party to it. I wash my hands of it.

Wharton watched him move off down the hall with misgivings, his hand opening and closing on the handle of the trowel. The faces of the Little-boy weathervane, the fire-dog gargoyle, the wizened

housemaid all seemed to mix and mingle before him, all grinning at something he could not understand. Go away from here ...

With a sudden bitter curse he attacked the wall, hacking into the soft, new plaster until the trowel scraped across the door of the East Room. He dug away plaster until he could reach the doorknob. He twisted, then yanked on it until the veins stood out in his temples .

The plaster cracked, schismed, and finally split. The door swung ponderously open, shedding plaster like a dead skin.

Wharton stared into the shimmering quicksilver pool.

It seemed to glow with a light of its own in the darkness, ethereal and fairy-like. Wharton stepped in, half-expecting to sink into warm, pliant fluid.

But the floor was solid.

His own reflection hung suspended below him, attached only by the feet, seeming to stand on its head in thin air. It made him dizzy just to look at it.

Slowly his gaze shifted around the room. The ladder was still there, stretching up into the glimmering depths of the mirror. The room was high, he saw. High enough for a fall to he winced - to kill.

It was ringed with empty bookcases, all seeming to lean over him on the very threshold of imbalance. They added to the room's strange, distorting effect.

He went over to the ladder and stared down at the feet. They were rubbershod, as Reynard had said, and seemed solid enough. But if the ladder had not slid, how had Janine fallen?

Somehow he found himself staring through the floor again. No, he corrected himself. Not through the floor. At the mirror; into the mirror

...

He wasn't standing on the floor at all he fancied. He Was poised in thin air halfway between the identical ceiling and floor, held up only by the stupid idea that he was on the floor. That was silly, as anyone could see, for there was the floor, way down there....

Snap out of it!' he yelled at himself suddenly. He was on the floor, and that was nothing but a harmless reflection of the ceiling. It would only be the floor if I was standing on my head, and I'm not; the other me is the one standing on his head... .

He began to feel vertigo, and a sudden lump of nausea rose in his throat. He tried to look away from the glittering quicksilver depths of the mirror, but he couldn't.

The door.. where was the door? He suddenly wanted out very badly.

Wharton turned around clumsily, but there were only crazily-tilted bookcases and the jutting ladder and the horrible chasm beneath his feet.

"Reynard!" He screamed. "I'm falling! "

Reynard came running, the sickness already a gray lesion on his heart. It was done; it had happened again.

He stopped at the door's threshold, Staring in at the Siamese twins staring at each other in the middle of the two-roofed, no-floored room.

"Louise," he croaked around the dry ball of sickness in his throat.

"Bring the pole."

Louise came shuffling out of the darkness and handed the hook-ended pole to Reynard. He slid it out across the shining quicksilver pond and caught the body sprawled on the glass. He dragged it slowly toward the door, and when he could reach it, he pulled it out.

He stared down into the contorted face and gently shut the staring eyes.

“I’ll want the plaster,” he said quietly.

“Yes, sir.”

She turned to go, and Reynard stared somberly into the room. Not for the first time he wondered if there was really a mirror there at all. In the room, a small pool of blood showed on the floor and ceiling, seeming to meet in the center, blood which hung there quietly and one could wait forever for it to drip.

GRADUATION AFTERNOON

Stephen King

Janice has never settled on the right word for the place where Buddy lives. It's too big to be called a house, too small to be an estate, and the name on the post at the foot of the driveway, Harborlights, gags her. It sounds like the name of a restaurant in New London, the kind where the special is always fish. She usually winds up just calling it "your place," as in "Let's go to your place and play tennis" or "Let's go to your place and go swimming."

It's pretty much the same deal with Buddy himself, she thinks, watching him trudge up the lawn toward the sound of shouts on the other side of the house, where the pool is. You didn't want to call your boyfriend Buddy, but when reverting to his real name meant Bruce, it left you with no real ground to stand on.

Or expressing feelings, that was that. She knew he wanted to hear her say she loved him, especially on his graduation day—surely a better present than the silver medallion she'd given him, although the medallion had set her back a teeth-clenching amount—but she couldn't do it. She couldn't bring herself to say, "I love you, Bruce." The best she could manage (and again with that interior clench) was "I'm awfully fond of you, Buddy." And even that sounded like a line out of a British musical comedy.

"You don't mind what she said, do you?" That was the last thing he'd asked her before heading up the lawn to change into his swim trunks. "That isn't why you're staying behind, is it?"

"No, just want to hit a few more. And look at the view." The house did have that going for it, and she could never get enough. Because you could see the whole New York cityscape from this side of the house, the buildings reduced to blue toys with sun gleaming on the highest windows. Janice thought that when it came to NYC, you could only get that sense of exquisite stillness from a distance. It was a lie she loved.

"Because she's just my gran," he went on. "You know her by now. If it enters her head, it exits her mouth."

“I know,” Janice said. And she liked Buddy’s gran, who made no effort to hide her snobbery. There it was, out and beating time to the music. They were the Hopes, came to Connecticut along with the rest of the Heavenly Host, thank you so much. She is Janice Gandolewski, who will have her own graduation day—from Fairhaven High—two weeks from now, after Buddy has left with his three best buddies to hike the Appalachian Trail.

She turns to the basket of balls, a slender girl of good height in denim shorts, sneakers, and a shell top. Her legs flex as she rises on tiptoe with each serve. She’s good-looking and knows it, her knowing of the functional and non-fussy sort. She’s smart, and knows it. Very few Fairhaven girls manage relationships with boys from the Academy—other than the usual we-all-know-where-we-are, quick-and-dirty Winter Carnival or Spring Fling weekends, that is—and she has done so in spite of the ski that trails after her wherever she goes, like a tin can tied to the bumper of a family sedan. She has managed this social hat-trick with Bruce Hope, also known as Buddy.

And when they were coming up from the basement media room after playing video games—most of the others still down there, and still with their mortarboards cocked back on their heads—they had overheard his gran, in the parlor with the other adults (because this was really their party; the kids would have their own tonight, first at Holy Now! out on Route 219, which had been fourwalled for the occasion by Jimmy Frederick’s dad and mom, pursuant to the mandatory designated-driver rule, and then later, at the beach, under a full June moon, could you give me spoon, do I hear swoon, is there a swoon in the house).

“That was Janice-Something-Unpronounceable,” Gran was saying in her oddly piercing, oddly toneless deaf-lady voice. “She’s very pretty, isn’t she? A townie. Bruce’s friend for now.” She didn’t quite call Janice Bruce’s starter-model, but of course it was all in the tone.

She shrugs and hits a few more balls, legs flexing, racket reaching. The balls fly hard and true across the net, each touching down deep in the receiver’s box on the far side.

They have in fact learned from each other, and she suspects that's what these things are about. What they are for. And Buddy has not, in truth, been that hard to teach. He respected her from the first—maybe a little too much. She had to teach him out of that—the pedestal-worship part of that. And she thinks he hasn't been that bad a lover, given the fact that kids are denied the finest of accommodations and the luxury of time when it comes to giving their bodies the food they come to want.

“We did the best we could,” she says, and decides to go and swim with the others, let him show her off one final time. He thinks they'll have all summer before he goes off to Princeton and she goes to State, but she thinks not; she thinks part of the purpose of the upcoming Appalachian hike is to separate them as painlessly but as completely as possible. In this Janice senses not the hand of the hale-and-hearty, good-fellows-every-one father, or the somehow endearing snobbery of the grandmother—a townie, Bruce's friend for now—but the smiling and subtle practicality of the mother, whose one fear (it might as well be stamped on her lovely, unlined forehead) is that the townie girl with the tin can tied to the end of her name will get pregnant and trap her boy into the wrong marriage.

“It would be wrong, too,” she murmurs as she wheels the basket of balls into the shed and flips the latch. Her friend Marcy keeps asking her what she sees in him at all—Buddy, she all but sneers, wrinkling her nose. What do you do all weekend? Go to garden parties? To polo matches?

In fact, they have been to a couple of polo matches, because Tom Hope still rides—although, Buddy confided, this was apt to be his last year if he didn't stop putting on weight. But they have also made love, some of it sweaty and intense. Sometimes, too, he makes her laugh. Less often, now—she has an idea that his capacity to surprise and amuse is far from infinite—but yes, he still does. He's a lean and narrow-headed boy who breaks the rich-kid-geek mold in interesting and sometimes very unexpected ways. Also he thinks the world of her, and that isn't entirely bad for a girl's self-image.

Still, she doesn't think he will resist the call of his essential nature forever. By the age of thirty-five or so, she guesses he will have lost most or all of his enthusiasm for eating pussy and will be more interested in collecting coins. Or refinishing Colonial rockers, like his father does out in the—ahem—carriage-house.

She walks slowly up the long acre of green grass, looking out toward the blue toys of the city dreaming in the far distance. Closer at hand are the sounds of shouts and splashing from the pool. Inside, Bruce's mother and father and gran and closest friends will be celebrating the one chick's high school graduation in their own way, at a formal tea. Tonight the kids will go out and party down in a more righteous mode. Alcohol and not a few tabs of X will be ingested. Club music will throb through big speakers. No one will play the country stuff Janice grew up with, but that's all right; she still knows where to find it.

When she graduates there will be a much smaller party, probably at Aunt Kay's restaurant, and of course she is bound for educational halls far less grand or traditional, but she has plans to go farther than she suspects Buddy goes even in his dreams. She will be a journalist. She will begin on the campus newspaper, and then will see where that takes her. One rung at a time, that's the way to do it. There are plenty of rungs on the ladder. She has talent to go along with her looks and unshowy self-confidence. She doesn't know how much, but she will find out. And there's luck. That, too. She knows enough not to count on it, but also enough to know it tends to come down on the side of the young.

She reaches the stone-flagged patio and looks down the rolling acre of lawn to the double tennis court. It all looks very big and very rich, very special, but she is wise enough to know she is only eighteen. There may come a time when it all looks quite ordinary to her, even in the eye of her memory. Quite small. It is this sense of perspective before the fact that makes it all right for her to be Janice-Something-Unpronounceable, and a townie, and Bruce's friend for now. Buddy, with his narrow head and fragile ability to make her laugh at

unexpected times. He has never made her feel small, probably knows she'd leave him the first time he ever tried.

She can go directly through the house to the pool and the changing rooms on the far side, but first she turns slightly to her left to once again look at the city across all those miles of blue afternoon distance. She has time to think, It could be my city someday, I could call it home, before an enormous spark lights up there, as if some God deep in the machinery had suddenly flicked His Bic.

She winces from the brilliance, which is at first like a thick, isolated stroke of lightning. And then the entire southern sky lights up a soundless lurid red. Formless bloodglare obliterates the buildings. Then for a moment they are there again, but ghostlike, as if seen through an interposing lens. A second or a tenth of a second after that they are gone forever, and the red begins to take on the shape of a thousand newsreels, climbing and boiling.

It is silent, silent.

Bruce's mother comes out on the patio and stands next to her, shading her eyes. She is wearing a new blue dress. A tea-dress. Her shoulder brushes Janice's and they look south at the crimson mushroom climbing, eating up the blue. Smoke is rising from around the edges—dark purple in the sunshine—and then being pulled back in. The red of the fireball is too intense to look at, it will blind her, but Janice cannot look away. Water is gushing down her cheeks in broad warm streams, but she cannot look away.

"What's that?" Bruce's mother asks. "If it's some kind of advertising, it's in very poor taste!"

"It's a bomb," Janice says. Her voice seems to be coming from somewhere else. On a live feed from Hartford, maybe. Now huge black blisters are erupting in the red mushroom, giving it hideous features that shift and change—now a cat, now a dog, now Bobo the Demon Clown—grimacing across the miles above what used to be

New York and is now a smelting furnace. “A nuke. And an almighty big one. No little dirty backpack model, or—”

Whap! Heat spreads upward and downward on the side of her face, and water flies from both of her eyes, and her head rocks. Bruce’s Mom has just slapped her. And hard.

“Don’t you even joke about that!” Bruce’s mother commands.
“There’s nothing funny about that!”

Other people are joining them on the patio now, but they are little more than shades; Janice’s vision has either been stolen by the brightness of the fireball, or the cloud has blotted out the sun. Maybe both.

“That’s in very ... poor ... TASTE!” Each word rising. Taste comes out in a scream.

Someone says, “It’s some kind of special effect, it has to be, or else we’d hear—”

But then the sound reaches them. It’s like a boulder running down an endless stone flume. It shivers the glass along the south side of the house and sends birds up from the trees in whirling squadrons. It fills the day. And it doesn’t stop. It’s like an endless sonic boom. Janice sees Bruce’s gran go walking slowly down the path that leads to the multi-car garage with her hands to her ears. She walks with her head down and her back bent and her butt sticking out, like a dispossessed warhag starting down a long refugee road. Something hangs down on the back of her dress, swinging from side to side, and Janice isn’t surprised to note (with what vision she has left) that it’s Gran’s hearing aid.

“I want to wake up,” a man says from behind Janice. He speaks in a querulous, pestering tone. “I want to wake up. Enough is enough.”

Now the red cloud has grown to its full height and stands in boiling triumph where New York was ninety seconds ago, a dark red and

purple toadstool that has burned a hole straight through this afternoon and all the afternoons to follow.

A breeze begins to push through. It is a hot breeze. It lifts the hair from the sides of her head, freeing her ears to hear that endless grinding boom even better. Janice stands watching, and thinks about hitting tennis balls, one after the other, all of them landing so close together you could have caught them in a roasting pan. That is pretty much how she writes. It is her talent. Or was.

She thinks about the hike Bruce and his friends won't be taking. She thinks about the party at Holy Now! they won't be attending tonight. She thinks about the records by Jay-Z and Beyonce and The Fray they won't be listening to—no loss there. And she thinks of the country music her dad listens to in his pickup truck on his way to and from work. That's better, somehow. She will think of Patsy Cline or Skeeter Davis and in a little while she may be able to teach what is left of her eyes not to look.

GRAMMA

Stephen King

George's mother went to the door, hesitated there, came back, and tousled George's hair. "I don't want you to worry," she said. "You'll be all right. Gramma, too."

"Sure, I'll be okay. Tell Buddy to lay chilly."

"Pardon me?"

George smiled. "To stay cool."

"Oh. Very funny." She smiled back at him, a distracted, going-in-six-directions-at-once smile. "George, are you sure—"

"I'll be fine."

Are you sure what? Are you sure you're not scared to be alone with Gramma? Was that what she was going to ask?

If it was, the answer is no. After all, it wasn't like he was six anymore, when they had first come here to Maine to take care of Gramma, and he had cried with terror whenever Gramma held out her heavy arms toward him from her white vinyl chair that always smelled of the poached eggs she ate and the sweet bland powder George's mom rubbed into her flabby, wrinkled skin; she held out her white-elephant arms, wanting him to come to her and be hugged to that huge and heavy old white-elephant body: Buddy had gone to her, had been enfolded in Gramma's blind embrace, and Buddy had come out alive ... but Buddy was two years older.

Now Buddy had broken his leg and was at the CMG Hospital in Lewiston.

"You've got the doctor's number if something should go wrong. Which it won't. Right?"

"Sure," he said, and swallowed something dry in his throat. He smiled. Did the smile look okay? Sure. Sure it did. He wasn't scared of Gramma anymore. After all, he wasn't six anymore. Mom was

going up to the hospital to see Buddy and he was just going to stay here and lay chilly. Hang out with Gramma awhile. No problem.

Mom went to the door again, hesitated again, and came back again, smiling that distracted, going-six-ways-at-once smile. “If she wakes up and calls for her tea—”

“I know,” George said, seeing how scared and worried she was underneath that distracted smile. She was worried about Buddy, Buddy and his dumb Pony League, the coach had called and said Buddy had been hurt in a play at the plate, and the first George had known of it (he was just home from school and sitting at the table eating some cookies and having a glass of Nestle’s Quik) was when his mother gave a funny little gasp and said, Hurt? Buddy? How bad?

“I know all that stuff, Mom. I got it knocked. Negative perspiration. Go on, now.”

“You’re a good boy, George. Don’t be scared. You’re not scared of Gramma anymore, are you?”

“Huh-uh,” George said. He smiled. The smile felt pretty good; the smile of a fellow who was laying chilly with negative perspiration on his brow, the smile of a fellow who Had It Knocked, the smile of a fellow who was most definitely not six anymore. He swallowed. It was a great smile, but beyond it, down in the darkness behind his smile, was one very dry throat. It felt as if his throat was lined with mittenwool. “Tell Buddy I’m sorry he broke his leg.”

“I will,” she said, and went to the door again. Four o’clock sunshine slanted in through the window. “Thank God we took the sports insurance, Georgie. I don’t know what we’d do if we didn’t have it.”

“Tell him I hope he tagged the sucker out.”

She smiled her distracted smile, a woman of just past fifty with two late sons, one thirteen, one eleven, and no man. This time she

opened the door, and a cool whisper of October came in through the sheds.

“And remember, Dr. Arlinder—”

“Sure,” he said. “You better go or his leg’ll be fixed by the time you get there.”

“She’ll probably sleep the whole time,” Mom said. “I love you, Georgie. You’re a good son.” She closed the door on that.

George went to the window and watched her hurry to the old ‘69 Dodge that burned too much gas and oil, digging the keys from her purse. Now that she was out of the house and didn’t know George was looking at her, the distracted smile fell away and she only looked distracted—distracted and sick with worry about Buddy. George felt bad for her. He didn’t waste any similar feelings on Buddy, who liked to get him down and sit on top of him with a knee on each of George’s shoulders and tap a spoon in the middle of George’s forehead until he just about went crazy (Buddy called it the Spoon Torture of the Heathen Chinee and laughed like a madman and sometimes went on doing it until George cried), Buddy who sometimes gave him the Indian Rope Burn so hard that little drops of blood would appear on George’s forearm, sitting on top of the pores like dew on blades of grass at dawn, Buddy who had listened so sympathetically when George had one night whispered in the dark of their bedroom that he liked Heather MacArdle and who the next morning ran across the schoolyard screaming **GEORGE AND HEATHER UP IN A TREE, KAY-EYE-ESS-ESS-EYE-EN-GEE! FIRSE COMES LOVE AN THEN COMES MARRITCH! HERE COMES HEATHER WITH A BABY CARRITCH!** like a runaway fire engine. Broken legs did not keep older brothers like Buddy down for long, but George was rather looking forward to the quiet as long as this one did. Let’s see you give me the Spoon Torture of the Heathen Chinee with your leg in a cast, Buddy. Sure, kid—EVERY day.

The Dodge backed out of the driveway and paused while his mother looked both ways, although nothing would be coming; nothing ever

was. His mother would have a two-mile ride over washboards and ruts before she even got to tar, and it was nineteen miles to Lewiston after that.

She backed all the way out and drove away. For a moment dust hung in the bright October afternoon air, and then it began to settle.

He was alone in the house.

With Gramma.

He swallowed.

Hey! Negative perspiration! Just lay chilly, right?

“Right,” George said in a low voice, and walked across the small, sunwashed kitchen. He was a towheaded, good-looking boy with a spray of freckles across his nose and cheeks and a look of good humor in his darkish gray eyes.

Buddy’s accident had occurred while he had been playing in the Pony League championship game this October 5th. George’s Pee Wee League team, the Tigers, had been knocked out of their tournament on the first day, two Saturdays ago (What a bunch of babies! Buddy had exulted as George walked tearfully off the field. What a bunch of PUSSIES!) ... and now Buddy had broken his leg. If Mom wasn’t so worried and scared, George would have been almost happy.

There was a phone on the wall, and next to it was a note-minder board with a grease pencil hanging beside it. In the upper corner of the board was a cheerful country Gramma, her cheeks rosy, her white hair done up in a bun; a cartoon Gramma who was pointing at the board. There was a comic-strip balloon coming out of the cheerful country Gramma’s mouth and she was saying, “REMEMBER THIS, SONNY!” Written on the board in his mother’s sprawling hand was Dr. Arlinder, 681-4330. Mom hadn’t written the number there just today, because she had to go to Buddy; it had

been there almost three weeks now, because Gramma was having her “bad spells” again.

George picked up the phone and listened.

“—so I told her, I said, ‘Mabel, if he treats you like that—’ “

He put it down again. Henrietta Dodd. Henrietta was always on the phone, and if it was in the afternoon you could always hear the soap opera stories going on in the background. One night after she had a glass of wine with Gramma (since she started having the “bad spells” again, Dr. Arlinder said Gramma couldn’t have the wine with her supper, so Mom didn’t either—George was sorry, because the wine made Mom sort of giggly and she would tell stories about her girlhood), Mom had said that every time Henrietta Dodd opened her mouth, all her guts fell out. Buddy and George laughed wildly, and Mom put a hand to her mouth and said Don’t you EVER tell anyone I said that, and then she began to laugh too, all three of them sitting at the supper table laughing, and at last the racket had awakened Gramma, who slept more and more, and she began to cry Ruth! Ruth! ROO-OOOTH! in that high, querulous voice of hers, and Mom had stopped laughing and went into her room.

Today Henrietta Dodd could talk all she wanted, as far as George was concerned. He just wanted to make sure the phone was working. Two weeks ago there had been a bad storm, and since then it went out sometimes.

He found himself looking at the cheery cartoon Gramma again, and wondered what it would be like to have a Gramma like that. His Gramma was huge and fat and blind; the hypertension had made her senile as well. Sometimes, when she had her “bad spells,” she would (as Mom put it) “act out the Tartar,” calling for people who weren’t there, holding conversations with total emptiness, mumbling strange words that made no sense. On one occasion when she was doing this last, Mom had turned white and had gone in and told her to shut up, shut up, shut up! George remembered that occasion very well, not only because it was the only time Mom had ever actually yelled

at Gramma, but because it was the next day that someone discovered that the Birches cemetery out on the Maple Sugar Road had been vandalized—gravestones knocked over, the old nineteenth-century gates pulled down, and one or two of the graves actually dug up—or something. Desecrated was the word Mr. Burdon, the principal, had used the next day when he convened all eight grades for Assembly and lectured the whole school on Malicious Mischief and how some things Just Weren't Funny. Going home that night, George had asked Buddy what desecrated meant, and Buddy said it meant digging up graves and pissing on the coffins, but George didn't believe that ... unless it was late. And dark.

Gramma was noisy when she had her “bad spells,” but mostly she just lay in the bed she had taken to three years before, a fat slug wearing rubber pants and diapers under her flannel nightgown, her face runneled with cracks and wrinkles, her eyes empty and Mind—faded blue irises floating atop yellowed corneas.

At first Gramma hadn't been totally blind. But she had been going blind, and she had to have a person at each elbow to help her totter from her white vinyl egg-and-baby-powder-smelling chair to her bed or the bathroom. In those days, five years ago, Gramma had weighed well over two hundred pounds.

She had held out her arms and Buddy, then eight, had gone to her. George had hung back. And cried.

But I'm not scared now, he told himself, moving across the kitchen in his Keds. Not a bit. She's just an old lady who has “bad spells” sometimes.

He filled the teakettle with water and put it on a cold burner. He got a teacup and put one of Gramma's special herb tea bags into it. In case she should wake up and want a cup. He hoped like mad that she wouldn't, because then he would have to crank up the hospital bed and sit next to her and give her the tea a sip at a time, watching the toothless mouth fold itself over the rim of the cup, and listen to the slurping sounds as she took the tea into her dank, dying guts.

Sometimes she slipped sideways on the bed and you had to pull her back over and her flesh was soft, kind of jiggly, as if it was filled with hot water, and her blind eyes would look at you ...

George licked his lips and walked toward the kitchen table again. His last cookie and half a glass of Quik still stood there, but he didn't want them anymore. He looked at his schoolbooks, covered with Castle Rock Cougars bookcovers, without enthusiasm.

He ought to go in and check on her.

He didn't want to.

He swallowed and his throat still felt as if it was lined with mittenwool.

I'm not afraid of Gramma, he thought. If she held out her arms I'd go right to her and let her hug me because she's just an old lady. She's senile and that's why she has "bad spells." That's all. Let her hug me and not cry. Just like Buddy.

He crossed the short entryway to Gramma's room, face set as if for bad medicine, lips pressed together so tightly they were white. He looked in, and there lay Gramma, her yellow-white hair spread around her in a corona, sleeping, her toothless mouth hung open, chest rising under the coverlet so slowly you almost couldn't see it, so slowly that you had to look at her for a while just to make sure she wasn't dead.

Oh God, what if she dies on me while Mom's up to the hospital?

She won't. She won't.

Yeah, but what if she does?

She won't, so stop being a pussy.

One of Gramma's yellow, melted-looking hands moved slowly on the coverlet: her long nails dragged across the sheet and made a minute

scratching sound. George drew back quickly, his heart pounding.

Cool as a moose, numbhead, see? Laying chilly.

He went back into the kitchen to see if his mother had been gone only an hour, or perhaps an hour and a half—if the latter, he could start reasonably waiting for her to come back. He looked at the clock and was astounded to see that not even twenty minutes had passed. Mom wouldn't even be into the city yet, let alone on her way back out of it! He stood still, listening to the silence. Faintly, he could hear the hum of the refrigerator and the electric clock. The snuffle of the afternoon breeze around the corners of the little house. And then—at the very edge of audibility—the faint, rasping susurrus of skin over cloth ... Gramma's wrinkled, tallowy hand moving on the coverlet.

He prayed in a single gust of mental breath:

Please God don't let her wake up until Mom comes home for Jesus' -
sake Amen.

He sat down and finished his cookie, drank his Quik. He thought of turning on the TV and watching something, but he was afraid the sound would wake up Gramma and that high, querulous, not-to-be-denied voice would begin calling Roo-OOTH! RUTH! BRING ME M'TEA! TEA! ROOO-OOOOOTH!

He slicked his dry tongue over his drier lips and told himself not to be such a pussy. She was an old lady stuck in bed, it wasn't as if she could get up and hurt him, and she was eighty-three years old, she wasn't going to die this afternoon.

George walked over and picked up the phone again.

“—that same day! And she even knew he was married! Gorry, I hate these cheap little corner-walkers that think they're so smart! So at Grange I said—”

George guessed that Henrietta was on the phone with Cora Simard. Henrietta hung on the phone most afternoons from one until six with first Ryan's Hope and then One Life to Live and then All My Children and then As the World Turns and then Search for Tomorrow and then God knew what other ones playing in the background, and Cora Simard was one of her most faithful telephone correspondents, and a lot of what they talked about was 1) who was going to be having a Tupperware party or an Amway party and what the refreshments were apt to be, 2) cheap little corner-walkers, and 3) what they had said to various people at 3-a) the Grange, 3-b) the monthly church fair, or 3-c) K of P Hall Beano.

“—that if I ever saw her up that way again, I guess I could be a good citizen and call—”

He put the phone back in its cradle. He and Buddy made fun of Cora when they went past her house just like all the other kids—she was fat and sloppy and gossipy and they would chant, Cora-Cora from Bora-Bora, ate a dog turd and wanted more-a! and Mom would have killed them both if she had known that, but now George was glad she and Henrietta Dodd were on the phone. They could talk all afternoon, for all George cared. He didn't mind Cora, anyway. Once he had fallen down in front of her house and scraped his knee—Buddy had been chasing him—and Cora had put a Band-Aid on the scrape and gave them each a cookie, talking all the time. George had felt ashamed for all the times he had said the rhyme about the dog turd and the rest of it.

George crossed to the sideboard and took down his reading book. He held it for a moment, then put it back. He had read all the stories in it already, although school had only been going a month. He read better than Buddy, although Buddy was better at sports. Won't be better for a while, he thought with momentary good cheer, not with a broken leg.

He took down his history book, sat down at the kitchen table, and began to read about how Cornwallis had surrendered up his sword at Yorktown. His thoughts wouldn't stay on it. He got up, went

through the entryway again. The yellow hand was still. Gramma slept, her face a gray, sagging circle against the pillow, a dying sun surrounded by the wild yellowish-white corona of her hair. To George she didn't look anything like people who were old and getting ready to die were supposed to look. She didn't look peaceful, like a sunset. She looked crazy, and ...

(and dangerous)

... yes, okay, and dangerous—like an ancient she-bear that might have one more good swipe left in her claws.

George remembered well enough how they had come to Castle Rock to take care of Gramma when Granpa died. Until then Mom had been working in the Stratford Laundry in Stratford, Connecticut. Granpa was three or four years younger than Gramma, a carpenter by trade, and he had worked right up until the day of his death. It had been a heart attack.

Even then Gramma had been getting senile, having her “bad spells.” She had always been a trial to her family, Gramma had. She was a volcanic woman who had taught school for fifteen years, between having babies and getting in fights with the Congregational Church she and Granpa and their nine children went to. Mom said that Granpa and Gramma quit the Congregational Church in Scarborough at the same time Gramma decided to quit teaching, but once, about a year ago, when Aunt Flo was up for a visit from her home in Salt Lake City, George and Buddy, listening at the register as Mom and her sister sat up late, talking, heard quite a different story. Granpa and Gramma had been kicked out of the church and Gramma had been fired off her job because she did something wrong. It was something about books. Why or how someone could get fired from their job and kicked out of the church just because of books, George didn't understand, and when he and Buddy crawled back into their twin beds under the eave, George asked.

There's all kinds of books, Senor El-Stupido, Buddy whispered.

Yeah, but what kind?

How should I know? Go to sleep!

Silence. George thought it through.

Buddy?

What! An irritated hiss.

Why did Mom tell us Gramma quit the church and her job?

Because it's a skeleton in the closet, that's why! Now go to sleep!

But he hadn't gone to sleep, not for a long time. His eyes kept straying to the closet door, dimly outlined in moonlight, and he kept wondering what he would do if the door swung open, revealing a skeleton inside, all grinning tombstone teeth and cistern eye sockets and parrot-cage ribs; white moonlight skating delirious and almost blue on whiter bone. Would he scream? What had Buddy meant, a skeleton in the closet? What did skeletons have to do with books? At last he had slipped into sleep without even knowing it and had dreamed he was six again, and Gramma was holding out her arms, her blind eyes searching for him; Gramma's reedy, querulous voice was saying, Where's the little one, Ruth? Why's he crying? I only want to put him in the closet ... with the skeleton.

George had puzzled over these matters long and long, and finally, about a month after Aunt Flo had departed, he went to his mother and told her he had heard her and Aunt Flo talking. He knew what a skeleton in the closet meant by then, because he had asked Mrs. Redenbacher at school. She said it meant having a scandal in the family, and a scandal was something that made people talk a lot. Like Cora Simard talks a lot? George had asked Mrs. Redenbacher, and Mrs. Redenbacher's face had worked strangely and her lips had quivered and she had said, That's not nice, George, but ... yes, something like that.

When he asked Mom, her face had gotten very still, and her hands had paused over the solitaire clockface of cards she had been laying out.

Do you think that's a good thing for you to be doing, Georgie? Do you and your brother make a habit of eavesdropping over the register?

George, then only nine, had hung his head.

We like Aunt Flo, Mom. We wanted to listen to her a little longer.

This was the truth.

Was it Buddy's idea?

It had been, but George wasn't going to tell her that. He didn't want to go walking around with his head on backwards, which might happen if Buddy found out he had tattled.

No, mine.

Mom had sat silent for a long time, and then she slowly began laying her cards out again. Maybe it's time you did know, she had said. Lying's worse than eavesdropping, I guess, and we all lie to our children about Gramma. And we lie to ourselves too, I guess. Most of the time, we do. And then she spoke with a sudden, vicious bitterness that was like acid squirting out between her front teeth—he felt that her words were so hot they would have burned his face if he hadn't recoiled. Except for me. I have to live with her, and I can no longer afford the luxury of lies.

So his Mom told him that after Granpa and Gramma had gotten married, they had had a baby that was born dead, and a year later they had another baby, and that was born dead too, and the doctor told Gramma she would never be able to carry a child to term and all she could do was keep on having babies that were dead or babies that died as soon as they sucked air. That would go on, he said, until

one of them died inside her too long before her body could shove it out and it would rot in there and kill her, too.

The doctor told her that.

Not long after, the books began.

Books about how to have babies?

But Mom didn't—or wouldn't—say what kind of books they were, or where Gramma got them, or how she knew to get them. Gramma got pregnant again, and this time the baby wasn't born dead and the baby didn't die after a breath or two; this time the baby was fine, and that was George's Uncle Larson. And after that, Gramma kept getting pregnant and having babies. Once, Mom said, Granpa had tried to make her get rid of the books to see if they could do it without them (or even if they couldn't, maybe Granpa figured they had enough yowwens by then so it wouldn't matter) and Gramma wouldn't. George asked his mother why and she said: "I think that by then having the books was as important to her as having the babies."

"I don't get it," George said.

"Well," George's mother said, "I'm not sure I do, either ... I was very small, remember. All I know for sure is that those books got a hold over her. She said there would be no more talk about it and there wasn't, either. Because Gramma wore the pants in our family."

George closed his history book with a snap. He looked at the clock and saw that it was nearly five o'clock. His stomach was grumbling softly. He realized suddenly, and with something very like horror, that if Mom wasn't home by six or so, Gramma would wake up and start hollering for her supper. Mom had forgotten to give him instructions about that, probably because she was so upset about Buddy's leg. He supposed he could make Gramma one of her special frozen dinners. They were special because Gramma was on a saltfree diet. She also had about a thousand different kinds of pills.

As for himself, he could heat up what was left of last night's macaroni and cheese. If he poured a lot of catsup on it, it would be pretty good.

He got the macaroni and cheese out of the fridge, spooned it into a pan, and put the pan on the burner next to the teakettle, which was still waiting in case Gramma woke up and wanted what she sometimes called "a cuppa cheer." George started to get himself a glass of milk, paused, and picked up the telephone again.

"—and I couldn't even believe my eyes when ... " Henrietta Dodd's voice broke off and then rose shrilly: "Who keeps listening in on this line, I'd like to know!"

George put the phone back on the hook in a hurry, his face burning.

She doesn't know it's you, stupe. There's six parties on the line!

All the same, it was wrong to eavesdrop, even if it was just to hear another voice when you were alone in the house, alone except for Gramma, the fat thing sleeping in the hospital bed in the other room; even when it seemed almost necessary to hear another human voice because your Mom was in Lewiston and it was going to be dark soon and Gramma was in the other room and Gramma looked like

(yes oh yes she did)

a she-bear that might have just one more murderous swipe left in her old clotted claws.

George went and got the milk.

Mom herself had been born in 1930, followed by Aunt Flo in 1932, and then Uncle Franklin in 1934. Uncle Franklin had died in 1948, of a burst appendix, and Mom sometimes still got teary about that, and carried his picture. She had liked Frank the best of all her brothers and sisters, and she said there was no need for him to die that way,

of peritonitis. She said that God had played dirty when He took Frank.

George looked out the window over the sink. The light was more golden now, low over the hill. The shadow of their back shed stretched all the way across the lawn. If Buddy hadn't broken his dumb leg, Mom would be here now, making chili or something (plus Gramma's saltfree dinner), and they would all be talking and laughing and maybe they'd play some gin rummy later on.

George flicked on the kitchen light, even though it really wasn't dark enough for it yet. Then he turned on LO HEAT under his macaroni. His thoughts kept returning to Gramma, sitting in her white vinyl chair like a big fat worm in a dress, her corona of hair every crazy whichway on the shoulders of her pink rayon robe, holding out her arms for him to come, him shrinking back against his Mom, bawling.

Send him to me, Ruth. I want to hug him.

He's a little frightened, Momma. He'll come in time. But his mother sounded frightened, too.

Frightened? Mom?

George stopped, thinking. Was that true? Buddy said your memory could play tricks on you. Had she really sounded frightened?

Yes. She had.

Gramma's voice rising peremptorily: Don't coddle the boy, Ruth! Send him over here; I want to give him a hug.

No. He's crying.

And as Gramma lowered her heavy arms from which the flesh hung in great, doughlike gobbets, a sly, senile smile had overspread her face and she had said: Does he really look like Franklin, Ruth? I remember you saying he favored Frank.

Slowly, George stirred the macaroni and cheese and catsup. He hadn't remembered the incident so clearly before. Maybe it was the silence that had made him remember. The silence, and being alone with Gramma.

So Gramma had her babies and taught school, and the doctors were properly dumbfounded, and Granpa carpentered and generally got more and more prosperous, finding work even in the depths of the Depression, and at last people began to talk, Mom said.

What did they say? George asked.

Nothing important, Mom said, but she suddenly swept her cards together. They said your Gramma and Granpa were too lucky for ordinary folks, that's all. And it was just after that that the books had been found. Mom wouldn't say more than that, except that the school board had found some and that a hired man had found some more. There had been a big scandal. Granpa and Gramma had moved to Buxton and that was the end of it.

The children had grown up and had children of their own, making aunts and uncles of each other; Mom had gotten married and moved to New York with Dad (who George could not even remember). Buddy had been born, and then they had moved to Stratford and in 1969 George had been born, and in 1971 Dad had been hit and killed by a car driven by the Drunk Man Who Had to Go to Jail.

When Granpa had his heart attack there had been a great many letters back and forth among the aunts and uncles. They didn't want to put the old lady in a nursing home. And she didn't want to go to a home. If Gramma didn't want to do a thing like that, it might be better to accede to her wishes. The old lady wanted to go to one of them and live out the rest of her years with that child. But they were all married, and none of them had spouses who felt like sharing their home with a senile and often unpleasant old woman. All were married, that was, except Ruth.

The letters flew back and forth, and at last George's Mom had given in. She quit her job and came to Maine to take care of the old lady. The others had chipped together to buy a small house in outer Castle View, where property values were low. Each month they would send her a check, so she could "do" for the old lady and for her boys.

What's happened is my brothers and sisters have turned me into a sharecropper, George could remember her saying once, and he didn't know for sure what that meant, but she had sounded bitter when she said it, like it was a joke that didn't come out smooth in a laugh but instead stuck in her throat like a bone. George knew (because Buddy had told him) that Mom had finally given in because everyone in the big, far-flung family had assured her that Gramma couldn't possibly last long. She had too many things wrong with her—high blood pressure, uremic poisoning, obesity, heart palpitations—to last long. It would be eight months, Aunt Flo and Aunt Stephanie and Uncle George (after whom George had been named) all said; a year at the most. But now it had been five years, and George called that lasting pretty long.

She had lasted pretty long, all right. Like a she-bear in hibernation, waiting for ... what?

(you know how to deal with her best Ruth you know how to shut her up)

George, on his way to the fridge to check the directions on one of Gramma's special saltfree dinners, stopped. Stopped cold. Where had that come from? That voice speaking inside his head?

Suddenly his belly and chest broke out in gooseflesh. He reached inside his shirt and touched one of his nipples. It was like a little pebble, and he took his finger away in a hurry.

Uncle George. His "namesake uncle," who worked for Sperry-Rand in New York. It had been his voice. He had said that when he and his family came up for Christmas two—no, three—years ago.

She's more dangerous now that she's senile.

George, be quiet. The boys are around somewhere.

George stood by the refrigerator, one hand on the cold chrome handle, thinking, remembering, looking out into the growing dark. Buddy hadn't been around that day. Buddy was already outside, because Buddy had wanted the good sled, that was why; they were going sliding on Joe Camber's hill and the other sled had a buckled runner. So Buddy was outside and here was George, hunting through the boot-and-sock box in the entryway, looking for a pair of heavy socks that matched, and was it his fault his mother and Uncle George were talking in the kitchen? George didn't think so. Was it George's fault that God hadn't struck him deaf, or, lacking the extremity of that measure, at least located the conversation elsewhere in the house? George didn't believe that, either. As his mother had pointed out on more than one occasion (usually after a glass of wine or two), God sometimes played dirty.

You know what I mean, Uncle George said.

His wife and his three girls had gone over to Gates Falls to do some last-minute Christmas shopping, and Uncle George was pretty much in the bag, just like the Drunk Man Who Had to Go to Jail. George could tell by the way his uncle slurred his words.

You remember what happened to Franklin when he crossed her.

George, be quiet, or I'll pour the rest of your beer right down the sink!

Well, she didn't really mean to do it. Her tongue just got away from her. Peritonitis—

George, shut up!

Maybe, George remembered thinking vaguely, God isn't the only one who plays dirty.

Now he broke the hold of these old memories and looked in the freezer and took out one of Gramma's dinners. Veal. With peas on the side. You had to preheat the oven and then bake it for forty minutes at 300 degrees. Easy. He was all set. The tea was ready on the stove if Gramma wanted that. He could make tea, or he could make dinner in short order if Gramma woke up and yelled for it. Tea or dinner, he was a regular two-gun Sam. Dr. Arlinder's number was on the board, in case of an emergency. Everything was cool. So what was he worried about?

He had never been left alone with Gramma, that was what he was worried, about.

Send the boy to me, Ruth. Send him over here.

No. He's crying.

She's more dangerous now ... you know what I mean.

We all lie to our children about Gramma.

Neither he nor Buddy. Neither of them had ever been left alone with Gramma. Until now.

Suddenly George's mouth went dry. He went to the sink and got a drink of water. He felt ... funny. These thoughts. These memories. Why was his brain dragging them all up now?

He felt as if someone had dumped all the pieces to a puzzle in front of him and that he couldn't quite put them together. And maybe it was good he couldn't put them together, because the finished picture might be, well, sort of boogery. It might—

From the other room, where Gramma lived all her days and nights, a choking, rattling, gargling noise suddenly arose.

A whistling gasp was sucked into George as he pulled breath. He turned toward Gramma's room and discovered his shoes were tightly

nailed to the linoleum floor. His heart was spike-iron in his chest. His eyes were wide and bulging. Go now, his brain told his feet, and his feet saluted and said Not at all, sir!

Gramma had never made a noise like that before.

Gramma had never made a noise like that before.

It arose again, a choking sound, low and then descending lower, becoming an insectile buzz before it died out altogether. George was able to move at last. He walked toward the entryway that separated the kitchen from Gramma's room. He crossed it and looked into her room, his heart slamming. Now his throat was choked with wool mittens; it would be impossible to swallow past them.

Gramma was still sleeping and it was all right, that was his first thought; it had only been some weird sound, after all; maybe she made it all the time when he and Buddy were in school. Just a snore. Gramma was fine. Sleeping.

That was his first thought. Then he noticed that the yellow hand that had been on the coverlet was now dangling limply over the side of the bed, the long nails almost but not quite touching the floor. And her mouth was open, as wrinkled and caved-in as an orifice dug into a rotten piece of fruit.

Timidly, hesitantly, George approached her.

He stood by her side for a long time, looking down at her, not daring to touch her. The imperceptible rise and fall of the coverlet appeared to have ceased.

Appeared.

That was the key word. Appeared.

But that's just because you are spooked, Georgie. You're just being Senor El-Stupido, like Buddy says—it's a game. Your brain's playing

tricks on your eyes, she's breathing just fine, she's—

“Gramma?” he said, and all that came out was a whisper. He cleared his throat and jumped back, frightened of the sound. But his voice was a little louder. “Gramma? You want your tea now? Gramma?”

Nothing.

The eyes were closed.

The mouth was open.

The hand hung.

Outside, the setting sun shone golden-red through the trees.

He saw her in a positive fullness then; saw her with that childish and brilliantly unhoused eye of unformed immature reflection, not here, not now, not in bed, but sitting in the white vinyl chair, holding out her arms, her face at the same time stupid and triumphant. He found himself remembering one of the “bad spells” when Gramma began to shout, as if in a foreign language—Gyaagin! Gyaagin! Hastur degryon Yos-soth-oth!—and Mom had sent them outside, had screamed “Just GO!” at Buddy when Buddy stopped at the box in the entry to hunt for his gloves, and Buddy had looked back over his shoulder, so scared he was walleyed with it because their mom never shouted, and they had both gone out and stood in the driveway, not talking, their hands stuffed in their pockets for warmth, wondering what was happening.

Later, Mom had called them in for supper as if nothing had happened.

(you know how to deal with her best Ruth you know how to shut her up)

George had not thought of that particular “bad spell” from that day to this. Except now, looking at Gramma, who was sleeping so strangely

in her crank-up hospital bed, it occurred to him with dawning horror that it was the next day they had learned that Mrs. Harham, who lived up the road and sometimes visited Gramma, had died in her sleep that night.

Gramma's "bad spells."

Spells.

Witches were supposed to be able to cast spells. That's what made them witches, wasn't it? Poisoned apples. Princes into toads. Gingerbread houses. Abracadabra. Presto-chango. Spells.

Spilled-out pieces of an unknown puzzle flying together in George's mind, as if by magic.

Magic, George thought, and groaned.

What was the picture? It was Gramma, of course, Gramma and her books, Gramma who had been driven out of town, Gramma who hadn't been able to have babies and then had been able to, Gramma who had been driven out of the church as well as out of town. The picture was Gramma, yellow and fat and wrinkled and sluglike, her toothless mouth curved into a sunken grin, her faded, blind eyes somehow sly and cunning; and on her head was a black, conical hat sprinkled with silver stars and glittering Babylonian crescents; at her feet were slinking black cats with eyes as yellow as urine, and the smells were pork and blindness, pork and burning, ancient stars and candles as dark as the earth in which coffins lay; he heard words spoken from ancient books, and each word was like a stone and each sentence like a crypt reared in some stinking boneyard and every paragraph like a nightmare caravan of the plague-dead taken to a place of burning; his eye was the eye of a child and in that moment it opened wide in startled understanding on blackness.

Gramma had been a witch, just like the Wicked Witch in the Wizard of Oz. And now she was dead. That gargling sound, George thought

with increasing horror. That gargling, snoring sound had been a ... a ... a “death rattle.”

“Gramma?” he whispered, and crazily he thought: Dingdong, the wicked witch is dead.

No response. He held his cupped hand in front of Gramma’s mouth. There was no breeze stirring around inside Gramma. It was dead calm and slack sails and no wake widening behind the keel. Some of his fright began to recede now, and George tried to think. He remembered Uncle Fred showing him how to wet a finger and test the wind, and now he licked his entire palm and held it in front of Gramma’s mouth.

Still nothing.

He started for the phone to call Dr. Arlinder, and then stopped. Suppose he called the doctor and she really wasn’t dead at all? He’d be in dutch for sure.

Take her pulse.

He stopped in the doorway, looking doubtfully back at that dangling hand. The sleeve of Gramma’s nightie had pulled up, exposing her wrist. But that was no good. Once, after a visit to the doctor when the nurse had pressed her finger to his wrist to take his pulse, George had tried it and hadn’t been able to find anything. As far as his own unskilled fingers could tell, he was dead.

Besides, he didn’t really want to ... well ... to touch Gramma. Even if she was dead. Especially if she was dead.

George stood in the entryway, looking from Gramma’s still, bedridden form to the phone on the wall beside Dr. Arlinder’s number, and back to Gramma again. He would just have to call. He would—

—get a mirror!

Sure! When you breathed on a mirror, it got cloudy. He had seen a doctor check an unconscious person that way once in a movie. There was a bathroom connecting with Gramma's room and now George hurried in and got Gramma's vanity mirror. One side of it was regular, the other side magnified, so you could see to pluck out hairs and do stuff like that.

George took it back to Gramma's bed and held one side of the mirror until it was almost touching Gramma's open, gaping mouth. He held it there while he counted to sixty, watching Gramma the whole time. Nothing changed. He was sure she was dead even before he took the mirror away from her mouth and observed its surface, which was perfectly clear and unclouded.

Gramma was dead.

George realized with relief and some surprise that he could feel sorry for her now. Maybe she had been a witch. Maybe not. Maybe she had only thought she was a witch. However it had been, she was gone now. He realized with an adult's comprehension that questions of concrete reality became not unimportant but less vital when they were examined in the mute bland face of mortal remains. He realized this with an adult's comprehension and accepted with an adult's relief. This was a passing footprint, the shape of a shoe, in his mind. So are all the child's adult impressions; it is only in later years that the child realizes that he was being made; formed; shaped by random experiences; all that remains in the instant beyond the footprint is that bitter gunpowder smell which is the ignition of an idea beyond a child's given years.

He returned the mirror to the bathroom, then went back through her room, glancing at the body on his way by. The setting sun had painted the old dead face with barbaric, orange-red colors, and George looked away quickly.

He went through the entry and crossed the kitchen to the telephone, determined to do everything right. Already in his mind he saw a certain advantage over Buddy; whenever Buddy started to tease

him, he would simply say: I was all by myself in the house when Gramma died, and I did everything right.

Call Dr. Arlinder, that was first. Call him and say, “My Gramma just died. Can you tell me what I should do? Cover her up or something?”

No.

“I think my Gramma just died.”

Yes. Yes, that was better. Nobody thought a little kid knew anything anyway, so that was better.

Or how about:

“I’m pretty sure my Gramma just died—”

Sure! That was best of all.

And tell about the mirror and the death rattle and all. And the doctor would come right away, and when he was done examining Gramma he would say, “I pronounce you dead, Gramma,” and then say to George, “You laid extremely chilly in a tough situation, George. I want to congratulate you.” And George would say something appropriately modest.

George looked at Dr. Arlinder’s number and took a couple of slow deep breaths before grabbing the phone. His heart was beating fast, but that painful spike-iron thud was gone now. Gramma had died. The worst had happened, and somehow it wasn’t as bad as waiting for her to start bellowing for Mom to bring her tea.

The phone was dead.

He listened to the blankness, his mouth still formed around the words I’m sorry, Missus Dodd, but this is George Bruckner and I have to call the doctor for my Gramma. No voices. No dial tone. Just dead blankness. Like the dead blankness in the bed in there.

Gramma is—

—is—

(oh she is)

Gramma is laying chilly.

Gooseflesh again, painful and marbling. His eyes fixed on the Pyrex teakettle on the stove, the cup on the counter with the herbal tea bag in it. No more tea for Gramma. Not ever.

(laying so chilly)

George shuddered.

He stuttered his finger up and down on the Princess phone's cutoff button, but the phone was dead. Just as dead as—

(just as chilly as)

He slammed the handset down hard and the bell tinged faintly inside and he picked it up in a hurry to see if that meant it had magically gone right again. But there was nothing, and this time he put it back slowly.

His heart was thudding harder again.

I'm alone in this house with her dead body.

He crossed the kitchen slowly, stood by the table for a minute, and then turned on the light. It was getting dark in the house. Soon the sun would be gone; night would be here.

Wait. That's all I got to do. Just wait until Mom gets back. This is better, really. If the phone went out, it's better that she just died instead of maybe having a fit or something, foaming at the mouth, maybe falling out of bed—

Ah, that was bad. He could have done very nicely without that horse-pucky.

Like being alone in the dark and thinking of dead things that were still lively—seeing shapes in the shadows on the walls and thinking of death, thinking of the dead, those things, the way they would stink and the way they would move toward you in the black: thinking this: thinking that: thinking of bugs turning in flesh: burrowing in flesh: eyes that moved in the dark. Yeah. That most of all. Thinking of eyes that moved in the dark and the creak of floorboards as something came across the room through the zebra-stripes of shadows from the light outside. Yeah.

In the dark your thoughts had a perfect circularity, and no matter what you tried to think of—flowers or Jesus or baseball or winning the gold in the 440 at the Olympics—it somehow led back to the form in the shadows with the claws and the unblinking eyes.

“Shittabrick!” he hissed, and suddenly slapped his own face. And hard. He was giving himself the whimwhams, it was time to stop it. He wasn’t six anymore. She was dead, that was all, dead. There was no more thought inside her now than there was in a marble or a floorboard or a doorknob or a radio dial or—

And a strong alien unprepared-for voice, perhaps only the unforgiving unbidden voice of simple survival, inside him cried: Shut up Georgie and get about your goddam business!

Yeah, okay. Okay, but—

He went back to the door of her bedroom to make sure.

There lay Gramma, one hand out of bed and touching the floor, her mouth hinged agape. Gramma was part of the furniture now. You could put her hand back in bed or pull her hair or pop a water glass into her mouth or put earphones on her head and play Chuck Berry into them full-tilt boogie and it would be all the same to her. Gramma

was, as Buddy sometimes said, out of it. Gramma had had the course.

A sudden low and rhythmic thudding noise began, not far to George's left, and he started, a little yipping cry escaping him. It was the storm door, which Buddy had put on just last week. Just the storm door, unlatched and thudding back and forth in the freshening breeze.

George opened the inside door, leaned out, and caught the storm door as it swung back. The wind—it wasn't a breeze but a wind—caught his hair and riffled it. He latched the door firmly and wondered where the wind had come from all of a sudden. When Mom left it had been almost dead calm. But when Mom had left it had been bright daylight and now it was dusk.

George glanced in at Gramma again and then went back and tried the phone again. Still dead. He sat down, got up, and began to walk back and forth through the kitchen, pacing, trying to think.

An hour later it was full dark.

The phone was still out. George supposed the wind, which had now risen to a near-gale, had knocked down some of the lines, probably out by the Beaver Bog, where the trees grew everywhere in a helter-skelter of deadfalls and swampwater. The phone dinged occasionally, ghostly and far, but the line remained blank. Outside the wind moaned along the eaves of the small house and George reckoned he would have a story to tell at the next Boy Scout Camporee, all right ... just sitting in the house alone with his dead Gramma and the phone out and the wind pushing rafts of clouds fast across the sky, clouds that were black on top and the color of dead tallow, the color of Gramma's claw-hands, underneath.

It was, as Buddy also sometimes said, a Classic.

He wished he was telling it now, with the actuality of the thing safely behind him. He sat at the kitchen table, his history book open in front

of him, jumping at every sound ... and now that the wind was up, there were a lot of sounds as the house creaked in all its unoiled secret forgotten joints.

She'll be home pretty quick. She'll be home and then everything will be okay. Everything

(you never covered her)

will be all r

(never covered her face)

George jerked as if someone had spoken aloud and stared wide-eyed across the kitchen at the useless telephone. You were supposed to pull the sheet up over the dead person's face. It was in all the movies.

Hell with that! I'm not going in there!

No! And no reason why he should! Mom could cover her face when she got home! Or Dr. Arlinder when he came! Or the undertaker!

Someone, anyone, but him.

No reason why he should.

It was nothing to him, and nothing to Gramma.

Buddy's voice in his head:

If you weren't scared, how come you didn't dare to cover her face?

It was nothing to me.

Fraidycat!

Nothing to Gramma, either.

CHICKENGUTS afraidycat!

Sitting at the table in front of his unread history book, considering it, George began to see that if he didn't pull the counterpane up over Gramma's face, he couldn't claim to have done everything right, and thus Buddy would have a leg (no matter how shaky) to stand on.

Now he saw himself telling the spooky story of Gramma's death at the Camporee fire before taps, just getting to the comforting conclusion where Mom's headlights swept into the driveway—the reappearance of the grown-up, both reestablishing and reconfirming the concept of Order—and suddenly, from the shadows, a dark figure arises, and a pine-knot in the fire explodes and George can see it's Buddy there in the shadows, saying: If you was so brave, chickenguts, how come you didn't dare to cover up HER FACE?

George stood up, reminding himself that Gramma was out of it, that Gramma was wasted, that Gramma was laying chilly. He could put her hand back in bed, stuff a tea bag up her nose, put on earphones playing Chuck Berry full blast, etc., etc., and none of it would put a buzz under Gramma, because that was what being dead was about, nobody could put a buzz under a dead person, a dead person was the ultimate laid-back cool, and the rest of it was just dreams, ineluctable and apocalyptic and feverish dreams about closet doors swinging open in the dead mouth of midnight, just dreams about moonlight skating a delirious blue on the bones of disinterred skeletons, just—

He whispered, "Stop it, can't you? Stop being so—"

(gross)

He steeled himself. He was going to go in there and pull the coverlet up over her face, and take away Buddy's last leg to stand on. He would administer the few simple rituals of Gramma's death perfectly. He would cover her face and then—his face lit at the symbolism of this—he would put away her unused tea bag and her unused cup. Yes.

He went in, each step a conscious act. Gramma's room was dark, her body a vague hump in the bed, and he fumbled madly for the light switch, not finding it for what seemed to be an eternity. At last it clicked up, flooding the room with low yellow light from the cut-glass fixture overhead.

Gramma lay there, hand dangling, mouth open. George regarded her, dimly aware that little pearls of sweat now clung to his forehead, and wondered if his responsibility in the matter could possibly extend to picking up that cooling hand and putting it back in bed with the rest of Gramma. He decided it did not. Her hand could have fallen out of bed any old time. That was too much. He couldn't touch her. Everything else, but not that.

Slowly, as if moving through some thick fluid instead of air, George approached Gramma. He stood over her, looking down. Gramma was yellow. Part of it was the light, filtered through the old fixture, but not all.

Breathing through his mouth, his breath rasping audibly, George grasped the coverlet and pulled it up over Gramma's face. He let go of it and it slipped just a little, revealing her hairline and the yellow creased parchment of her brow. Steeling himself, he grasped it again, keeping his hands far to one side and the other of her head so he wouldn't have to touch her, even through the cloth, and pulled it up again. This time it stayed. It was satisfactory. Some of the fear went out of George. He had buried her. Yes, that was why you covered the dead person up, and why it was right: it was like burying them. It was a statement.

He looked at the hand dangling down, unburied, and discovered now that he could touch it, he could tuck it under and bury it with the rest of Gramma.

He bent, grasped the cool hand, and lifted it.

The hand twisted in his and clutched his wrist.

George screamed. He staggered backward, screaming in the empty house, screaming against the sound of the wind reaving the eaves, screaming against the sound of the house's creaking joints. He backed away, pulling Gramma's body askew under the coverlet, and the hand thudded back down, twisting, turning, snatching at the air ... and then relaxing to limpness again.

I'm all right, it was nothing, it was nothing but a reflex.

George nodded in perfect understanding, and then he remembered again how her hand had turned, clutching his, and he shrieked. His eyes bulged in their sockets. His hair stood out, perfectly on end, in a cone. His heart was a runaway stamping-press in his chest. The world tilted crazily, came back to the level, and then just went on moving until it was tilted the other way. Every time rational thought started to come back, panic goosed him again. He whirled, wanting only to get out of the room to some other room—or even three or four miles down the road, if that was what it took—where he could get all of this under control. So he whirled and ran full tilt into the wall, missing the open doorway by a good two feet.

He rebounded and fell to the floor, his head singing with a sharp, cutting pain that sliced keenly through the panic. He touched his nose and his hand came back bloody. Fresh drops spotted his shirt. He scrambled to his feet and looked around wildly.

The hand dangled against the floor as it had before, but Gramma's body was not askew; it also was as it had been.

He had imagined the whole thing. He had come into the room, and all the rest of it had been no more than a mind-movie.

No.

But the pain had cleared his head. Dead people didn't grab your wrist. Dead was dead. When you were dead they could use you for a hat rack or stuff you in a tractor tire and roll you downhill or et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. When you were dead you might be acted upon (by, say, little boys trying to put dead dangling hands back into bed), but your days of acting upon—so to speak—were over.

Unless you're a witch. Unless you pick your time to die when no one's around but one little kid, because it's best that way, you can ... can ...

Can what?

Nothing. It was stupid. He had imagined the whole thing because he had been scared and that was all there was to it. He wiped his nose with his forearm and winced at the pain. There was a bloody smear on the skin of his inner forearm.

He wasn't going to go near her again, that was all. Reality or hallucination, he wasn't going to mess with Gramma. The bright flare of panic was gone, but he was still miserably scared, near tears, shaky at the sight of his own blood, only wanting his mother to come home and take charge.

George backed out of the room, through the entry, and into the kitchen. He drew a long, shuddery breath and let it out. He wanted a wet rag for his nose, and suddenly he felt like he was going to vomit. He went over to the sink and ran cold water. He bent and got a rag from the basin under the sink—a piece of one of Gramma's old diapers—and ran it under the cold tap, snuffling up blood as he did so. He soaked the old soft cotton diaper-square until his hand was numb, then turned off the tap and wrung it out.

He was putting it to his nose when her voice spoke from the other room.

“Come here, boy,” Gramma called in a dead buzzing voice. “Come in here—Gramma wants to hug you.”

George tried to scream and no sound came out. No sound at all. But there were sounds in the other room. Sounds that he heard when Mom was in there, giving Gramma her bedbath, lifting her bulk, dropping it, turning it, dropping it again.

Only those sounds now seemed to have a slightly different and yet utterly specific meaning—it sounded as though Gramma was trying to ... to get out of bed.

“Boy! Come in here, boy! Right NOW! Step to it!”

With horror he saw that his feet were answering that command. He told them to stop and they just went on, left foot, right foot, hay foot, straw foot, over the linoleum; his brain was a terrified prisoner inside his body—a hostage in a tower.

She IS a witch, she's a witch and she's having one of her "bad spells," oh yeah, it's a "spell" all right, and it's bad, it's REALLY bad, oh God oh Jesus help me help me help me—

George walked across the kitchen and through the entryway and into Gramma's room and yes, she hadn't just tried to get out of bed, she was out, she was sitting in the white vinyl chair where she hadn't sat for four years, since she got too heavy to walk and too senile to know where she was, anyway.

But Gramma didn't look senile now.

Her face was sagging and doughy, but the senility was gone—if it had ever really been there at all, and not just a mask she wore to lull small boys and tired husbandless women. Now Gramma's face gleamed with fell intelligence—it gleamed like an old, stinking wax candle. Her eyes drooped in her face, lackluster and dead. Her chest was not moving. Her nightie had pulled up, exposing elephantine thighs. The coverlet of her deathbed was thrown back.

Gramma held her huge arms out to him.

"I want to hug you, Georgie," that flat and buzzing deadvoice said. "Don't be a scared old crybaby. Let your Gramma hug you."

George cringed back, trying to resist that almost insurmountable pull. Outside, the wind shrieked and roared. George's face was long and twisted with the extremity of his fright; the face of a woodcut caught and shut up in an ancient book.

George began to walk toward her. He couldn't help himself. Step by dragging step toward those outstretched arms. He would show Buddy that he wasn't scared of Gramma, either. He would go to

Gramma and he hugged because he wasn't a crybaby fraidycat. He would go to Gramma now.

He was almost within the circle of her arms when the window to his left crashed inward and suddenly a wind-blown branch was in the room with them, autumn leaves still clinging to it. The river of wind flooded the room, blowing over Gramma's pictures, whipping her nightgown and her hair.

Now George could scream. He stumbled backward out of her grip and Gramma made a cheated hissing sound, her lips pulling back over smooth old gums; her thick, wrinkled hands clapped uselessly together on moving air.

George's feet tangled together and he fell down. Gramma began to rise from the white vinyl chair, a tottering pile of flesh; she began to stagger toward him. George found he couldn't get up; the strength had deserted his legs. He began to crawl backward, whimpering. Gramma came on, slowly but relentlessly, dead and yet alive, and suddenly George understood what the hug would mean; the puzzle was complete in his mind and somehow he found his feet just as Gramma's hand closed on his shirt. It ripped up the side, and for one moment he felt her cold flesh against his skin before fleeing into the kitchen again.

He would run into the night. Anything other than being hugged by the witch, his Gramma. Because when his mother came back she would find Gramma dead and George alive, oh yes ... but George would have developed a sudden taste for herbal tea.

He looked back over his shoulder and saw Gramma's grotesque, misshapen shadow rising on the wall as she came through the entryway.

And at that moment the telephone rang, shrilly and stridently.

George seized it without even thinking and screamed into it; screamed for someone to come, to please come. He screamed

these things silently; not a sound escaped his locked throat.

Gramma tottered into the kitchen in her pink nightie. Her whitish-yellow hair blew wildly around her face, and one of her horn combs hung askew against her wrinkled neck.

Gramma was grinning.

“Ruth?” It was Aunt Flo’s voice, almost lost in the whistling windtunnel of a bad long-distance connection. “Ruth, are you there?” It was Aunt Flo in Minnesota, over two thousand miles away.

“Help me!” George screamed into the phone, and what came out was a tiny, hissing whistle, as if he had blown into a harmonica full of dead reeds.

Gramma tottered across the linoleum, holding her arms out for him. Her hands snapped shut and then open and then shut again. Gramma wanted her hug; she had been waiting for that hug for five years.

“Ruth, can you hear me? It’s been storming here, it just started, and I ... I got scared. Ruth, I can’t hear you—”

“Gramma,” George moaned into the telephone. Now she was almost upon him.

“George?” Aunt Flo’s voice suddenly sharpened; became almost a shriek. “George, is that you?”

He began to back away from Gramma, and suddenly realized that he had stupidly backed away from the door and into the corner formed by the kitchen cabinets and the sink. The horror was complete. As her shadow fell over him, the paralysis broke and he screamed into the phone, screamed it over and over again: “Gramma! Gramma! Gramma!”

Gramma's cold hands touched his throat. Her muddy, ancient eyes locked on his, draining his will.

Faintly, dimly, as if across many years as well as many miles, he heard Aunt Flo say: "Tell her to lie down, George, tell her to lie down and be still. Tell her she must do it in your name and the name of her father. The name of her taken father is Hastur. His name is power in her ear, George—tell her Lie down in the Name of Hastur—tell her —"

The old, wrinkled hand tore the telephone from George's nerveless grip. There was a taut pop as the cord pulled out of the phone. George collapsed in the corner and Gramma bent down, a huge heap of flesh above him, blotting out the light.

George screamed: "Lie down! Be still! Hastur's name! Hastur! Lie down! Be still!"

Her hands closed around his neck—

"You gotta do it! Aunt Flo said you did! In my name! In your Father's name! Lie down! Be sti—"

—and squeezed.

When the lights finally splashed into the driveway an hour later, George was sitting at the table in front of his unread history book. He got up and walked to the back door and opened it. To his left, the Princess phone hung in its cradle, its useless cord looped around it.

His mother came in, a leaf clinging to the collar of her coat. "Such a wind," she said. "Was everything all—George? George, what happened?"

The blood fell from Mom's face in a single, shocked rush, turning her a horrible clown-white.

“Gramma,” he said. “Gramma died. Gramma died, Mommy.” And he began to cry.

She swept him into her arms and then staggered back against the wall, as if this act of hugging had robbed the last of her strength. “Did ... did anything happen?” she asked. “George, did anything else happen?”

“The wind knocked a tree branch through her window,” George said.

She pushed him away, looked at his shocked, slack face for a moment, and then stumbled into Gramma’s room. She was in there for perhaps four minutes. When she came back, she was holding a red tatter of cloth. It was a bit of George’s shirt.

“I took this out of her hand,” Mom whispered.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” George said. “Call Aunt Flo, if you want. I’m tired. I want to go to bed.”

She made as if to stop him, but didn’t. He went up to the room he shared with Buddy and opened the hot-air register so he could hear what his mother did next. She wasn’t going to talk to Aunt Flo, not tonight, because the telephone cord had pulled out; not tomorrow, because shortly before Mom had come home, George had spoken a short series of words, some of them bastardized Latin, some only pre-Druidic grunts, and over two thousand miles away Aunt Flo had dropped dead of a massive brain hemorrhage. It was amazing how those words came back. How everything came back.

George undressed and lay down naked on his bed. He put his hands behind his head and looked up into the darkness. Slowly, slowly, a sunken and rather horrible grin surfaced on his face.

Things were going to be different around here from now on.

Very different.

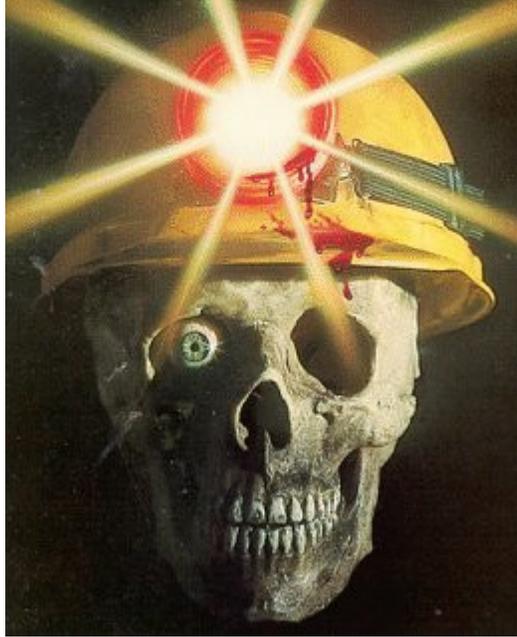
Buddy, for instance. George could hardly wait until Buddy came home from the hospital and started in with the Spoon Torture of the Heathen Chinee or an Indian Rope Burn or something like that. George supposed he would have to let Buddy get away with it—at least in the daytime, when people could see—but when night came and they were alone in this room, in the dark, with the door closed ...

George began to laugh soundlessly.

As Buddy always said, it was going to be a Classic.

STEPHEN KING'S

GRAVEYARD SHIFT



GRAVEYARD SHIFT

Stephen King

Two A.M., Friday.

Hall was sitting on the bench by the elevator, the only place on the third floor where a working joe could catch a smoke, when Warwick came up. He wasn't happy to see Warwick. The foreman wasn't supposed to show up on three during the graveyard shift; he was supposed to stay down in his office in the basement drinking coffee from the urn that stood on the corner of his desk. Besides, it was hot.

It was the hottest June on record in Gates Falls, and the Orange Crush thermometer which was also by the elevator had once rested at 94 degrees at three in the morning. God only knew what kind of hellhole the mill was on the three-to-eleven shift.

Hall worked the picker machine, a balky gadget manufactured by a defunct Cleveland firm in 1934. He had only been working in the mill since April, which meant he was still making minimum \$1.78 an hour, which was still all right. No wife, no steady girl, no alimony. He was a drifter, and during the last three years he had moved on his thumb from Berkeley (college student) to Lake Tahoe (busboy) to Galveston (stevedore) to Miami (short-order cook) to Wheeling (taxi driver and dish-washer) to Gates Falls, Maine (picker-machine operator). He didn't figure on moving again until the snow fell. He was a solitary person and he liked the hours from eleven to seven when the blood flow of the big mill was at its coolest, not to mention the temperature.

The only thing he did not like was the rats.

The third floor was long and deserted, lit only by the sputtering glow of the fluorescents. Unlike the other levels of the mill, it was relatively silent and unoccupied—at least by the humans. The rats were another matter. The only machine on three was the picker; the rest of the floor was storage for the ninety-pound bags of fiber which had yet to be sorted by Hall's long gear-toothed machine. They were stacked like link sausages in long rows, some of them (especially the discontinued meltons and irregular slipes for which there were no orders) years old and dirty gray with industrial wastes. They made

fine nesting places for the rats, huge, fat-bellied creatures with rabid eyes and bodies that jumped with lice and vermin.

Hall had developed a habit of collecting a small arsenal of soft-drink cans from the trash barrel during his break. He pegged them at the rats during times when work was slow, retrieving them later at his leisure. Only this time Mr. Foreman had caught him, coming up the stairs instead of using the elevator like the sneaky sonofabitch everyone said he was.

“What are you up to, Hall?”

“The rats,” Hall said, realizing how lame that must sound now that all the rats had snuggled safely back into their houses. “I peg cans at ‘em when I see ‘em.”

Warwick nodded once, briefly. He was a big beefy man with a crew cut. His shirtsleeves were rolled up and his tie was pulled down. He looked at Hall closely. “We don’t pay you to chuck cans at rats, mister. Not even if you pick them up again.”

“Harry hasn’t sent down an order for twenty minutes,” Hall answered, thinking: Why couldn’t you stay the hell put and drink your coffee? “I can’t run it through the picker if I don’t have it.”

Warwick nodded as if the topic no longer interested him.

“Maybe I’ll take a walk up and see Wisconsky,” he said. “Five to one he’s reading a magazine while the crap piles up in his bins.”

Hall didn’t say anything.

Warwick suddenly pointed. “There’s one! Get the bastard!”

Hall fired the Nehi can he had been holding with one whistling, overhand motion. The rat, which had been watching them from atop one of the fabric bags with its bright buckshot eyes, fled with one

faint squeak. Warwick threw back his head and laughed as Hall went after the can.

“I came to see you about something else,” Warwick said.

“Is that so?”

“Next week’s Fourth of July week.” Hall nodded. The mill would be shut down Monday to Saturday—vacation week for men with at least one year’s tenure. Layoff week for men with less than a year. “You want to work?”

Hall shrugged. “Doing what?”

“We’re going to clean the whole basement level. Nobody’s touched it for twelve years. Helluva mess. We’re going to use hoses.”

“The town zoning committee getting on the board of directors?”

Warwick looked steadily at Hall. “You want it or not? Two an hour, double time on the fourth. We’re working the graveyard shift because it’ll be cooler.”

Hall calculated. He could clear maybe seventy-five bucks after taxes. Better than the goose egg he had been looking forward to.

“All right.”

“Report down by the dye house next Monday.”

Hall watched him as he started back to the stairs. Warwick paused halfway there and turned back to look at Hall. “You used to be a college boy, didn’t you?”

Hall nodded.

“Okay, college boy, I’m keeping it in mind.”

He left. Hall sat down and lit another smoke, holding a soda can in one hand and watching for the rats. He could just imagine how it would be in the basement—the sub-basement, actually, a level below the dye house. Damp, dark, full of spiders and rotten cloth and ooze from the river—and rats. Maybe even bats, the aviators of the rodent family. Gah.

Hall threw the can hard, then smiled thinly to himself as the faint sound of Warwick's voice came down through the overhead ducts, reading Harry Wisconsky the riot act.

Okay, college boy, I'm keeping it in mind.

He stopped smiling abruptly and butted his smoke. A few moments later Wisconsky started to send rough nylon down through the blowers, and Hall went to work. And after a while the rats came out and sat atop the bags at the back of the long room watching him with their unblinking black eyes. They looked like a jury.

Eleven P.M., Monday.

There were about thirty-six men sitting around when Warwick came in wearing a pair of old jeans tucked into high rubber boots. Hall had been listening to Harry Wisconsky, who was enormously fat, enormously lazy, and enormously gloomy.

"It's gonna be a mess," Wisconsky was saying when Mr. Foreman came in. "You wait and see, we're all gonna go home blacker'n midnight in Persia."

"Okay!" Warwick said. "We strung sixty lightbulbs down there, so it should be bright enough for you to see what you're doing. You guys"—he pointed to a bunch of men that had been leaning against the drying spools—"I want you to hook up the hoses over there to the main water conduit by the stairwell. You can unroll them down the stairs. We got about eighty yards for each man, and that should be plenty. Don't get cute and spray one of your buddies or you'll send him to the hospital. They pack a wallop."

“Somebody’ll get hurt,” Wisconsky prophesied sourly. “Wait and see.”

“You other guys,” Warwick said pointing to the group that Hall and Wisconsky were a part of. “You’re the crap crew tonight. You go in pairs with an electric wagon for each team. There’s old office furniture, bags of cloth, hunks of busted machinery, you name it. We’re gonna pile it by the airshaft at the west end. Anyone who doesn’t know how to run a wagon?”

No one raised a hand. The electric wagons were battery-driven contraptions like miniature dump trucks. They developed a nauseating stink after continual use that reminded Hall of burning power lines.

“Okay,” Warwick said. “We got the basement divided up into sections, and we’ll be done by Thursday. Friday we’ll chain-hoist the crap out. Questions?”

There were none. Hall studied the foreman’s face closely, and he had a sudden premonition of a strange thing coming. The idea pleased him. He did not like Warwick very much.

“Fine,” Warwick said. “Let’s get at it.”

Two A.M., Tuesday.

Hall was bushed and very tired of listening to Wisconsky’s steady patter of profane complaints. He wondered if it would do any good to belt Wisconsky. He doubted it. It would just give Wisconsky something else to bitch about.

Hall had known it would be bad, but this was murder. For one thing, he hadn’t anticipated the smell. The polluted stink of the river, mixed with the odor of decaying fabric, rotting masonry, vegetable matter. In the far corner, where they had begun, Hall discovered a colony of huge white toadstools poking their way up through the shattered cement. His hands had come in contact with them as he pulled and

yanked at a rusty gear-toothed wheel, and they felt curiously warm and bloated, like the flesh of a man afflicted with dropsy

The bulbs couldn't banish the twelve-year darkness; it could only push it back a little and cast a sickly yellow glow over the whole mess. The place looked like the shattered nave of a desecrated church, with its high ceiling and mammoth discarded machinery that they would never be able to move, its wet walls overgrown with patches of yellow moss, and the atonal choir that was the water from the hoses, running in the half-clogged sewer network that eventually emptied into the river below the falls.

And the rats—huge ones that made those on third look like dwarfs. God knew what they were eating down here. They were continually overturning boards and bags to reveal huge nests of shredded newspaper, watching with atavistic loathing as the pups fled into the cracks and crannies, their eyes huge and blind with the continuous darkness.

"Let's stop for a smoke," Wisconsky said. He sounded out of breath, but Hall had no idea why; he had been goldbricking all night. Still, it was about that time, and they were currently out of sight of everyone else.

"All right." He leaned against the edge of the electric wagon and lit up.

"I never should've let Warwick talk me into this," Wisconsky said dolefully. "This ain't work for a man. But he was mad the other night when he caught me in the crapper up on four with my pants up. Christ, was he mad."

Hall said nothing. He was thinking about Warwick, and about the rats. Strange, how the two things seemed tied together. The rats seemed to have forgotten all about men in their long stay under the mill; they were impudent and hardly afraid at all. One of them had sat up on its hind legs like a squirrel until Hall had gotten in kicking distance, and then it had launched itself at his boot, biting at the

leather. Hundreds, maybe thousands. He wondered how many varieties of disease they were carrying around in this black sumphole. And Warwick. Something about him—

“I need the money,” Wisconsky said. “But Christ Jesus, buddy, this ain’t no work for a man. Those rats.” He looked around fearfully. “It almost seems like they think. You ever wonder how it’d be, if we was little and they were big—”

“Oh, shut up,” Hall said.

Wisconsky looked at him, wounded. “Say, I’m sorry, buddy. It’s just that ...” He trailed off. “Jesus, this place stinks!” he cried. “This ain’t no kind of work for a man!” A spider crawled off the edge of the wagon and scrambled up his arm. He brushed it off with a choked sound of disgust.

“Come on,” Hall said, snuffing his cigarette. “The faster, the quicker.”

“I suppose,” Wisconsky said miserably. “I suppose.”

Four A.M., Tuesday.

Lunch time.

Hall and Wisconsky sat with three or four other men, eating their sandwiches with black hands that not even the industrial detergent could clean. Hall ate looking into the foreman’s little glass office. Warwick was drinking coffee and eating cold hamburgers with great relish.

“Ray Upson had to go home,” Charlie Brochu said.

“He puke?” someone asked. “I almost did.”

“Nuh. Ray’d eat cowflop before he’d puke. Rat bit him.”

Hall looked up thoughtfully from his examination of Warwick. “Is that so?” he asked.

“Yeah.” Brochu shook his head. “I was teaming with him. Goddamndest thing I ever saw. Jumped out of a hole in one of those old cloth bags. Must have been big as a cat. Grabbed onto his hand and started chewing.”

“Jee-sus,” one of the men said, looking green.

“Yeah,” Brochu said. “Ray screamed just like a woman, and I ain’t blamin’ him. He bled like a pig. Would that thing let go? No sir. I had to belt it three or four times with a board before it would. Ray was just about crazy. He stomped it until it wasn’t nothing but a mess of fur. Damndest thing I ever saw. Warwick put a bandage on him and sent him home. Told him to go to the doctor tomorrow.”

“That was big of the bastard,” somebody said.

As if he had heard, Warwick got to his feet in his office, stretched, and then came to the door. “Time we got back with it.”

The men got to their feet slowly, eating up all the time they possibly could stowing their dinner buckets, getting cold drinks, buying candy bars. Then they started down, heels clanking dispiritedly on the steel grillwork of the stair risers.

Warwick passed Hall, clapping him on the shoulder. “How’s it going, college boy?” He didn’t wait for an answer.

“Come on,” Hall said patiently to Wisconsky, who was tying his shoelace. They went downstairs.

Seven A.M., Tuesday.

Hall and Wisconsky walked out together; it seemed to Hall that he had somehow inherited the fat Pole. Wisconsky was almost comically dirty, his fat moon face smeared like that of a small boy who has just been thrashed by the town bully.

There was none of the usual rough banter from the other men, the pulling of shirttails, the cracks about who was keeping Tony's wife warm between the hours of one and four. Nothing but silence and an occasional hawking sound as someone spat on the dirty floor.

"You want a lift?" Wisconsky asked him hesitantly.

"Thanks."

They didn't talk as they rode up Mill Street and crossed the bridge. They exchanged only a brief word when Wisconsky dropped him off in front of his apartment.

Hall went directly to the shower, still thinking about Warwick, trying to place whatever it was about Mr. Foreman that drew him, made him feel that somehow they had become tied together.

He slept as soon as his head hit the pillow, but his sleep was broken and restless: he dreamed of rats.

One A.M., Wednesday.

It was better running the hoses.

They couldn't go in until the crap crews had finished a section, and quite often they were done hosing before the next section was clear—which meant time for a cigarette. Hall worked the nozzle of one of the long hoses and Wisconsky pattered back and forth, unsnagging lengths of the hose, turning the water on and off, moving obstructions.

Warwick was short-tempered because the work was proceeding slowly. They would never be done by Thursday, the way things were going.

Now they were working on a helter-skelter jumble of nineteenth-century office equipment that had been piled in one corner—smashed rolltop desks, moldy ledgers, reams of invoices, chairs with

broken seats—and it was rat heaven. Scores of them squeaked and ran through the dark and crazy passages that honeycombed the heap, and after two men were bitten, the others refused to work until Warwick sent someone upstairs to get heavy rubberized gloves, the kind usually reserved for the dye-house crew, which had to work with acids.

Hall and Wisconsky were waiting to go in with their hoses when a sandy-haired bullneck named Carmichael began howling curses and backing away, slapping at his chest with his gloved hands.

A huge rat with gray-streaked fur and ugly, glaring eyes had bitten into his shirt and hung there, squeaking and kicking at Carmichael's belly with its back paws. Carmichael finally knocked it away with his fist, but there was a huge hole in his shirt, and a thin line of blood trickled from above one nipple. The anger faded from his face. He turned away and retched.

Hall turned the hose on the rat, which was old and moving slowly, a snatch of Carmichael's shirt still caught in its jaws. The roaring pressure drove it backward against the wall, where it smashed limply.

Warwick came over, an odd, strained smile on his lips. He clapped Hall on the shoulder. "Damn sight better than throwing cans at the little bastards, huh, college boy?"

"Some little bastard," Wisconsky said. "It's a foot long."

"Turn that hose over there." Warwick pointed at the jumble of furniture. "You guys, get out of the way!"

"With pleasure," someone muttered.

Carmichael charged up to Warwick, his face sick and twisted. "I'm gonna have compensation for this! I'm gonna—"

“Sure,” Warwick said, smiling. “You got bit on the titty. Get out of the way before you get pasted down by this water.”

Hall pointed the nozzle and let it go. It hit with a white explosion of spray, knocking over a desk and smashing two chairs to splinters. Rats ran everywhere, bigger than any Hall had ever seen. He could hear men crying out in disgust and horror as they fled, things with huge eyes and sleek, plump bodies. He caught a glimpse of one that looked as big as a healthy six-week puppy. He kept on until he could see no more, then shut the nozzle down.

“Okay!” Warwick called. “Let’s pick it up!”

“I didn’t hire out as no exterminator!” Cy Ippleston called mutinously. Hall had tipped a few with him the week before. He was a young guy, wearing a smut-stained baseball cap and a T-shirt.

“That you, Ippleston?” Warwick asked genially.

Ippleston looked uncertain, but stepped forward. “Yeah. I don’t want no more of these rats. I hired to clean up, not to maybe get rabies or typhoid or somethin’. Maybe you best count me out.”

There was a murmur of agreement from the others. Wisconsky stole a look at Hall, but Hall was examining the nozzle of the hose he was holding. It had a bore like a .45 and could probably knock a man twenty feet.

“You saying you want to punch your clock, Cy?”

“Thinkin’ about it,” Ippleston said.

Warwick nodded. “Okay. You and anybody else that wants. But this ain’t no unionized shop, and never has been. Punch out now and you’ll never punch back in. I’ll see to it.”

“Aren’t you some hot ticket,” Hall muttered.

Warwick swung around. “Did you say something, college boy?”

Hall regarded him blandly. "Just clearing my throat, Mr. Foreman."

Warwick smiled. "Something taste bad to you?"

Hall said nothing.

"All right, let's pick it up!" Warwick bawled.

They went back to work.

Two A.M., Thursday.

Hall and Wisconsky were working with the trucks again, picking up junk. The pile by the west airshaft had grown to amazing proportions, but they were still not half done.

"Happy Fourth," Wisconsky said when they stopped for a smoke. They were working near the north wall, far from the stairs. The light was extremely dim, and some trick of acoustics made the other men seem miles away.

"Thanks." Hall dragged on his smoke. "Haven't seen many rats tonight."

"Nobody has," Wisconsky said. "Maybe they got wise."

They were standing at the end of a crazy, zigzagging alley formed by piles of old ledgers and invoices, moldy bags of cloth, and two huge flat looms of ancient vintage. "Gah," Wisconsky said, spitting. "That Warwick—"

"Where do you suppose all the rats got to?" Hall asked, almost to himself. "Not into the walls—" He looked at the wet and crumbling masonry that surrounded the huge foundation stones. "They'd drown. The river's saturated everything."

Something black and flapping suddenly dive-bombed them. Wisconsky screamed and put his hands over his head.

“A bat,” Hall said, watching after it as Wisconsky straightened up.

“A bat! A bat!” Wisconsky raved. “What’s a bat doing in the cellar? They’re supposed to be in trees and under eaves and—”

“It was a big one,” Hall said softly. “And what’s a bat but a rat with wings?”

“Jesus,” Wisconsky moaned. “How did it—”

“Get in? Maybe the same way the rats got out.”

“What’s going on back there?” Warwick shouted from somewhere behind them. “Where are you?”

“Don’t sweat it,” Hall said softly. His eyes gleamed in the dark.

“Was that you, college boy?” Warwick called. He sounded closer.

“It’s okay!” Hall yelled. “I barked my shin!”

Warwick’s short, barking laugh. “You want a Purple Heart?”

Wisconsky looked at Hall. “Why’d you say that?”

“Look.” Hall knelt and lit a match. There was a square in the middle of the wet and crumbling cement. “Tap it.”

Wisconsky did. “It’s wood.”

Hall nodded. “It’s the top of a support. I’ve seen some other ones around here. There’s another level under this part of the basement.”

“God,” Wisconsky said with utter revulsion.

Three-thirty A.M., Thursday.

They were in the northeast corner, Ippeston and Brochu behind them with one of the high-pressure hoses, when Hall stopped and pointed

at the floor. "There I thought we'd come across it."

There was a wooden trapdoor with a crusted iron ringbolt set near the center.

He walked back to Ippeston and said, "Shut it off for a minute." When the hose was choked to a trickle, he raised his voice to a shout. "Hey! Hey, Warwick! Better come here a minute!"

Warwick came splashing over, looking at Hall with that same hard smile in his eyes. "Your shoelace come untied, college boy?"

"Look," Hall said. He kicked the trapdoor with his foot. "Sub-cellar."

"So what?" Warwick asked. "This isn't break time, col—"

"That's where your rats are," Hall said. "They're breeding down there. Wisconsky and I even saw a bat earlier."

Some of the other men had gathered around and were looking at the trapdoor.

"I don't care," Warwick said. "The job was the basement not—"

"You'll need about twenty exterminators, trained ones," Hall was saying. "Going to cost the management a pretty penny. Too bad."

Someone laughed. "Fat chance."

Warwick looked at Hall as if he were a bug under glass. "You're really a case, you are," he said, sounding fascinated. "Do you think I give a good goddamn how many rats there are under there?"

"I was at the library this afternoon and yesterday," Hall said. "Good thing you kept reminding me I was a college boy. I read the town zoning ordinances, Warwick—they were set up in 1911, before this mill got big enough to co-opt the zoning board. Know what I found?"

Warwick's eyes were cold. "Take a walk, college boy. You're fired."

“I found out,” Hall plowed on as if he hadn’t heard, “I found out that there is a zoning law in Gates Falls about vermin. You spell that v-e-r-m-i-n, in case you wondered. It means disease-carrying animals such as bats, skunks, unlicensed dogs—and rats. Especially rats. Rats are mentioned fourteen times in two paragraphs, Mr. Foreman. So you just keep in mind that the minute I punch out I’m going straight to the town commissioner and tell him what the situation down here is.”

He paused, relishing Warwick’s hate-congested face. “I think that between me, him, and the town committee, we can get an injunction slapped on this place. You’re going to be shut down a lot longer than just Saturday, Mr. Foreman. And I got a good idea what your boss is going to say when he turns up. Hope your unemployment insurance is paid up, Warwick.”

Warwick’s hands formed into claws. “You damned snot-nose, I ought to—” He looked down at the trapdoor, and suddenly his smile reappeared. “Consider yourself rehired, college boy.”

“I thought you might see the light.”

Warwick nodded, the same strange grin on his face. “You’re just so smart. I think maybe you ought to go down there, Hall, so we got somebody with a college education to give us an informed opinion. You and Wisconsky.”

“Not me!” Wisconsky exclaimed. “Not me, I—”

Warwick looked at him. “You what?”

Wisconsky shut up.

“Good,” Hall said cheerfully. “We’ll need three flashlights. I think I saw a whole rack of those six-battery jobs in the main office, didn’t I?”

“You want to take somebody else?” Warwick asked expansively.
“Sure, pick your man.”

“You,” Hall said gently. The strange expression had come into his face again. “After all, the management should be represented, don’t you think? Just so Wisconsky and I don’t see too many rats down there?”

Someone (it sounded like Ippeston) laughed loudly.

Warwick looked at the men carefully. They studied the tips of their shoes. Finally he pointed at Brochu. “Brochu, go up to the office and get three flashlights. Tell the watchman I said to let you in.”

“Why’d you get me into this?” Wisconsky moaned to Hall. “You know I hate those—”

“It wasn’t me,” Hall said, and looked at Warwick.

Warwick looked back at him, and neither would drop his eyes.

Four A.M., Thursday.

Brochu returned with the flashlights. He gave one to Hall, one to Wisconsky, one to Warwick.

“Ippeston! Give the hose to Wisconsky.” Ippeston did so. The nozzle trembled delicately between the Pole’s hands.

“All right” Warwick said to Wisconsky. “You’re in the middle. If there are rats, you let them have it.”

Sure, Hall thought. And if there are rats, Warwick won’t see them. And neither will Wisconsky, after he finds an extra ten in his pay envelope.

Warwick pointed at two of the men. “Lift it.”

One of them bent over the ringbolt and pulled. For a moment Hall didn't think it was going to give, and then it yanked free with an odd, crunching snap. The other man put his fingers on the underside to help pull, then withdrew with a cry. His hands were crawling with huge and sightless beetles.

With a convulsive grunt the man on the ringbolt pulled the trap back and let it drop. The underside was black with an odd fungus that Hall had never seen before. The beetles dropped off into the darkness below or ran across the floor to be crushed.

"Look," Hall said.

There was a rusty lock bolted on the underside, now broken. "But it shouldn't be underneath," Warwick said. "It should be on top. Why—"

"Lots of reasons," Hall said. "Maybe so nothing on this side could open it—at least when the lock was new. Maybe so nothing on that side could get up."

"But who locked it?" Wisconsky asked.

"Ah," Hall said mockingly, looking at Warwick. "A mystery."

"Listen," Brochu whispered.

"Oh, God," Wisconsky sobbed. "I ain't going down there!"

It was a soft sound, almost expectant; the whisk and patter of thousands of paws, the squeaking of rats.

"Could be frogs," Warwick said.

Hall laughed aloud.

Warwick shone his light down. A sagging flight of wooden stairs led down to the black stones of the floor beneath. There was not a rat in sight.

“Those stairs won’t hold us,” Warwick said with finality.

Brochu took two steps forward and jumped up and down on the first step. It creaked but showed no sign of giving way.

“I didn’t ask you to do that,” Warwick said.

“You weren’t there when that rat bit Ray,” Brochu said softly.

“Let’s go,” Hall said.

Warwick took a last sardonic look around at the circle of men, then walked to the edge with Hall. Wisconsky stepped reluctantly between them. They went down one at a time. Hall, then Wisconsky, then Warwick. Their flashlight beams played over the floor, which was twisted and heaved into a hundred crazy hills and valleys. The hose thumped along behind Wisconsky like a clumsy serpent.

When they got to the bottom, Warwick flashed his light around. It picked out a few rotting boxes, some barrels, little else. The seep from the river stood in puddles that came to ankle depth on their boots.

“I don’t hear them anymore,” Wisconsky whispered.

They walked slowly away from the trapdoor, their feet shuffling through the slime. Hall paused and shone his light on a huge wooden box with white letters on it. “Elias Varney,” he read, “1841. Was the mill here then?”

“No,” Warwick said. “It wasn’t built until 1897. What difference?”

Hall didn’t answer. They walked forward again. The sub-cellar was longer than it should have been, it seemed. The stench was stronger, a smell of decay and rot and things buried. And still the only sound was the faint, cavelike drip of water.

“What’s that?” Hall asked, pointing his beam at a jut of concrete that protruded perhaps two feet into the cellar. Beyond it, the darkness

continued and it seemed to Hall that he could now hear sounds up there, curiously stealthy.

Warwick peered at it. "It's ... no, that can't be right."

"Outer wall of the mill, isn't it? And up ahead ..."

"I'm going back," Warwick said, suddenly turning around.

Hall grabbed his neck roughly. "You're not going anywhere, Mr. Foreman."

Warwick looked up at him, his grin cutting the darkness. "You're crazy, college boy. Isn't that right? Crazy as a loon."

"You shouldn't push people, friend. Keep going."

Wisconsky moaned. "Hall—"

"Give me that." Hall grabbed the hose. He let go of Warwick's neck and pointed the hose at his head. Wisconsky turned abruptly and crashed back toward the trapdoor. Hall did not even turn. "After you, Mr. Foreman."

Warwick stepped forward, walking under the place where the mill ended above them. Hall flashed his light about, and felt a cold satisfaction—premonition fulfilled. The rats had closed in around them, silent as death. Crowded in, rank on rank. Thousands of eyes looked greedily back at him. In ranks to the wall, some fully as high as a man's shin.

Warwick saw them a moment later and came to a full stop. "They're all around us, college boy." His voice was still calm, still in control, but it held a jagged edge.

"Yes," Hall said. "Keep going."

They walked forward, the hose dragging behind. Hall looked back once and saw the rats had closed the aisle behind them and were

gnawing at the heavy canvas hosing. One looked up and almost seemed to grin at him before lowering his head again. He could see the bats now, too. They were roosting from the roughhewn overheads, huge, the size of crows or rooks.

“Look,” Warwick said, centering his beam about five feet ahead.

A skull, green with mold, laughed up at them. Further on Hall could see an ulna, one pelvic wing, part of a ribcage. “Keep going,” Hall said. He felt something bursting up inside him, something lunatic and dark with colors. You are going to break before I do, Mr. Foreman, so help me God.

They walked past the bones. The rats were not crowding them; their distances appeared constant. Up ahead Hall saw one cross their path of travel. Shadows hid it, but he caught sight of a pink twitching tail as thick as a telephone cord.

Up ahead the flooring rose sharply, then dipped. Hall could hear a stealthy rustling sound, a big sound. Something that perhaps no living man had ever seen. It occurred to Hall that he had perhaps been looking for something like this through all his days of crazy wandering.

The rats were moving in, creeping on their bellies, forcing them forward. “Look,” Warwick said coldly.

Hall saw. Something had happened to the rats back here, some hideous mutation that never could have survived under the eye of the sun; nature would have forbidden it. But down here, nature had taken on another ghastly face.

The rats were gigantic, some as high as three feet. But their rear legs were gone and they were blind as moles, like their flying cousins. They dragged themselves forward with hideous eagerness.

Warwick turned and faced Hall, the smile hanging on by brute willpower. Hall really had to admire him. “We can’t go on, Hall. You

must see that.”

“The rats have business with you, I think,” Hall said.

Warwick’s control slipped. “Please,” he said. “Please.”

Hall smiled. “Keep going.”

Warwick was looking over his shoulder. “They’re gnawing into the hose. When they get through it, we’ll never get back.”

“I know. Keep going.”

“You’re insane—” A rat ran across Warwick’s shoe and he screamed. Hall smiled and gestured with his light. They were all around, the closest of them less than a foot away now.

Warwick began to walk again. The rats drew back.

They topped the miniature rise and looked down. Warwick reached it first, and Hall saw his face go white as paper. Spit ran down his chin. “Oh, my God. Dear Jesus.”

And he turned to run.

Hall opened the nozzle of the hose and the high-pressure rush of water struck Warwick squarely on the chest, knocking him back out of sight. There was a long scream that rose over the sound of the water. Thrashing sounds.

“Hall!” Grunts. A huge, tenebrous squeaking that seemed to fill the earth.

“HALL, FOR GOD’S SAKE—”

A sudden wet ripping noise. Another scream, weaker. Something huge shifted and turned. Quite distinctly Hall heard the wet snap that a fractured bone makes.

A legless rat, guided by some bastard form of sonar, lunged against him, biting. Its body was flabby, warm. Almost absently Hall turned the hose on it, knocking it away. The hose did not have quite so much pressure now.

Hall walked to the brow of the wet hill and looked down.

The rat filled the whole gully at the far end of that noxious tomb. It was a huge and pulsating gray, eyeless, totally without legs. When Hall's light struck it, it made a hideous mewling noise. Their queen, then, the magna mater. A huge and nameless thing whose progeny might someday develop wings. It seemed to dwarf what remained of Warwick, but that was probably just illusion. It was the shock of seeing a rat as big as a Holstein calf.

"Goodbye, Warwick," Hall said. The rat crouched over Mr. Foreman jealously, ripping at one limp arm.

Hall turned away and began to make his way back rapidly, halting the rats with his hose, which was growing less and less potent. Some of them got through and attacked his legs above the tops of his boots with biting lunges. One hung stubbornly on at his thigh, ripping at the cloth of his corduroy pants. Hall made a fist and smashed it aside.

He was nearly three-quarters of the way back when the huge whirring filled the darkness. He looked up and the gigantic flying form smashed into his face.

The mutated bats had not lost their tails yet. It whipped around Hall's neck in a loathsome coil and squeezed as the teeth sought the soft spot under his neck. It wriggled and flapped with its membranous wings, clutching the tatters of his shirt for purchase.

Hall brought the nozzle of the hose up blindly and struck at its yielding body again and again. It fell away and he trampled it beneath his feet, dimly aware that he was screaming. The rats ran in a flood over his feet, up his legs.

He broke into a staggering run, shaking some off. The others bit at his belly, his chest. One ran up his shoulder and pressed its questing muzzle into the cup of his ear.

He ran into the second bat. It roosted on his head for a moment, squealing, and then ripped away a flap of Hall's scalp.

He felt his body growing numb. His ears filled with the screech and yammer of many rats. He gave one last heave, stumbled over furry bodies, fell to his knees. He began to laugh, a high, screaming sound.

Five A.M., Thursday.

"Somebody better go down there," Brochu said tentatively.

"Not me," Wisconsky whispered. "Not me."

"No, not you, jelly belly," Ippeston said with contempt.

"Well, let's go," Brogan said, bringing up another hose. "Me, Ippeston, Dangerfield, Nedeau. Stevenson, go up to the office and get a few more lights."

Ippeston looked down into the darkness thoughtfully. "Maybe they stopped for a smoke," he said. "A few rats, what the hell."

Stevenson came back with the lights; a few moments later they started down.

LARRY FESSENDEN · AARON CHRISTENSEN · SCOTT LYNCH-GIDDINGS · STEVE HERSON · KENNETH MARTIN



RED CLARK PRESENTS

GRAY MATTER

BASED ON A STORY BY STEPHEN KING

*The
Duo
Designs.*

GRAY MATTER

Stephen King

They had been predicting a norther all week and along about Thursday we got it, a real screamer that piled up eight inches by four in the afternoon and showed no signs of slowing down. The usual five or six were gathered around the Reliable in Henry's Nite-Owl, which is the only little store on this side of Bangor that stays open right around the clock.

Henry don't do a huge business—mostly, it amounts to selling the college kids their beer and wine—but he gets by and it's a place for us old duffers on Social Security to get together and talk about who's died lately and how the world's going to hell.

This afternoon Henry was at the counter; Bill Pelham, Bertie Connors, Carl Littlefield, and me was tipped up by the stove. Outside, not a car was moving on Ohio Street, and the plows was having hard going. The wind was socking drifts across that looked like the backbone on a dinosaur.

Henry'd only had three customers all afternoon—that is, if you want to count in blind Eddie. Eddie's about seventy, and he ain't completely blind. Runs into things, mostly. He comes in once or twice a week and sticks a loaf of bread under his coat and walks out with an expression on his face like: there, you stupid sonsabitches, fooled you again

Bertie once asked Henry why he never put a stop to it.

"I'll tell you," Henry said. "A few years back the Air Force wanted twenty million dollars to rig up a flyin' model of an airplane they had planned out. Well, it cost them seventy-five million and then the damn thing wouldn't fly. That happened ten years ago, when blind Eddie and myself were considerably younger, and I voted for the woman who sponsored that bill. Blind Eddie voted against her. And since then I've been buyin' his bread,"

Bertie didn't look like he quite followed all of that, but he sat back to muse over it.

Now the door opened again, letting in a blast of the cold gray air outside, and a young kid came in, stamping snow off his boots. I placed him after a second. He was Richie Grenadine's kid, and he looked like he'd just kissed the wrong end of the baby. His Adam's apple was going up and down and his face was the color of old oilcloth.

"Mr. Parmalee," he says to Henry, his eyeballs rolling around in his head like ball bearings, "you got to come. You got to take him his beer and come. I can't stand to go back there. I'm scared."

"Now slow down," Henry says, taking off his white butcher's apron and coming around the counter. "What's the matter? Your dad been on a drunk?"

I realized when he said that that Richie hadn't been in for quite some time. Usually he'd be by once a day to pick up a case of whatever beer was going cheapest at that time, a big fat man with jowls like pork butts and ham-hock arms. Richie always was a pig about his beer, but he handled it okay when he was working at the sawmill out in Clifton. Then something happened—a pulper piled a bad load, or maybe Richie just made it out that way—and Richie was off work, free an' easy, with the sawmill company paying him compensation. Something in his back. Anyway, he got awful fat. He hadn't been in lately, although once in a while I'd seen his boy come in for Richie's nightly case. Nice enough boy. Henry sold him the beer, for he knew it was only the boy doing as his father said.

"He's been on a drunk," the boy was saying now, "but that ain't the trouble. It's ... it's ... oh Lord, it's awful!"

Henry saw he was going to bawl, so he says real quick; "Carl, will you watch things for a minute?"

"Sure."

"Now, Timmy, you come back into the stockroom and tell me what's what."

He led the boy away, and Carl went around behind the counter and sat on Henry's stool. No one said anything for quite a while. We could hear 'em back there, Henry's deep, slow voice and then Timmy Grenadine's high one, speaking very fast. Then the boy commenced to cry, and Bill Pelham cleared his throat and started filling up his pipe.

"I ain't seen Richie for a couple months," I said.

Bill grunted. "No loss."

"He was in ... oh, near the end of October," Carl said. "Near Halloween. Bought a case of Schlitz beer. He was gettin' awful meaty."

There wasn't much more to say. The boy was still crying, but he was talking at the same time. Outside the wind kept on whooping and yowling and the radio said we'd have another six inches or so by morning. It was mid-January and it made me wonder if anyone had seen Richie since October—besides his boy, that is.

The talking went on for quite a while, but finally Henry and the boy came back out. The boy had taken his coat off, but Henry had put his on. The boy was kinda hitching in his chest the way you do when the worst is past, but his eyes was red and when he glanced at you, he'd look down at the floor.

Henry looked worried. "I thought I'd send Timmy here upstairs an' have my wife cook him up a toasted cheese or somethin'. Maybe a couple of you fellas'd like to go around to Richie's place with me. Timmy says he wants some beer. He gave me the money." He tried to smile, but it was a pretty sick affair and he soon gave up.

"Sure," Bertie says. "What kind of beer? I'll go fetch her."

"Get Harrow's Supreme," Henry said. "We got some cut-down boxes back there."

I got up, too. It would have to be Bertie and me. Carl's arthritis gets something awful on days like this, and Billy Pelham don't have much use of his right arm anymore.

Bertie got four six-packs of Harrow's and I packed them into a box while Henry took the boy upstairs to the apartment, overhead.

Well, he straightened that out with his missus and came back down, looking over his shoulder once to make sure the upstairs door was closed. Billy spoke up, fairly busting: "What's up? Has Richie been workin' the kid over?"

"No," Henry said. "I'd just as soon not say anything just yet. It'd sound crazy. I will show you somethin', though. The money Timmy had to pay for the beer with." He shed four dollar bills out of his pocket, holding them by the corner, and I don't blame him. They was all covered with a gray, slimy stuff that looked like the scum on top of bad preserves. He laid them down on the counter with a funny smile and said to Carl; "Don't let anybody touch 'em. Not if what the kid says is even half right!"

And he went around to the sink by the meat counter and washed his hands.

I got up, put on my pea coat and scarf and buttoned up. It was no good taking a car; Richie lived in an apartment building down on Curve Street, which is as close to straight up an' down as the law allows, and it's the last place the plows touch.

As we were going out, Bill Pelham called after us: "Watch out, now."

Henry just nodded and put the case of Harrow's on the little handcart he keeps by the door, and out we trundled.

The wind hit us like a sawblade, and right away I pulled my scarf up over my ears. We paused in the doorway just for a second while Bertie pulled on his gloves. He had a pained sort of a wince on his face, and I knew how he felt. It's all well for younger fellows to go out

skiing all day and running those goddamn wasp-wing snowmobiles half the night, but when you get up over seventy without an oil change, you feel that north-east wind around your heart.

“I don’t want to scare you boys,” Henry said, with that queer, sort of revolted smile still on his mouth, “but I’m goin’ to show you this all the same. And I’m goin’ to tell you what the boy told me while we walk up there ... because I want you to know, you see!”

And he pulled a .45-caliber hogleg out of his coat pocket—the pistol he’d kept loaded and ready under the counter ever since he went to twenty-four hours a day back in 1958. I don’t know where he got it, but I do know the one time he flashed it at a stickup guy, the fella just turned around and bolted right out the door. Henry was a cool one, all right. I saw him throw out a college kid that came in one time and gave him a hard time about cashing a check. That kid walked away like his ass was on sideways and he had to crap.

Well, I only tell you that because Henry wanted Bertie and me to know he meant business, and we did, too.

So we set out, bent into the wind like washerwomen, Henry trundling that cart and telling us what the boy had said. The wind was trying to rip the words away before we could hear ‘em, but we got most of it—more’n we wanted to. I was damn glad Henry had his Frenchman’s pecker stowed away in his coat pocket.

The kid said it must have been the beer—you know how you can get a bad can every now and again. Flat or smelly or green as the peestains in an Irishman’s underwear. A fella once told me that all it takes is a tiny hole to let in bacteria that’ll do some damn strange things. The hole can be so small that the beer won’t hardly dribble out, but the bacteria can get in. And beer’s good food for some of those bugs.

Anyway, the kid said Richie brought back a case of Golden Light just like always that night in October and sat down to polish it off while Timmy did his homework.

Timmy was just about ready for bed when he hears Richie say, “Christ Jesus, that ain’t right.”

And Timmy says, “What’s that, Pop?”

“That beer,” Richie says. “God, that’s the worst taste I ever had in my mouth.”

Most people would wonder why in the name of God he drank it if it tasted so bad, but then, most people have never seen Richie Grenadine go to his beer. I was down in Wally’s Spa one afternoon, and I saw him win the goddamndest bet. He bet a fella he could drink twenty two-bit glasses of beer in one minute. Nobody local would take him up, but this salesman from Montpelier laid down a twenty-dollar bill and Richie covered him. He drank all twenty with seven seconds to spare—although when he walked out he was more’n three sails into the wind. So I expect Richie had most of that bad can in his gut before his brain could warn him.

“I’m gonna puke,” Richie says. “Look out!”

But by the time he got to the head it had passed off, and that was the end of it. The boy said he smelt the can, and it smelt like something crawled in there and died. There was a little gray dribble around the top, too.

Two days later the boy comes home from school and there’s Richie sitting in front of the TV and watching the afternoon tearjerkers with every goddamn shade in the place pulled down.

“What’s up?” Timmy asks, for Richie don’t hardly ever roll in before nine.

“I’m watchin’ the TV,” Richie says. “I didn’t seem to want to go out today.”

Timmy turned on the light over the sink, and Richie yelled at him: “And turn off that friggin’ light!”

So Timmy did, not asking how he's gonna do his homework in the dark. When Richie's in that mood, you don't ask him nothing.

"An' go out an' get me a case," Richie says. "Money's on the table."

When the kid gets back, his dad's still sitting in the dark, only now it's dark outside, too. And the TV's off. The kid starts getting the creeps—well, who wouldn't? Nothing but a dark flat and your daddy setting in the corner like a big lump.

So he puts the beer on the table, knowing that Richie don't like it so cold it spikes his forehead, and when he gets close to his old man he starts to notice a kind of rotten smell, like an old cheese someone left standing on the counter over the weekend. He don't say shit or go blind, though, as the old man was never what you'd call a cleanly soul. Instead he goes into his room and shuts the door and does his homework, and after a while he hears the TV start to go and Richie's popping the top in his first of the evening.

And for two weeks or so, that's the way things went. The kid got up in the morning and went to school an' when he got home Richie'd be in front of the television, and beer money on the table.

The flat was smelling ranker and ranker, too. Richie wouldn't have the shades up at all, and about the middle of November he made Timmy stop studying in his room. Said he couldn't abide the light under the door. So Timmy started going down the block to a friend's house after getting his dad the beer.

Then one day when Timmy came home from school—it was four o'clock and pretty near dark already—Richie says, "Turn on the light."

The kid turns on the light over the sink, and damn if Richie ain't all wrapped up in a blanket.

"Look," Richie says, and one hand creeps out from under the blanket. Only it ain't a hand at all. Something gray, is all the kid could

tell Henry. Didn't look like a hand at all. Just a gray lump.

Well, Timmy Grenadine was scared bad. He says, "Pop, what's happening to you?"

And Richie says, "I dunno. But it don't hurt. It feels ... kinda nice."

So, Timmy says, "I'm gonna call Dr. Westphail."

And the blanket starts to tremble all over, like something awful was shaking—all over—under there. And Richie says, "Don't you dare. If you do I'll touch ya and you'll end up just like this." And he slides the blanket down over his face for just a minute.

By then we were up to the corner of Harlow and Curve Street, and I was even colder than the temperature had been on Henry's Orange Crush thermometer when we came out. A person doesn't hardly want to believe such things, and yet there's still strange things in the world.

I once knew a fella named George Kelso, who worked for the Bangor Public Works Department. He spent fifteen years fixing water mains and mending electricity cables and all that, an' then one day he just up an' quit, not two years before his retirement. Frankie Haldeman, who knew him, said George went down into a sewer pipe on Essex laughing and joking just like always and came up fifteen minutes later with his hair just as white as snow and his eyes staring like he just looked through a window into hell. He walked straight down to the BPW garage and punched his clock and went down to Wally's Spa and started drinking. It killed him two years later. Frankie said he tried to talk to him about it and George said something one time, and that was when he was pretty well blotto. Turned around on his stool, George did, an' asked Frankie Haldeman if he'd ever seen a spider as big as a good-sized dog setting in a web full of kitties an' such all wrapped up in silk thread. Well, what could he say to that? I'm not saying there's any truth in it, but I am saying that there's things in the corners of the world that would drive a man insane to look 'em right in the face.

So we just stood on the corner a minute, in spite of the wind that was whooping up the street.

“What’d he see?” Bertie asked.

“He said he could still see his dad,” Henry answered, “but he said it was like he was buried in gray jelly ... and it was all kinda mashed together. He said his clothes were all stickin’ in and out of his skin, like they was melted to his body.”

“Holy Jesus,” Bertie said.

“Then he covered right up again and started screaming at the kid to turn off the light.”

“Like he was a fungus,” I said.

“Yes,” Henry said. “Sorta like that.”

“You keep that pistol handy,” Bertie said.

“Yes, I think I will.” And with that, we started to trundle up Curve Street.

The apartment house where Richie Grenadine had his flat was almost at the top of the hill, one of those big Victorian monsters that were built by the pulp an’ paper barons at the turn of the century. They’ve just about all been turned into apartment houses now. When Bertie got his breath he told us Richie lived on the third floor under that top gable that jutted out like an eyebrow. I took the chance to ask Henry what happened to the kid after that.

Along about the third week in November the kid came back one afternoon to find Richie had gone one further than just pulling the shades down. He’d taken and nailed blankets across every window in the place. It was starting to stink worse, too—kind of a mushy stink, the way fruit gets when it goes to ferment with yeast.

A week or so after that, Richie got the kid to start heating his beer on the stove. Can you feature that? The kid all by himself in that apartment with his dad turning into ... well, into something ... an' heating his beer and then having to listen to him—it—drinking it with awful thick slurping sounds, the way an old man eats his chowder: Can you imagine it?

And that's the way things went on until today, when the kid's school let out early because of the storm.

“The boy says he went right home,” Henry told us. “There's no light in the upstairs hall at all—the boy claims his dad musta snuck out some night and broke it—so he had to sort of creep down to his door.

“Well, he heard somethin' moving around in there, and it suddenly pops into his mind that he don't know what Richie does all day through the week. He ain't seen his dad stir out of that chair for almost a month, and a man's got to sleep and go to the bathroom sometime.

“There's a Judas hole in the middle of the door, and it's supposed to have a latch on the inside to fasten it shut, but it's been busted ever since they lived there. So the kid slides up to the door real easy and pushed it open a bit with his thumb and pokes his eye up to it.”

By now we were at the foot of the steps and the house was looming over us like a high, ugly face, with those windows on the third floor for eyes. I looked up there and sure enough those two windows were just as black as pitch. Like somebody'd put blankets over 'em or painted 'em up.

“It took him a minute to get his eye adjusted to the gloom. An' then he seen a great big gray lump, not like a man at all, slitherin' over the floor, leavin' a gray, slimy trail behind it. An' then it sort of snaked out an arm—or something like an arm—and pried a board off'n the wall. And took out a cat.” Henry stopped for a second. Bertie was beating his hands together and it was god-awful cold out there on the street,

but none of us was ready to go up just yet. “A dead cat,” Henry recommenced, “that had putrefacted. The boy said it looked all swole up stiff ... and there was little white things crawlin’ all over it ...”

“Stop,” Bertie said. “For Christ’s sake.”

“And then his dad ate it.”

I tried to swallow and something tasted greasy in my throat.

“That’s when Timmy closed the peephole.” Henry finished softly. “And ran.”

“I don’t think I can go up there,” Bertie said.

Henry didn’t say nothing, just looked from Bertie to me and back again.

“I guess we better,” I said. “We got Richie’s beer.”

Bertie didn’t say anything to that, so we went up the steps and in through the front hall door. I smelled it right off.

Do you know how a cider house smells in summer? You never get the smell of apples out, but in the fall it’s all right because it smells tangy and sharp enough to ream your nose right out. But in the summer, it just smells mean, this smell was like that, but a little bit worse.

There was one light on in the lower hall, a mean yellow thing in a frosted glass that threw a glow as thin as buttermilk. And those stairs that went up into the shadows.

Henry bumped the cart to a stop, and while he was lifting out the case of beer, I thumbed the button at the foot of the stairs that controlled the second-floor-landing bulb. But it was busted, just as the boy said.

Bertie quavered: “I’ll lug the beer. You just take care of that pistol.”

Henry didn't argue. He handed it over and we started up, Henry first, then me, then Bertie with the case in his arms. By the time we had fetched the second-floor landing, the stink was just that much worse. Rotted apples, all fermented, and under that an even uglier stink.

When I lived out in Levant I had a dog one time—Rex, his name was—and he was a good mutt but not very wise about cars. He got hit a lick one afternoon while I was at work and he crawled under the house and died there. My Christ, what a stink. I finally had to go under and haul him out with a pole. That other stench was like that; flyblown and putrid and just as dirty as a borin' cob.

Up till then I had kept thinking that maybe it was some sort of joke, but I saw it wasn't. "Lord, why don't the neighbors kick up Harry?" I asked.

"What neighbors?" Henry asked, and he was smiling that queer smile again.

I looked around and saw that the hall had a sort of dusty, unused look and the door of all three second-floor apartments was closed and locked up.

"Who's the landlord, I wonder?" Bertie asked, resting the case on the newel post and getting his breath. "Gaiteau? Surprised he don't kick 'im out."

"Who'd go up there and evict him?" Henry asked. "You?"

Bertie didn't say nothing.

Presently we started up the next flight, which was even narrower and steeper than the last. It was getting hotter, too. It sounded like every radiator in the place was clanking and hissing. The smell was awful, and I started to feel like someone was stirring my guts with a stick.

At the top was a short hall, and one door with a little Judas hole in the middle of it.

Bertie made a soft little cry an' whispered out: "Look what we're walkin' in!"

I looked down and saw all this slimy stuff on the hall floor, in little puddles. It looked like there'd been a carpet once, but the gray stuff had eaten it all away.

Henry walked down to the door, and we went after him. I don't know about Bertie, but I was shaking in my shoes. Henry never hesitated, though; he raised up that gun and beat on the door with the butt of it.

"Richie?" he called, and his voice didn't sound a bit scared, although his face was deadly pale. "This is Henry Parmalee from down at the Nite-Owl. I brought your beer."

There wasn't any answer for p'raps a full minute, and then a voice said, "Where's Timmy? Where's my boy?"

I almost ran right then. That voice wasn't human at all. It was queer an' low an' bubbly, like someone talking through a mouthful of suet.

"He's at my store," Henry said, "havin' a decent meal. He's just as skinny as a slat cat, Richie."

There wasn't nothing for a while, and then some horrible squishing noises, like a man in rubber boots walking through mud. Then that decayed voice spoke right through the other side of the door.

"Open the door an' shove that beer through," it said. "Only you got to pull all the ring tabs first. I can't."

"In a minute," Henry said. "What kind of shape you in, Richie?"

"Never mind that," the voice said, and it was horribly eager. "Just push in the beer and go!"

"It ain't just dead cats anymore, is it?" Henry said, and he sounded sad. He wasn't holdin' the gun butt-up anymore; now it was business end first.

And suddenly, in a flash of light, I made the mental connection Henry had already made, perhaps even as Timmy was telling his story. The smell of decay and rot seemed to double in my nostrils when I remembered. Two young girls and some old Salvation Army wino had disappeared in town during the last three weeks or so—all after dark.

“Send it in or I’ll come out an’ get it,” the voice said.

Henry gestured us back, and we went.

“I guess you better, Richie.” He cocked his piece.

There was nothing then, not for a long time. To tell the truth, I began to feel as if it was all over. Then that door burst open, so sudden and so hard that it actually bulged before slamming out against the wall. And out came Richie.

It was just a second, just a second before Bertie and me was down those stairs like schoolkids, four an’ five at a time, and out the door into the snow, slipping an’ sliding.

Going down we heard Henry fire three times, the reports loud as grenades in the closed hallways of that empty, cursed house.

What we saw in that one or two seconds will last me a lifetime—or whatever’s left of it. It was like a huge gray wave of jelly, jelly that looked like a man, and leaving a trail of slime behind it.

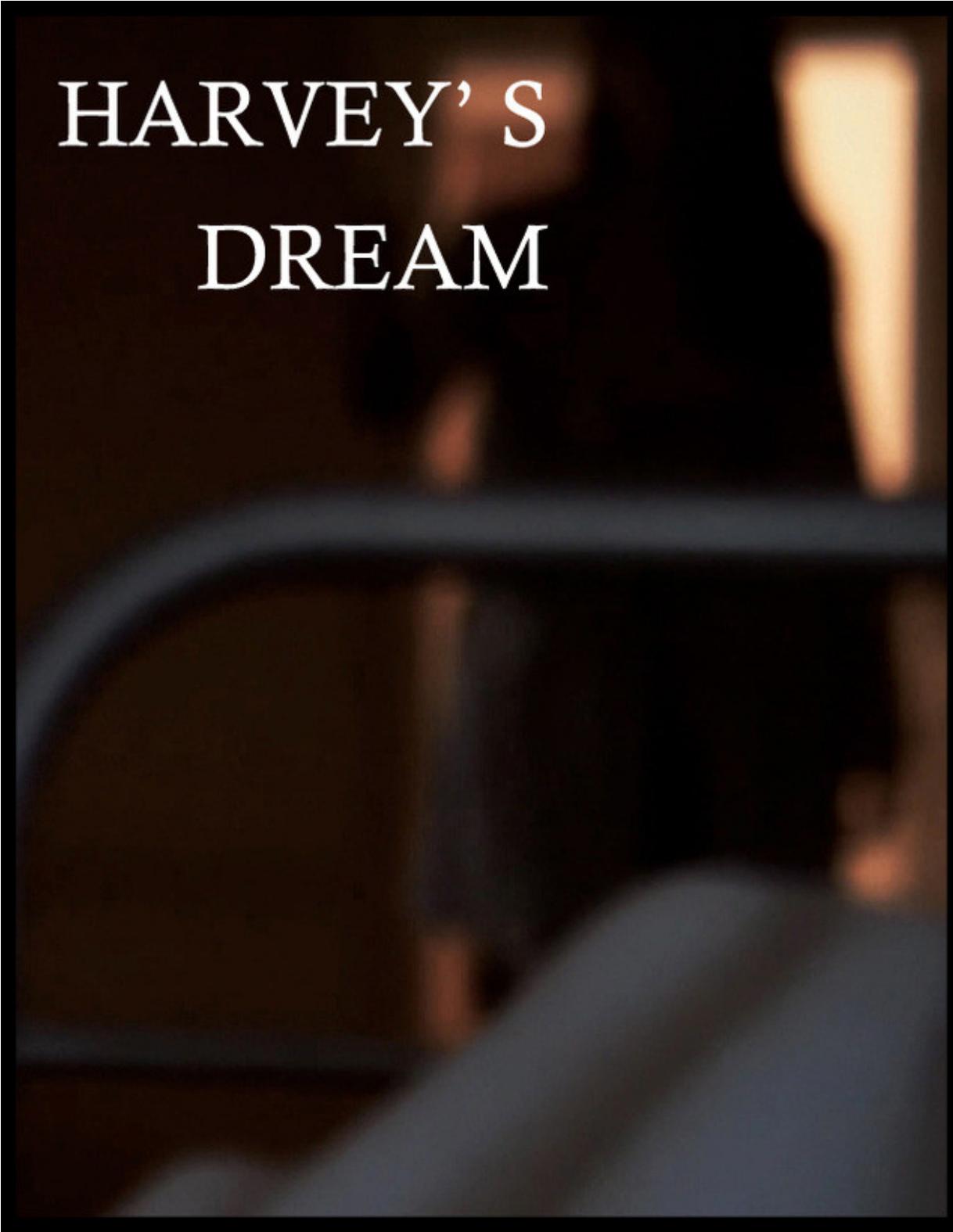
But that wasn’t the worst. Its eyes were flat and yellow and wild, with no human soul in ‘em. Only there wasn’t two. There were four, an’ right down the center of the thing, betwixt the two pairs of eyes, was a white, fibrous line with a kind of pulsing pink flesh showing through like a slit in a hog’s belly.

It was dividing, you see. Dividing in two.

Bertie and I didn't say nothing to each other going back to the store. I don't know what was going through his mind, but I know well enough what was in mine: the multiplication table. Two times two is four, four times two is eight, eight times two is sixteen, sixteen times two is—

We got back. Carl and Bill Pelham jumped up and started asking questions right off. We wouldn't answer, neither of us. We just turned around and waited to see if Henry was gonna walk in outta the snow. I was up to 32,768 times two is the end of the human race and so we sat there cozied up to all that beer and waited to see which one was going to finally come back; and here we still sit.

I hope it's Henry. I surely do.



HARVEY'S
DREAM

HARVEY'S DREAM

Stephen King

(From: The New Yorker, June 2003)

Janet turns from the sink and, boom, all at once her husband of nearly thirty years is sitting at the kitchen table in a white T-shirt and a pair of Big Dog boxers, watching her.

More and more often she has found this weekday commodore of Wall Street in just this place and dressed in just this fashion come Saturday morning: slumped at the shoulder and blank in the eye, a white scruff showing on his cheeks, man-tits sagging out the front of his T, hair standing up in back like Alfalfa of the Little Rascals grown old and stupid. Janet and her friend Hannah have frightened each other lately (like little girls telling ghost stories during a sleepover) by swapping Alzheimer's tales: who can no longer recognize his wife, who can no longer remember the names of her children.

But she doesn't really believe these silent Saturday-morning appearances have anything to do with early-onset Alzheimer's; on any given weekday morning Harvey Stevens is ready and raring to go by six-forty-five, a man of sixty who looks fifty (well, fifty-four) in either of his best suits, and who can still cut a trade, buy on margin, or sell short with the best of them.

No, she thinks, this is merely practicing to be old, and she hates it. She's afraid that when he retires it will be this way every morning, at least until she gives him a glass of orange juice and asks him (with an increasing impatience she won't be able to help) if he wants cereal or just toast. She's afraid she'll turn from whatever she's doing and see him sitting there in a bar of far too brilliant morning sun, Harvey in the morning, Harvey in his T-shirt and his boxer shorts, legs spread apart so she can view the meagre bulge of his basket (should she care to) and see the yellow calluses on his great toes, which always make her think of Wallace Stevens having on about the Emperor of Ice Cream. Sitting there silent and dopyly contemplative instead of ready and raring, psyching himself up for the day. God, she hopes she's wrong.

It makes life seem so thin, so stupid somehow. She can't help wondering if this is what they fought through for, raised and married off their three girls for, got past his inevitable middle-aged affair for, worked for and sometimes (let's face it) grabbed for. If this is where you come out of the deep dark woods, Janet thinks, this ... this parking lot ... then why does anyone do it?

But the answer is easy. Because you didn't know. You discarded most of the lies along the way but held on to the one that said life mattered. You kept a scrapbook devoted to the girls, and in it they were still young and still interesting in their possibilities: Trisha, the eldest, wearing a top hat and waving a tinfoil wand over Tim, the cocker spaniel; Jenna, frozen in mid-jump halfway through the lawn sprinkler, her taste for dope, credit cards, and older men still far over the horizon; Stephanie, the youngest, at the county spelling bee, where "cantaloupe" turned out to be her Waterloo. Somewhere in most of these pictures (usually in the background) were Janet and the man she had married, always smiling, as if it were against the law to do anything else.

Then one day you made the mistake of looking over your shoulder and discovered that the girls were grown and that the man you had struggled to stay married to was sitting with his legs apart, his fish-white legs, staring into a bar of sun, and by God maybe he looked fifty-four in either of his best suits, but sitting

there at the kitchen table like that he looked seventy. Hell, seventy-five. He looked like what the goons on "The Sopranos" called a mope.

She turns back to the sink and sneezes delicately, once, twice, a third time.

"How are they this morning?" he asks, meaning her sinuses, meaning her allergies. The answer is not very good, but, like a surprising number of bad things, her summer allergies have their sunny side. She no longer has to sleep with him and fight for her share of the covers in the middle of the night; no longer has to listen

to the occasional muffled fart as Harvey's soldiers ever deeper into sleep. Most nights during the summer she gets six, even seven hours, and that's more than enough. When fall comes and he moves back in from the guest room, it will drop to four, and much of that will be troubled.

One year, she knows, he won't move back in. And although she doesn't tell him so—it would hurt his feelings, and she still doesn't like to hurt his feelings; this is what now passes for love between them, at least going from her direction to his—she will be glad.

She sighs and reaches into the pot of water in the sink. Gropes around in it. "Not so bad," she says.

And then, just when she is thinking (and not for the first time) about how this life holds no more surprises, no unplumbed marital depths, he says in a strangely casual voice, "It's a good thing you weren't sleeping with me last night, Jax. I had a bad dream. I actually screamed myself awake."

She's startled. How long has it been since he called her Jax instead of Janet or Jan? The last is a nickname she secretly hates. It makes her think of that syrupy-sweet actress on "Lassie" when she was a kid, the little boy (Timmy, his name was Timmy) always fell down a well or got bitten by a snake or trapped under a rock, and what kind of parents put a kid's life in the hands of a fucking collie?

She turns to him again, forgetting the pot with the last egg still in it, the water now long enough off the boil to be lukewarm. He had a bad dream? Harvey? She tries to remember when Harvey has mentioned having had any kind of dream and has no luck. All that comes is a vague memory of their courtship days, Harvey saying something like "I dream of you," she herself young enough to think it sweet instead of lame.

"You what?"

"Screamed myself awake," he says. "Did you not hear me?"

“No.” Still looking at him. Wondering if he’s kidding her. If it’s some kind of bizarre morning joke. But Harvey is not a joking man. His idea of humor is telling anecdotes at dinner about his Army days. She has heard all of them at least a hundred times.

“I was screaming words, but I wasn’t really able to say them. It was like ... I don’t know ... I couldn’t close my mouth around them. I sounded like I’d had a stroke. And my voice was lower. Not like my own voice at all.” He pauses. “I heard myself, and made myself stop. But I was shaking all over, and I had to turn on the light for a little while. I tried to pee, and I couldn’t. These days it seems like I can always pee—a little, anyway—but not this morning at two-forty-seven.” He pauses, sitting there in his bar of sun. She can see dust motes dancing in it. They seem to give him a halo.

“What was your dream?” she asks, and here is an odd thing: for the first time in maybe five years, since they stayed up until midnight discussing whether to hold the Motorola stock or sell it (they wound up selling), she’s interested in something he has to say.

“I don’t know if I want to tell you,” he says, sounding uncharacteristically shy. He turns, picks up the pepper mill, and begins to toss it from hand to hand.

“They say if you tell your dreams they won’t come true,” she says to him, and here is Odd Thing No. 2: all at once Harvey looks there, in a way he hasn’t looked to her in years. Even his shadow on the wall above the toaster oven looks somehow more there. She thinks, He looks as though he matters, and why should that be? Why, when I was just thinking that life is thin, should it seem thick? This is a summer morning in late June. We are in Connecticut. When June comes we are always in Connecticut. Soon one of us will get the newspaper, which will be divided into three parts, like Gaul.

“Do they say so?” He considers the idea, eyebrows raised (she needs to pluck them again, they are getting that wild look, and he never knows), tossing the pepper mill from hand to hand. She would like to tell him to stop doing that, it’s making her nervous (like the

exclamatory blackness of his shadow on the wall, like her very beating heart, which has suddenly begun to accelerate its rhythm for no reason at all), but she doesn't want to distract him from whatever is going on in his Saturday-morning head. And then he puts the pepper mill down anyway, which should be all right but somehow isn't, because it has its own shadow—it runs out long on the table like the shadow of an oversized chess piece, even the toast crumbs lying there have shadows, and she has no idea why that should frighten her but it does. She thinks of the Cheshire Cat telling Alice, “We're all mad here,” and suddenly she doesn't want to hear Harvey's stupid dream, the one from which he awakened himself screaming and sounding like a man who has had a stroke. Suddenly she doesn't want life to be anything but thin. Thin is O.K., thin is good, just look at the actresses in the movies if you doubt it.

Nothing must announce itself, she thinks feverishly. Yes, feverishly; it's as if she's having a hot flash, although she could have sworn all that nonsense ended two or three years ago. Nothing must announce itself, it's Saturday morning and nothing must announce itself.

She opens her mouth to tell him she got it backward, what they really say is that if you tell your dreams they will come true, but it's too late, he's already talking, and it occurs to her that this is her punishment for dismissing life as thin. Life is actually like a Jethro Tull song, thick as a brick, how could she have ever thought otherwise?

“I dreamed it was morning and I came down to the kitchen,” he says. “Saturday morning, just like this, only you weren't up yet.”

“I'm always up before you on Saturday morning,” she says.

“I know, but this was a dream,” he says patiently, and she can see the white hairs on the insides of his thighs, where the muscles are wasted and starved. Once he played tennis, but those days are done. She thinks, with a viciousness that is entirely unlike her, You will have a heart attack, white man, that's what will finish you, and maybe they'll discuss giving you an obit in the Times, but if a B-

movie actress from the fifties died that day, or a semi-famous ballerina from the forties, you won't even get that.

"But it was like this," he says. "I mean, the sun was shining in." He raises a hand and stirs the dust motes into lively life around his head and she wants to scream at him not to do that, not to disturb the universe like that.

"I could see my shadow on the floor and it never looked so bright or so thick." He pauses, then smiles, and she sees how cracked his lips are. "'Bright' sa funny word to use for a shadow, isn't it? 'Thick,' too."

"Harvey—"

"I crossed to the window," he says, "and I looked out, and I saw there was a dent in the side of the Friedmans' Volvo, and I knew—somehow—that Frank had been out drinking and that the dent happened coming home."

She suddenly feels that she will faint. She saw the dent in the side of Frank Friedman's Volvo herself, when she went to the door to see if the newspaper had come (it hadn't), and she thought the same thing, that Frank had been out at the Gourd and scraped something in the parking lot. How does the other guy look? had been her exact thought.

The idea that Harvey has also seen this comes to her, that he is goofing with her for some strange reason of his own. Certainly it's possible; the guest room where he sleeps on summer nights has an angle on the street. Only Harvey isn't that sort of man. "Goofing" is not Harvey Stevens's "thing."

There is sweat on her cheeks and brow and neck, she can feel it, and her heart is beating faster than ever. There really is a sense of something looming, and why should this be happening now? Now, when the world is quiet, when prospects are tranquil? If I asked for

this, I'm sorry, she thinks ... or maybe she's actually praying. Take it back, please take it back.

"I went to the refrigerator," Harvey is saying, "and I looked inside, and I saw a plate of devilled eggs with a piece of Saran wrap over them. I was delighted—I wanted lunch at seven in the morning!"

He laughs. Janet— Jax that was—looks down into the pot sitting in the sink. At the one hard-boiled egg left in it. The others have been shelled and neatly sliced in two, the yolks scooped out. They are in a bowl beside the drying rack. Beside the bowl is the jar of mayonnaise. She has been planning to serve the devilled eggs for lunch, along with a green salad.

"I don't want to hear the rest," she says, but in a voice so low she can barely hear it herself. Once she was in the Dramatics Club and now she can't even project across the kitchen. The muscles in her chest feel all loose, the way Harvey's legs would if he tried to play tennis.

"I thought I would have just one," Harvey says, "and then I thought, No, if I do that she'll yell at me. And then the phone rang. I dashed for it because I didn't want it to wake you up, and here comes the scary part. Do you want to hear the scary part?"

No, she thinks from her place by the sink. I don't want to hear the scary part. But at the same time she does want to hear the scary part, everyone wants to hear the scary part, we're all mad here, and her mother really did say that if you told your dreams they wouldn't come true, which meant you were supposed to tell the nightmares and save the good ones for yourself, hide them like a tooth under the pillow. They have three girls. One of them lives just down the road, Jenna the gay divorcee, same name as one of the Bush twins, and doesn't Jenna hate that; these days she insists that people call her Jen.

Three girls, which meant a lot of teeth under a lot of pillows, a lot of worries about strangers in cars offering rides and candy, which had

meant a lot of precautions, and oh how she hopes her mother was right, that telling a bad dream is like putting a stake in a vampire's heart.

"I picked up the phone," Harvey says, "and it was Trisha." Trisha is their oldest daughter, who idolized Houdini and Blackstone before discovering boys. "She only said one word at first, just 'Dad,' but I knew it was Trisha. You know how you always know?"

Yes. She knows how you always know. How you always know your own, from the very first word, at

least until they grow up and become someone else's.

"I said, 'Hi, Trish, why you calling so early, hon ? Your mom's still in the sack.' And at first there was no answer. I thought we'd been cut off, and then I heard these whispering whimpering sounds. Not words but half-words. Like she was trying to talk but hardly anything could come out because she wasn't able to muster any strength or get her breath. And that was when I started being afraid."

Well, then, he's pretty slow, isn't he? Because Janet—who was Jax at Sarah Lawrence, Jax in the Dramatics Club, Jax the truly excellent French-kisser, Jax who smoked Gitanes and affected enjoyment of tequila shooters—Janet has been scared for quite some time now, was scared even before Harvey mentioned the dent in the side of Frank Friedman's Volvo. And thinking of that makes her think of the phone conversation she had with her friend Hannah not even a week ago, the one that eventually progressed to Alzheimer's ghost stories. Hannah in the city, Janet curled up on the window seat in the living room and looking out at their one-acre share of Westport, at all the beautiful growing things that make her sneeze and water at the eyes, and before the conversation turned to Alzheimer's they had discussed first Lucy Friedman and then Frank, and which one of them had said it? Which one of them had said, "If he doesn't do something about his drinking and driving, he's eventually going to kill somebody"?

“And then Trish said what sounded like ‘lees’ or ‘least,’ but in the dream I knew she was ... eliding? . .

.is that the word? Eliding the first syllable, and that what she was really saying was ‘police.’ I asked her what about the police, what was she trying to say about the police, and I sat down. Right there.” He points to the chair in what they call the telephone nook. “There was some more silence, then a few more of those half-words, those whispered half-words. She was making me so mad doing that, I thought, Drama queen, same as it ever was, but then she said, ‘number,’ just as clear as a bell. And I knew—the way I knew she was trying to say ‘police’—that she was trying to tell me the police had called her because they didn’t have our number.”

Janet nods numbly. They decided to unlist their number two years ago because reporters kept calling Harvey about the Enron mess. Usually at dinnertime. Not because he’d had anything to do with Enron per se but because those big energy companies were sort of a specialty of his. He’d even served on a Presidential commission a few years earlier, when Clinton had been the big kahuna and the world had been (in her humble opinion, at least) a slightly better, slightly safer place. And while there were a lot of things about Harvey she no longer liked, one thing she knew perfectly well was that he had more integrity in his little finger than all those Enron sleazebags put together. She might sometimes be bored by integrity, but she knows what it is.

But don’t the police have a way of getting unlisted numbers? Well, maybe not if they’re in a hurry to find something out or tell somebody something. Plus, dreams don’t have to be logical, do they? Dreams are poems from the subconscious.

And now, because she can no longer bear to stand still, she goes to the kitchen door and looks out into the bright June day, looks out at Sewing Lane, which is their little version of what she supposes is the American dream. How quiet this morning lies, with a trillion drops of dew still sparkling on the grass! And still her heart hammers in her chest and the sweat rolls down her face and she wants to tell him he

must stop, he must not tell this dream, this terrible dream. She must remind him that Jenna lives right down the road—Jen, that is, Jen who works at the Video Stop in the village and spends all too many weekend nights drinking at the Gourd with the likes of Frank Friedman, who is old enough to be her father. Which is undoubtedly part of the attraction.

“All these whispered little half-words,” Harvey is saying, “and she would not speak up. Then I heard

‘killed,’ and I knew that one of the girls was dead. I just knew it. Not Trisha, because it was Trisha on the phone, but either Jenna or Stephanie. And I was so scared. I actually sat there wondering which one I wanted it to be, like Sophie’s fucking Choice. I started to shout at her. ‘Tell me which one! Tell me which one! For God’s sake, Trish, tell me which one!’ Only then the real world started to bleed through .

. . always assuming there is such a thing... .”

Harvey utters a little laugh, and in the bright morning light Janet sees there is a red stain in the middle of the dent on the side of Frank Friedman’s Volvo, and in the middle of the stain is a dark smutch that might be dirt or even hair. She can see Frank pulling up crooked to the curb at two in the morning, too drunk even to try the driveway, let alone the garage—straight is the gate, and all that. She can see him stumbling to the house with his head down, breathing hard through his nose. Viva ze booi .

“By then I knew I was in bed, but I could hear this low voice that didn’t sound like mine at all, it sounded like some stranger’s voice, and it couldn’t put corners on any of the words it was saying. ‘Ell-eeitch-un, ell-eeitch-un,’ that’s what it sounded like. ‘Ell-eeitch-un, Ish!’”

Tell me which one. Tell me which one, Trish.

Harvey falls silent, thinking. Considering. The dust motes dance around his face. The sun makes his T-shirt almost too dazzling to

look at; it is a T-shirt from a laundry-detergent ad.

“I lay there waiting for you to run in and see what was wrong,” he finally says. “I lay there all over goosebumps , and trembling, telling myself it was just a dream, the way you do, of course, but also thinking how real it was. How marvellous, in a horrible way.”

He stops again, thinking how to say what comes next, unaware that his wife is no longer listening to him.

Jax -that-was is now employing all her mind, all her considerable powers of thought, to make herself believe that what she is seeing is not blood but just the Volvo’s undercoating where the paint has been scraped away. “Undercoating” is a word her subconscious has been more than eager to cast up.

“It’s amazing, isn’t it, how deep imagination goes?” he says finally. “A dream like that is how a poet—one of the really great ones—must see his poem. Every detail so clear and so bright.”

He falls silent and the kitchen belongs to the sun and the dancing motes; outside, the world is on hold.

Janet looks at the Volvo across the street; it seems to pulse in her eyes, thick as a brick. When the phone rings, she would scream if she could draw breath, cover her ears if she could lift her hands. She hears Harvey get up and cross to the nook as it rings again, and then a third time.

It is a wrong number, she thinks. It has to be, because if you tell your dreams they don’t come true.

Harvey says, “Hello?”

NIGHTMARES & DREAMSCAPES
HEAD DOWN



HEAD DOWN

Stephen King

AUTHOR'S NOTE: I am breaking in here, Constant Reader, to make you aware that this is not a story but an essay—almost a diary. It originally appeared in *The New Yorker* in the spring of 1990.

S.K.

Head down! Keep your head down!”

It is far from the most difficult feat in sports, but anyone who has ever tried to do it will tell you that it's tough enough: using a round bat to hit a round ball squarely on the button. Tough enough so that the handful of men who do it well become rich, famous, and idolized: the Jose Cansecos, the Mike Greenwells, the Kevin Mitchells. For thousands of boys (and not a few girls), their faces, not the face of Axl Rose or Bobby Brown, are the ones that matter; their posters hold the positions of honor on bedroom walls and locker doors. Today Ron St. Pierre is teaching some of these boys—boys who will represent Bangor West Side in District 3 Little League tournament play—how to put the round bat on the round ball. Right now he's working with a kid named Fred Moore while my son, Owen, stands nearby, watching closely. He's due in St. Pierre's hot seat next. Owen is broad-shouldered and heavily built, like his old man; Fred looks almost painfully slim in his bright green jersey. And he is not making good contact.

“Head down, Fred!” St. Pierre shouts. He is halfway between the mound and home plate at one of the two Little League fields behind the Coke plant in Bangor; Fred is almost all the way to the backstop. The day is a hot one, but if the heat bothers either Fred or St. Pierre it does not show. They are intent on what they are doing.

“Keep it down!” St. Pierre shouts again, and unloads a fat pitch.

Fred chips under it. There is that chinky aluminum-on-cowhide sound—the sound of someone hitting a tin cup with a spoon. The ball hits the backstop, rebounds, almost bonks him on the helmet.

Both of them laugh, and then St. Pierre gets another ball from the red plastic bucket beside him.

“Get ready, Freddy!” he yells. “Head down!”

*

Maine’s District 3 is so large that it is split in two. The Penobscot County teams make up half the division; the teams from Aroostook and Washington counties make up the other half. All-Star kids are selected by merit and drawn from all existing district Little League teams. The dozen teams in District 3 play in simultaneous tournaments. Near the end of July, the two teams left will play off, best two out of three, to decide the district champ. That team represents District 3 in State Championship play, and it has been a long time—eighteen years—since a Bangor team made it into the state tourney.

This year, the State Championship games will be played in Old Town, where they make the canoes. Four of the five teams that play there will go back home. The fifth will go on to represent Maine in the Eastern Regional Tournament, this year to be held in Bristol, Connecticut. Beyond that, of course, is Williamsport, Pennsylvania, where the Little League World Series happens. The Bangor West players rarely seem to think of such dizzy heights; they will be happy just to beat Millinocket, their first-round opponent in the Penobscot County race. Coaches, however, are allowed to dream—are, in fact, almost obligated to dream.

*

This time Fred, who is the team joker, does get his head down. He hits a weak grounder on the wrong side of the first-base line, foul by about six feet.

“Look,” St Pierre says, taking another ball. He holds it up. It is scuffed, dirty, and grass-stained. It is nevertheless a baseball, and

Fred eyes it respectfully. "I'm going to show you a trick. Where's the ball?"

"In your hand," Fred says.

Saint, as Dave Mansfield, the team's head coach, calls him, drops it into his glove. "Now?"

"In your glove."

Saint turns sideways; his pitching hand creeps into his glove. "Now?"

"In your hand. I think."

"You're right. So watch my hand. Watch my hand, Fred Moore, and wait for the ball to come out in it. You're looking for the ball. Nothing else. Just the ball. I should just be a blur to you. Why would you want to see me, anyway? Do you care if I'm smiling? No. You're waiting to see how I'll come—sidearm or three-quarters or over the top. Are you waiting?"

Fred nods.

"Are you watching?"

Fred nods again.

"O.K.," St. Pierre says, and goes into his short-arm batting-practice motion again.

This time Fred drives the ball with real authority: a hard sinking liner to right field.

"All right!" Saint cries. "That's all right, Fred Moore!" He wipes sweat off his forehead. "Next batter!"

*

Dave Mansfield, a heavy, bearded man who comes to the park wearing aviator sunglasses and an open-neck College World Series shirt (it's a good-luck charm), brings a paper sack to the Bangor West-Millinocket game. It contains sixteen pennants, in various colors. BANGOR, each one says, the word flanked by a lobster on one side and a pine tree on the other. As each Bangor West player is announced on loudspeakers that have been wired to the chain-link backstop, he takes a pennant from the bag Dave holds out, runs across the infield, and hands it to his opposite number.

Dave is a loud, restless man who happens to love baseball and the kids who play it at this level. He believes there are two purposes to All-Star Little League: to have fun and to win. Both are important, he says, but the most important thing is to keep them in the right order. The pennants are not a sly gambit to unnerve the opposition but just for fun. Dave knows that the boys on both teams will remember this game, and he wants each of the Millinocket kids to have a souvenir. It's as simple as that.

The Millinocket players seem surprised by the gesture, and they don't know exactly what to do with the pennants as someone's tape player begins to warble out the Anita Bryant version of "The Star-Spangled Banner." The Millinocket catcher, almost buried beneath his gear, solves the problem in unique fashion: he holds his Bangor pennant over his heart.

With the amenities taken care of, Bangor West administers a brisk and thorough trouncing; the final score is Bangor West 18, Millinocket 7. The loss does not devalue the souvenirs, however; when Millinocket departs on the team bus, the visitors' dugout is empty save for a few Dixie cups and Popsicle sticks. The pennants—every single one of them—are gone.

*

"Cut two!" Neil Waterman, Bangor West's field coach, shouts. "Cut two, cut two!"

It's the day after the Millinocket game. Everyone on the team is still showing up for practice, but it's early yet. Attrition will set in. That is a given: parents are not always willing to give up summer plans so their kids can play Little League after the regular May-June season is over, and sometimes the kids themselves tire of the constant grind of practice. Some would rather be riding their bikes, trying to hang ten on their skateboards, or just hanging around the community pool and checking out the girls.

"Cut two!" Waterman yells. He is a small, compact man in khaki shorts and a Joe Coach crewcut. In real life he is a teacher and a college basketball coach, but this summer he is trying to teach these boys that baseball has more in common with chess than many would ever have believed. Know your play, he tells them over and over again. Know who it is you're backing up. Most important of all, know who your cut man is in every situation, and be able to hit him. He works patiently at showing them the truth that hides at the center of the game: that it is played more in the mind than with the body.

Ryan Larrobino, Bangor West's center fielder, fires a bullet to Casey Kinney at second base. Casey tags an invisible runner, pivots, and throws another bullet to home, where J. J. Fiddler takes the throw and tosses the ball back to Waterman.

"Double-play ball!" Waterman shouts, and hits one to Matt Kinney (not related to Casey). Matt is playing shortstop at practice today. The ball takes a funny hop and appears to be on its way to left center. Matt knocks it down, picks it up, and feeds to Casey at second; Casey pivots and throws to Mike Arnold, who is on first. Mike feeds it home to J.J.

"All right!" Waterman shouts. "Good job, Matt Kinney! Good job! One-two-one! You're covering, Mike Pelkey!" The two names. Always the two names, to avoid confusion. The team is lousy with Matts, Mikes, and guys named Kinney.

The throws are executed flawlessly. Mike Pelkey, Bangor West's number two pitcher, is right where he's supposed to be, covering

first. It's a move he doesn't always remember to make, but this time he does. He grins and trots back to the mound as Neil Waterman gets ready to hit the next combination.

*

"This is the best Little League All-Star team I've seen in years," Dave Mansfield says some days after Bangor West's trouncing of Millinocket. He dumps a load of sunflower seeds into his mouth and begins to chew them. He spits hulls casually as he talks. "I don't think they can be beaten—at least not in this division."

He pauses and watches as Mike Arnold breaks toward the plate from first, grabs a practice bunt, and whirls toward the bag. He cocks his arm back—then holds the ball. Mike Pelkey is still on the mound; this time he has forgotten that it is his job to cover, and the bag is undefended. He flashes Dave a quick guilty glance. Then he breaks into a sunny grin and gets ready to do it again. Next time he'll do it right, but will he remember to do it right during a game?

"Of course, we can beat ourselves," Dave says. "That's how it usually happens." And, raising his voice, he bellows, "Where were you, Mike Pelkey? You're s'posed to be covering first!"

Mike nods and trots over—better late than never.

"Brewer," Dave says, and shakes his head. "Brewer at their field. That'll be tough. Brewer's always tough."

*

Bangor West does not trounce Brewer, but they win their first "road game" without any real strain. Matt Kinney, the team's number one pitcher, is in good form. He is far from overpowering, but his fastball has a sneaky, snaky little hop, and he also has a modest but effective breaking pitch. Ron St. Pierre is fond of saying that every Little League pitcher in America thinks he's got a killer curveball.

“What they think is a curve is usually this big lollipop change,” he says. “A batter with a little self-discipline can kill the poor thing.”

Matt Kinney’s curveball actually curves, however, and tonight he goes the distance and strikes out eight. Probably more important, he walks only four. Walks are the bane of a Little League coach’s existence. “They kill you,” Neil Waterman says. “The walks kill you every time. Absolutely no exceptions. Sixty per cent of batters walked score in Little League games.” Not in this game: two of the batters Kinney walks are forced at second; the other two are stranded. Only one Brewer batter gets a hit: Denise Hewes, the center fielder, singles with one out in the fifth, but she is forced at second.

After the game is safely in the bag, Matt Kinney, a solemn and almost eerily self-possessed boy, flashes Dave a rare smile, revealing a set of neat braces. “She could hit!” he says, almost reverently.

“Wait until you see Hampden,” Dave says dryly. “They all hit.”

*

When the Hampden squad shows up at Bangor West’s field, behind the Coke plant, on July 17th, they quickly prove Dave right. Mike Pelkey has pretty good stuff and better control than he had against Millinocket, but he isn’t much of a mystery to the Hampden boys. Mike Tardif, a compact kid with an amazingly fast bat, rips Pelkey’s third pitch over the left-field fence, two hundred feet away, for a home run in the first inning. Hampden adds two more runs in the second, and leads Bangor West 3-0.

In the third, however, Bangor West breaks loose. Hampden’s pitching is good, Hampden’s hitting is awesome, but Hampden’s fielding, particularly infielding, leaves something to be desired. Bangor West puts three hits together with five errors and two walks to score seven runs. This is how Little League is most often played, and seven runs should be enough, but they aren’t; the opposition

chips stubbornly away, getting two in its half of the third and two more in the fifth. When Hampden comes up in the bottom of the sixth, it is trailing by only three, 10-7.

Kyle King, a twelve-year-old who started for Hampden this evening and then went to catcher in the fifth, leads off the bottom of the sixth with a double. Then Mike Pelkey strikes out Mike Tardif. Mike Wentworth, the new Hampden pitcher, singles to deep short. King and Wentworth advance on a passed ball, but are forced to hold when Jeff Carson grounds back to the pitcher. This brings up Josh Jamieson, one of five Hampden home-run threats, with two on and two out. He represents the tying run. Mike, although clearly tired, finds a little extra and strikes him out on a one-two pitch. The game is over.

The kids line up and give each other the custom-ordained high fives, but it's clear that Mike isn't the only kid who is simply exhausted after the match; with their slumped shoulders and lowered heads, they all look like losers. Bangor West is now 3-0 in divisional play, but the win is a fluke, the kind of game that makes Little League such a nerve-racking experience for spectators, coaches, and the players themselves. Usually sure-handed in the field, Bangor West has tonight committed something like nine errors.

"I didn't sleep all night," Dave mutters at practice the next day. "Damn, we were outplayed. We should have lost that game."

Two nights later, he has something else to feel gloomy about. He and Ron St. Pierre make the six-mile trip to Hampden to watch Kyle King and his mates play Brewer. This is no scouting expedition; Bangor has played both clubs, and both men have copious notes. What they are really hoping to see, Dave admits, is Brewer getting lucky and putting Hampden out of the way. It doesn't happen; what they see isn't a baseball game but gunnery practice.

Josh Jamieson, who struck out in the clutch against Mike Pelkey, clouts a home run over everything and into the Hampden practice

field. Nor is Jamieson alone. Carson hits one, Wentworth hits one, and Tardif hits a pair. The final score is Hampden 21, Brewer 9.

On the ride back to Bangor, Dave Mansfield chews a lot of sunflower seeds and says little. He rouses himself only once, as he wheels his old green Chevy into the rutted dirt parking lot beside the Coke plant. “We got lucky Tuesday night, and they know it,” he says. “When we go down there Thursday, they’ll be waiting for us.”

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The diamonds on which the teams of District 3 play out their six-inning dramas all have the same dimensions, give or take a foot here or an outfield gate there. The coaches all carry the rule book in their back pockets, and they put it to frequent use. Dave likes to say that it never hurts to make sure. The infield is sixty feet on each side, a square standing on the point that is home plate. The backstop, according to the rule book, must be at least twenty feet from home plate, giving both the catcher and a runner at third a fair chance on a passed ball. The fences are supposed to be 200 feet from the plate. At Bangor West’s field, it’s actually about 210 to dead center. And at Hampden, home of power hitters like Tardif and Jamieson, it’s more like 180.

The most inflexible measurement is also the most important: the distance between the pitcher’s rubber and the center of the plate. Forty-six feet—no more, no less. When it comes to this one, nobody ever says, “Aw, close enough for government work—let it go.” Most Little League teams live and die by what happens in the forty-six feet between those two points.

The fields of District 3 vary considerably in other ways, and a quick look is usually enough to tell you something about the feel any given community has for the game. The Bangor West field is in bad shape—a poor relation that the town regularly ignores in its recreation budget. The undersurface is a sterile clay that turns to soup when the weather is wet and to concrete when the weather is dry, as it has been this summer. Watering has kept most of the outfield reasonably

green, but the infield is hopeless. Scruffy grass grows up the lines, but the area between the pitcher's rubber and home plate is almost completely bald. The backstop is rusty; passed balls and wild pitches frequently squirt through a wide gap between the ground and the chain-link. Two large, hilly dunes run through short-right and center fields. These dunes have actually become a home-team advantage. Bangor West players learn to play the caroms off them, just as Red Sox left fielders learn to play caroms off the Green Monster. Visiting fielders, on the other hand, often find themselves chasing their mistakes all the way to the fence.

Brewer's field, tucked behind the local IGA grocery and a Marden's Discount Store, has to compete for space with what may be the oldest, rustiest playground equipment in New England; little brothers and sisters watch the game upside down from the swings, their heads down and their feet in the sky.

Bob Beal Field in Machias, with its pebble-pocked-skin infield, is probably the worst of the fields Bangor West will visit this year; Hampden, with its manicured outfield and neat composition infield, is probably the best. With its picnic area beyond the center-field fence and a rest-room-equipped snack bar, Hampden's diamond, behind the local VFW hall, looks like a rich kids' field. But looks can be deceiving. This team is a combination of kids from Newburgh and Hampden, and Newburgh is still small-farm and dairy country. Many of these kids ride to the games in old cars with primer paint around the headlights and mufflers held in place by chicken wire; they wear sunburns they got doing chores, not while they were hanging out at the country-club swimming pool. Town kids and country kids. Once they're in uniform, it doesn't much matter which is which.

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Dave is right: the Hampden-Newburgh fans are waiting. Bangor West last won the District 3 Little League title in 1971; Hampden has never won a title, and many local fans continue to hope that this will be the year, despite the earlier loss to Bangor West. For the first

time, the Bangor team really feels it is on the road; it is faced with a large hometown rooting section.

Matt Kinney gets the start. Hampden counters with Kyle King, and the game quickly shapes up as that rarest and richest of Little League commodities, a genuine pitchers' duel. At the end of the third inning, the score is Hampden 0, Bangor West 0.

In the bottom of the fourth, Bangor scores two unearned runs when Hampden's infield comes unglued once more. Owen King, Bangor West's first baseman, comes to bat with two on and one out. The two Kings, Kyle on the Hampden team and Owen on the Bangor West team, are not related. You don't need to be told; a single glance is enough. Kyle King is about five foot three. At six foot two, Owen King towers over him. Size differences are so extreme in Little League that it's easy to feel disoriented, the victim of hallucination.

Bangor's King raps a ground ball to short. It's a tailor-made double play, but the Hampden shortstop does not field it cleanly, and King, shucking his two hundred or so pounds down to first at top speed, beats the throw. Mike Pelkey and Mike Arnold scamper home.

Then, in the top of the fifth, Matt Kinney, who has been cruising, hits Chris Witcomb, number eight in Hampden's order. Brett Johnson, the number nine hitter, scorches one at Casey Kinney, Bangor West's second baseman. Again, it's a tailor-made double-play ball, but Casey gives up on it. His hands, which have been automatically dipping down, freeze about four inches off the ground, and Casey turns his face away to protect it from a possible bad hop. This is the most common of all Little League fielding errors, and the most easily understood; it is an act of naked self-preservation. The stricken look that Casey throws toward Dave and Neil as the ball squirts through into center field completes this part of the ballet.

"It's O.K., Casey! Next time!" Dave bawls in his gravelly, self-assured Yankee voice.

“New batter!” Neil shouts, ignoring Casey’s look completely. “New batter! Know your play! We’re still ahead! Get an out! Just concentrate on getting an out!”

Casey begins to relax, begins to get back into the game, and then, beyond the outfield fences, the Hampden Horns begin to blow. Some of them belong to late-model cars—Toyotas and Hondas and snappy little Dodge Colts with U.S. OUT OF CENTRAL AMERICA and SPLIT WOOD NOT ATOMS stickers on the bumpers. But most of the Hampden Horns reside within older cars and pick-up trucks. Many of the pick-ups have rusty doors, FM converters wired up beneath the dashboards, and Leer camper caps built over the truck beds. Who is inside these vehicles, blowing the horns? No one seems to know—not for sure. They are not parents or relatives of the Hampden players; the parents and relatives (plus a generous complement of ice-cream-smearing little brothers and sisters) are filling the bleachers and lining the fence on the third-base side of the diamond, where the Hampden dugout is. They may be local guys just off work—guys who have stopped to watch some of the game before having a few brewskis at the VFW hall next door—or they may be the ghosts of Hampden Little Leaguers Past, hungry for that long-denied State Championship flag. It seems at least possible; there is something both eerie and inevitable about the Hampden Horns. They toot in harmony—high horns, low horns, a few foghorns powered by dying batteries. Several Bangor West players look uneasily back toward the sound.

Behind the backstop, a local TV crew is preparing to videotape a story for the sports final on the eleven o’clock news. This causes a stir among some of the spectators, but only a few of the players on the Hampden bench seem to notice it. Matt Kinney certainly doesn’t. He is totally intent on the next Hampden batter, Matt Knaide, who taps one turf shoe with his aluminum Worth bat and then steps into the batter’s box.

The Hampden Horns fall silent. Matt Kinney goes into his windup. Casey Kinney drops back into position just east of second, glove

down. His face says it has no plans to turn away if the ball is hit to him again. The Hampden runners stand expectantly on first and second. (There is no leading away from the bag in Little League.) The spectators along the opposing arms of the diamond watch anxiously. Their conversations die out. Baseball at its best (and this is a very good game indeed, one you would pay money to see) is a game of restful pauses punctuated by short, sharp inhalations. The fans can now sense one of those inhalations coming. Matt Kinney winds and fires.

Knaide lines the first pitch over second for a base hit, and now the score is 2-1. Kyle King, Hampden's pitcher, steps to the plate and sends a low, screeching line drive straight back to the mound. It hits Matt Kinney on the right shin. He makes an instinctive effort to field the ball, which has already squiggled off toward the hole between third and short, before he realizes he is really hurt and folds up. Now the bases are loaded, but for the moment no one cares; the instant the umpire raises his hands, signalling time out, all the Bangor West players converge on Matt Kinney. Beyond center field, the Hampden Horns are blowing triumphantly.

Kinney is white-faced, clearly in pain. An ice pack is brought from the first-aid kit kept in the snack bar, and after a few minutes he is able to rise and limp off the field with his arms around Dave and Neil. The spectators applaud loudly and sympathetically.

Owen King, the erstwhile first baseman, becomes Bangor West's new pitcher, and the first batter he must face is Mike Tardif. The Hampden Horns send up a brief, anticipatory blat as Tardif steps in. King's third pitch goes wild to the backstop. Brett Johnson heads home; King breaks toward the plate from the mound, as he has been taught to do. In the Bangor West dugout, Neil Waterman, his arm still around Matt Kinney's shoulders, chants, "Cover-cover-COVER!"

Joe Wilcox, Bangor West's starting catcher, is a foot shorter than King, but very quick. At the beginning of this All-Star season, he did not want to catch, and he still doesn't like it, but he has learned to live with it and to get tough in a position where very few small

players survive for long; even in Little League, most catchers resemble human Toby jugs. Earlier in this game he made an amazing one-handed stab of a foul ball. Now he lunges toward the backstop, flinging his mask aside with his bare hand at the same instant he catches the rebounding wild pitch. He turns toward the plate and tosses to King as the Hampden Horns chorus a wild—and premature, as it turns out—bray of triumph.

Johnson has slowed down. On his face is an expression strikingly similar to that worn by Casey Kinney when Casey allowed Johnson's hard-hit grounder to shoot through the hole. It is a look of extreme anxiety and trepidation, the face of a boy who suddenly wishes he were someplace else. Anyplace else. The new pitcher is blocking the plate.

Johnson starts a halfhearted slide. King takes the toss from Wilcox, pivots with surprising, winsome grace, and tags the hapless Johnson out easily. He walks back toward the mound, wiping sweat from his forehead, and prepares to face Tardif once more. Behind him, the Hampden Horns have fallen silent again.

Tardif loops one toward third. Kevin Rochefort, Bangor's third baseman, takes a single step backward in response. It's an easy play, but there is an awful look of dismay on his face, and it is only then, as Rochefort starts to freeze up on what is an easy pop fly, that one can see how badly the whole team has been shaken by Matt's injury. The ball goes into Rochefort's glove, and then pops out when Rochefort—dubbed Roach Clip first by Freddy Moore and then by the whole squad—fails to squeeze it. Knaide, who advanced to third while King and Wilcox were dealing with Johnson, has already broken for the plate. Rochefort could have doubled Knaide up easily if he had caught the ball, but here, as in the majors, baseball is a game of ifs and inches. Rochefort doesn't catch the ball. He throws wild to first instead. Mike Arnold has taken over there, and he is one of the best fielders on the team, but no one issued him stilts. Tardif, meanwhile, steams into second. The pitchers' duel has become a typical Little League game, and now the Hampden Horns are a

cacophony of joy. The home team has their thumping shoes on, and the final score is Hampden 9, Bangor West 2. Still, there are two good things to go home on: Matt Kinney is not seriously hurt, and when Casey Kinney got another tough chance in the late innings he refused to choke, and made the play.

After the final out is recorded, the Bangor West players trudge into their dugout and sit on the bench. This is their first loss, and most of them are not coping with it very gracefully. Some toss their gloves disgustedly between their dirty sneakers. Some are crying, others look close to tears, and no one is talking. Even Freddy, Bangor's quipmaster general, has nothing to say on this muggy Thursday evening in Hampden. Beyond the center-field fence, a few of the Hampden Horns are still tooting happily away.

Neil Waterman is the first person to speak. He tells the boys to get their heads up and look at him. Three of them already are: Owen King, Ryan Larrobino, and Matt Kinney. Now about half the squad manages to do as he's asked. Several others, however—including Josh Stevens, who made the final out—continue to seem vastly interested in their footgear.

"Get your heads up," Waterman says again. He speaks louder this time, but not unkindly, and now they all manage to look at him. "You played a pretty good game," he says softly. "You got a little rattled, and they ended up on top. It happens. It doesn't mean they're better, though—that's something we're going to find out on Saturday. Tonight all you lost was a baseball game. The sun will still come up tomorrow." They begin to stir around on the bench a little; this old homily has apparently not lost its power to comfort. "You gave what you had tonight, and that's all we want. I'm proud of you, and you can be proud of yourselves. Nothing happened that you have to hang your heads about."

He stands aside for Dave Mansfield, who surveys his team. When Dave speaks, his usually loud voice is even quieter than Waterman's. "We knew when we came down here that they had to beat us, didn't we?" he asks. He speaks reflectively, almost as if he

were talking to himself. “If they didn’t, they’d be out. They’ll be coming to our field on Saturday. That’s when we have to beat them. Do you want to?”

They are all looking up now.

“I want you to remember what Neil told you,” Dave says in that reflective voice, so unlike his practice-field bellow. “You are a team. That means you love each other. You love each other—win or lose—because you are a team.”

The first time anyone suggested to these boys that they must come to love each other while they were on the field, they laughed uneasily at the idea. Now they don’t laugh. After enduring the Hampden Horns together, they seem to understand, at least a little.

Dave surveys them again, then nods. “O.K. Pick up the gear.”

They pick up bats, helmets, catching equipment, and stuff everything into canvas duffel bags. By the time they’ve got it over to Dave’s old green pick-up truck, some of them are laughing again.

Dave laughs with them, but he doesn’t do any laughing on the ride home. Tonight the ride seems long. “I don’t know if we can beat them on Saturday,” he says on the way back. He is speaking in that same reflective tone of voice. “I want to, and they want to, but I just don’t know. Hampden’s got mo on their side, now.”

Mo, of course, is momentum—that mythic force which shapes not only single games but whole seasons. Baseball players are quirky and superstitious at every level of play, and for some reason the Bangor West players have adopted a small plastic sandal—a castoff of some young fan’s baby doll—as their mascot. They have named this absurd talisman Mo. They stick it in the chain-link fence of the dugout at every game, and batters often touch it furtively before stepping into the on-deck circle. Nick Trzaskos, who ordinarily plays left field for Bangor West, has been entrusted with Mo between games. Tonight, for the first time, he forgot to bring the talisman.

“Nick better remember Mo on Saturday,” Dave says grimly. “But even if he remembers ...” He shakes his head. “I just don’t know.”

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There is no admission charge to Little League games; the charter expressly forbids it. Instead, a player takes around a hat during the fourth inning, soliciting donations for equipment and field maintenance. On Saturday, when Bangor West and Hampden square off in the year’s final Penobscot County Little League game, at Bangor, one can judge the growth of local interest in the team’s fortunes by a simple act of comparison. The collection taken up at the Bangor-Millinocket contest was \$15.45; when the hat finally comes back in the fifth inning of the Saturday-afternoon game against Hampden, it’s overflowing with change and crumpled dollar bills. The total take is \$94.25. The bleachers are full; the fences are lined; the parking lot is full. Little League has one thing in common with almost all American sports and business endeavors: nothing succeeds like success.

Things start off well for Bangor—they lead 7-3 at the end of three—and then everything falls apart. In the fourth inning, Hampden scores six runs, most of them honest. Bangor West doesn’t fold, as it did after Matt Kinney was hit in the game at Hampden—the players do not drop their heads, to use Neil Waterman’s phrase. But when they come to bat in the bottom of the sixth inning they are down by a score of 14-12. Elimination looks very close and very real. Mo is in its accustomed place, but Bangor West is still three outs away from the end of its season.

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One kid who did not need to be told to get his head up following Bangor West’s 9-2 loss was Ryan Iarrobino. He went two for three in that game, played well, and trotted off the field knowing he had played well. He is a tall kid, quiet, with broad shoulders and a shock of dark-brown hair. He is one of two natural athletes on the Bangor West team. Matt Kinney is the other. Although the two boys are

physical opposites—Kinney slim and still fairly short, Larrobino tall and well muscled—they share a quality that is uncommon in boys their age: they trust their bodies. Most of the others on the Bangor West squad, no matter how talented, seem to regard feet, arms, and hands as spies and potential traitors.

Larrobino is one of those boys who seem somehow more there when they are dressed for some sort of competition. He is one of the few lads on either team who can don batting helmets and not look like nerds wearing their mothers' stewpots. When Matt Kinney stands on the mound and throws a baseball, he seems perfect in his place and time. And when Ryan Larrobino steps into the right-hand batter's box and points the head of his bat out toward the pitcher for an instant before raising it to the cocked position, at his right shoulder, he also seems to be exactly where he belongs. He looks dug in even before he settles himself for the first pitch: you could draw a perfectly straight line from the ball of his shoulder to the ball of his hip and on down to the ball of his ankle. Matt Kinney was built to throw baseballs; Ryan Larrobino was built to hit them.

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Last call for Bangor West. Jeff Carson, whose fourth-inning home run is really the difference in this game, and who earlier replaced Mike Wentworth on the mound for Hampden, is now replaced by Mike Tardif. He faces Owen King first. King goes three and two (swinging wildly for the fences at one pitch in the dirt), then lays off a pitch just inside to work a walk. Roger Fisher follows him to the plate, pinch-hitting for the ever-gregarious Fred Moore. Roger is a small boy with Indian-dark eyes and hair. He looks like an easy out, but looks can be deceptive; Roger has good power. Today, however, he is overmatched. He strikes out.

In the field, the Hampden players shift around and look at each other. They are close, and they know it. The parking lot is too far away here for the Hampden Horns to be a factor; their fans settle for simply screaming encouragement. Two women wearing purple Hampden caps are standing behind the dugout, hugging each other

joyfully. Several other fans look like track runners waiting for the starter's gun; it is clear they mean to rush onto the field the moment their boys succeed in putting Bangor West away for good.

Joe Wilcox, who didn't want to be a catcher and ended up doing the job anyway, rams a one-out single up the middle and into left-center field. King stops at second. Up steps Arthur Dorr, the Bangor right fielder, who wears the world's oldest pair of high-top sneakers and has not had a hit all day. This time he rifles one, but right at the Hampden shortstop, who barely has to move. The shortstop whips the ball to second, hoping to catch King off the bag, but he's out of luck. Nevertheless, there are two out.

The Hampden fans scream further encouragement. The women behind the dugout are jumping up and down. Now there are a few Hampden Horns tootling away someplace, but they are a little early, and all one has to do to know it is to look at Mike Tardif's face as he wipes off his forehead and pounds the baseball into his glove.

Ryan Larrobino steps into the right-hand batter's box. He has a fast, almost naturally perfect swing; even Ron St. Pierre will not fault him on it much.

Ryan swings through Tardif's first pitch, his hardest of the day—it makes a rifle-shot sound as it hits Kyle King's glove. Tardif then wastes one outside. King returns the ball; Tardif meditates briefly and then throws a low fastball. Ryan looks at it, and the umpire calls strike two. It has caught the outside corner—maybe. The ump says it did, anyway, and that's the end of it.

Now the fans on both sides have fallen quiet, and so have the coaches. They're all out of it. It's only Tardif and Larrobino now, balanced on the last strike of the last out of the last game one of these teams will play. Forty-six feet between these two faces. Only, Larrobino is not watching Tardif's face. He is watching Tardif's glove, and somewhere I can hear Ron St. Pierre telling Fred, You're waiting to see how I'll come—sidearm, three-quarters, or over the top.

Iarrobino is waiting to see how Tardif will come. As Tardif moves to the set position, you can faintly hear the pock-pock, pock-pock of tennis balls on a nearby court, but here there is only silence and the crisp black shadows of the players, lying on the dirt like silhouettes cut from black construction paper, and Iarrobino is waiting to see how Tardif will come.

He comes over the top. And suddenly Iarrobino is in motion, both knees and the left shoulder dipping slightly, the aluminum bat a blur in the sunlight. That aluminum-on-cowhide sound—chink, like someone hitting a tin cup with a spoon—is different this time. A lot different. Not chink but crunch as Ryan connects, and then the ball is in the sky, tracking out to left field—a long shot that is clearly gone, high, wide, and handsome into the summer afternoon. The ball will later be recovered from beneath a car about 275 feet away from home plate.

The expression on twelve-year-old Mike Tardif's face is stunned, thunderstruck disbelief. He takes one quick look into his glove, as if hoping to find the ball still there and discover that Iarrobino's dramatic two-strike, two-out shot was only a hideous momentary dream. The two women behind the backstop look at each other in total amazement. At first, no one makes a sound. In that moment before everyone begins to scream and the Bangor West players rush out of their dugout to await Ryan at home plate and mob him when he arrives, only two people are entirely sure that it did really happen. One is Ryan himself. As he rounds first, he raises both hands to his shoulders in a brief but emphatic gesture of triumph. And, as Owen King crosses the plate with the first of the three runs that will end Hampden's All-Star season, Mike Tardif realizes. Standing on the pitcher's rubber for the last time as a Little Leaguer, he bursts into tears.

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"You gotta remember, they're only twelve," each of the three coaches says at one time or another, and each time one of them says it, the

listener feels that he—Mansfield, Waterman, or St. Pierre—is really reminding himself.

“When you are on the field, we’ll love you and you will love each other,” Waterman tells the boys again and again, and in the wake of Bangor’s eleventh-hour, 15-14 win over Hampden, when they all did love each other, the boys no longer laugh at this. He continues, “From now on, I’m going to be hard on you—very hard. When you’re playing, you’ll get nothing but unconditional love from me. But when we’re practicing on our home field some of you are going to find out how loud I can yell. If you’re goofing off, you’re going to sit down. If I tell you to do something and you don’t do it, you’re going to sit down. Recess is over, guys—everybody out of the pool. This is where the hard work starts.”

A few nights later, Waterman hits a shot to right during fielding practice. It almost amputates Arthur Dorr’s nose on the way by. Arthur has been busy making sure his fly is zipped. Or inspecting the laces of his Keds. Or some damn thing.

“Arthur!” Neil Waterman bellows, and Arthur flinches more at the sound of that voice than he did at the close passage of the baseball. “Get in here! On the bench! Now!”

“But—” Arthur begins.

“In here!” Neil yells back. “You’re on the pine!”

Arthur trots sullenly in, head down, and J. J. Fiddler takes his place. A few nights later, Nick Trzaskos loses his chance to hit away when he fails to bunt two pitches in five tries or so. He sits on the bench by himself, cheeks flaming.

Machias, the Aroostook County/Washington County winner, is next on the docket—a two-out-of-three series, and the winner will be District 3 champion. The first game is to be played at the Bangor field, behind the Coke plant, the second at Bob Beal Field in

Machias. The last game, if needed, will be played on neutral ground between the two towns.

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As Neil Waterman has promised, the coaching staff is all encouragement once the national anthem has been played and the first game starts.

“That’s all right, no damage!” Dave Mansfield cries as Arthur Dorr misjudges a long shot to right and the ball lands behind him. “Get an out, now! Belly play! Let’s just get an out!” No one seems to know exactly what “belly play” is, but since it seems to involve winning ball games, the boys are all for it.

No third game against Machias is necessary. Bangor West gets a strong pitching performance from Matt Kinney in the first one and wins 17-5. Winning the second game is a little tougher only because the weather does not cooperate: a drenching summer downpour washes out the first try, and it is necessary for Bangor West to make the 168-mile round trip to Machias twice in order to clinch the division. They finally get the game in, on the twenty-ninth of July. Mike Pelkey’s family has spirited Bangor West’s number two pitcher off to Disney World in Orlando, making Mike the third player to fade from the team, but Owen King steps quietly in and pitches a five-hitter, striking out eight before tiring and giving way to Mike Arnold in the sixth inning. Bangor West wins, 12-2, and becomes District 3 Little League champ.

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At moments like these, the pros retire to their air-conditioned locker rooms and pour champagne over each other’s heads. The Bangor West team goes out to Helen’s, the best (maybe the only) restaurant in Machias, to celebrate with hot dogs, hamburgers, gallons of Pepsi-Cola, and mountains of French fries. Looking at them as they laugh at each other, razz each other, and blow napkin pellets through

their straws at each other, it is impossible not to be aware of how soon they will discover gaudier modes of celebration.

For now, however, this is perfectly O.K.—great, in fact. They are not overwhelmed by what they have done, but they seem tremendously pleased, tremendously content, and entirely here. If they have been touched with magic this summer, they do not know it, and no one has as yet been unkind enough to tell them that it may be so. For now they are allowed the deep-fried simplicities of Helen's, and those simplicities are quite enough. They have won their division; the State Championship Tournament, where bigger and better teams from the more heavily populated regions downstate will probably blow them out, is still a week away.

Ryan Larrobino has changed back into his tank top. Arthur Dorr has a rakish smear of ketchup on one cheek. And Owen King, who struck terror into the hearts of the Machias batters by coming at them with a powerful sidearm fastball on 0-2 counts, is burbling happily into his glass of Pepsi. Nick Trzaskos, who can look unhappier than any boy on earth when things don't break his way, looks supremely happy tonight. And why not? Tonight they're twelve and they're winners.

Not that they don't remind you themselves from time to time. Halfway back from Machias after the first trip, the rainout, J. J. Fiddler begins to wriggle around uneasily in the back seat of the car he is riding in. "I gotta go," he says. He clutches at himself and adds ominously, "Man, I gotta go bad. I mean big time."

"J.J.'s gonna do it!" Joe Wilcox cries gleefully. "Watch this! J.J.'s gonna flood the car!"

"Shut up, Joey," J.J. says, and then begins to wriggle around again.

He has waited until the worst possible moment to make his announcement. The eighty-four-mile trip between Machias and Bangor is, for the most part, an exercise in emptiness. There isn't even a decent stand of trees into which J.J. can disappear for a few

moments along this stretch of road—only mile after mile of open hay fields, with Route 1A cutting a winding course through them.

Just as J.J.'s bladder is going to DEFCON-1, a providential gas station appears. The assistant coach swings in and tops up his tank while J.J. splits for the men's room. "Boy!" he says, brushing his hair out of his eyes as he jogs back to the car. "That was close!"

"Got some on your pants, J.J.," Joe Wilcox says casually, and everyone goes into spasms of wild laughter as J.J. checks.

On the trip back to Machias the next day, Matt Kinney reveals one of the chief attractions People magazine holds for boys of Little League age. "I'm sure there's one in here someplace," he says, leafing slowly through an issue he has found on the back seat. "There almost always is."

"What? What are you looking for?" third baseman Kevin Rochefort asks, peering over Matt's shoulder as Matt leafs past the week's celebs, barely giving them a look.

"The breast-examination ad," Matt explains. "You can't see everything, but you can see quite a lot. Here it is!" He holds the magazine up triumphantly.

Four other heads, each wearing a red Bangor West baseball cap, immediately cluster around the magazine. For a few minutes, at least, baseball is the furthest thing from these boys' minds.

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The 1989 Maine State Little League Championship Tournament begins on August 3, just over four weeks after All-Star play began for the teams involved. The state is divided into five districts, and all five send teams to Old Town, where this year's tourney is to be held. The participants are Yarmouth, Belfast, Lewiston, York, and Bangor West. All the teams but Belfast are bigger than the Bangor West All-

Stars, and Belfast is supposed to have a secret weapon. Their number one pitcher is this year's tourney wunderkind.

The naming of the tourney wunderkind is a yearly ceremony, a small tumor that seems to defy all attempts to remove it. This boy, who is anointed Kid Baseball whether he wants the honor or not, finds himself in a heretofore unsuspected spotlight, the object of discussion, speculation, and, inevitably, wagering. He also finds himself in the unenviable position of having to live up to all sorts of pretournament hype. A Little League tournament is a pressure situation for any kid; when you get to Tourney Town and discover you have somehow become an instant legend as well, it's usually too much.

This year's object of myth and discussion is Belfast's southpaw Stanley Sturgis. In his two outings for Belfast he has chalked up thirty strikeouts—fourteen in his first game, sixteen in his second. Thirty K's in two games is an impressive statistic in any league, but to fully understand Sturgis's accomplishment one has to remember that Little League games consist of only six innings. That means that 83 per cent of the outs Belfast recorded with Sturgis on the hill came on strikeouts.

Then there is York. All the teams that come to the Knights of Columbus field in Old Town to compete in the tourney have excellent records, but York, which is undefeated, is the clear favorite to win a ticket to the Eastern Regionals. None of their players are giants, but several of them are over five-ten, and their best pitcher, Phil Tarbox, has a fastball that may top seventy miles an hour on some pitches—extravagant by Little League standards. Like Yarmouth and Belfast, the York players come dressed in special All-Star uniforms and matching turf shoes, which make them look like pros.

Only Bangor West and Lewiston come wearing mufti—which is to say, shirts of many colors bearing the names of their regular-season team sponsors. Owen King wears Elks orange, Ryan Iarrobino and Nick Trzaskos wear Bangor Hydro red, Roger Fisher and Fred Moore wear Lions green, and so on. The Lewiston team is dressed

in similar fashion, but they have at least been provided with matching shoes and stirrups. Compared with Lewiston, the Bangor team, dressed in a variety of baggy gray sweatpants and nondescript street sneakers, looks eccentric. Next to the other teams, however, they look like out-and-out ragamuffins. No one, with the possible exception of the Bangor West coaches and the players themselves, takes them very seriously. In its first article on the tourney the local newspaper gives more coverage to Sturgis, of Belfast, than it does to the entire Bangor West team.

Dave, Neil, and Saint, the odd but surprisingly effective brain trust that has brought the team this far, watch Belfast take infield and batting practice without saying much. The Belfast kids are resplendent in their new purple-and-white uniforms—uniforms that have not worn so much as a speck of infield dirt until today. At last, Dave says, “Well, we finally got here again. We did that much. Nobody can take that away from us.”

Bangor West comes from the district in which the tournament is being held this year, and the team will not have to play until two of the five teams have been eliminated. This is called a first-round bye, and right now it’s the biggest, perhaps the only, advantage this team has. In their own district, they looked like champions (except for that one awful game against Hampden), but Dave, Neil, and Saint have been around long enough to know that they are now looking at an entirely different level of baseball. Their silence as they stand by the fence watching Belfast work out acknowledges this eloquently.

In contrast, York has already ordered District 4 pins. Trading pins is a tradition at the regional tournaments, and the fact that York has already laid in a supply tells an interesting tale. The pins say York means to play with the best of the East Coast, in Bristol. The pins say they don’t think Yarmouth can stop them; or Belfast, with its wunderkind southpaw; or Lewiston, which clawed its way to the Division 2 championship through the losers’ bracket, after dropping their first game 15-12; or, least of all, fourteen badly dressed pipsqueaks from the west side of Bangor.

“At least we’ll get a chance to play,” Dave says, “and we’ll try to make them remember we were here.”

But first Belfast and Lewiston have their chance to play, and after the Boston Pops has steamed through a recorded version of the national anthem, and a local writer of some repute has tossed out the obligatory first pitch (it sails all the way to the backstop), they have at it.

Area sports reporters have spilled a lot of ink on the subject of Stanley Sturgis, but reporters are not allowed on the field once the game starts (a situation caused by a mistake in the rules as they were originally laid out, some of them seem to feel). Once the umpire has commanded the teams to play ball, Sturgis finds himself on his own. The writers, the pundits, and the entire Belfast hot-stove league are now all on the other side of the fence.

Baseball is a team sport, but there is only one player with a ball at the center of each diamond and only one player with a bat at the diamond’s lowest point. The man with the bat keeps changing, but the pitcher remains—unless he can no longer cut it, that is. Today is Stan Sturgis’s day to discover the hard truth of tourney play: sooner or later, every wunderkind meets his match.

Sturgis struck out thirty men in his last pair of games, but that was District 2. The team Belfast is playing today, a tough bunch of scrappers out of Lewiston’s Elliot Avenue League, is a different plate of beans altogether. They are not as big as the boys from York and don’t field as smoothly as the boys from Yarmouth, but they are pesky and persistent. The first batter, Carlton Gagnon, personifies the gnawing, clawing spirit of the team. He singles up the middle, steals second, is sacrificed to third, then bolts home on a steal play sent in from the bench. In the third inning, with the score 1-0, Gagnon reaches base again, this time on a fielder’s choice. Randy Gervais, who follows this pest in the lineup, strikes out, but before he does, Gagnon has gone to second on a passed ball and stolen third. He scores on a two-out base hit by Bill Paradis, the third baseman.

Belfast comes up with a run in the fourth, briefly making a game of it, but then Lewiston puts them, and Stanley Sturgis, away for good, scoring two in the fifth and four more in the sixth. The final tally is 9-1. Sturgis strikes out eleven, but he also gives up seven hits, while Carlton Gagnon, Lewiston's pitcher, strikes out eight and allows only three hits. When Sturgis leaves the field at the end of the game, he looks both depressed and relieved. For him the hype and hoopla are over. He can quit being a newspaper sidebar and go back to being a kid again. His face suggests that he sees certain advantages in that.

Later, in a battle of the giants, tourney favorite York knocks off Yarmouth. Then everybody goes home (or, in the case of the visiting players, back to their motels or to the homes of their host families). Tomorrow, Friday, it will be Bangor West's turn to play while York waits to meet the winner in the closer.

*

Friday comes in hot, foggy, and cloudy. Rain threatens from first light, and an hour or so before Bangor West and Lewiston are scheduled to square off the rain comes—a deluge of rain. When this sort of weather struck in Machias, the game was quickly cancelled. Not here. This is a different field—one with a grass infield instead of dirt—but that isn't the only factor. The major one is TV. This year, for the first time, two stations have pooled their resources and will telecast the tournament final statewide on Saturday afternoon. If the semifinal between Bangor and Lewiston is postponed, it means trouble with the schedule, and even in Maine, even in this most amateur of amateur sports, the one thing you don't jiggle is the media's schedule.

So the Bangor West and Lewiston teams are not dismissed when they come to the field. Instead, they sit in cars or cluster in little groups beneath the candy-striped canvas of the central concession booth. Then they wait for a break in the weather. And wait. And wait. Restlessness sets in, of course. Many of these kids will play in bigger games before their athletic careers end, but this is the biggest to date for all of them; they are pumped to the max.

Someone eventually has a brainstorm. After a few quick phone calls, two Old Town schoolbuses, gleaming bright yellow in the drenching rain, pull up to the nearby Elks Club, and the players are whisked off on a tour of the Old Town Canoe Company factory and the local James River paper mill. (The James River Corporation is the prime buyer of ad time on the upcoming championship telecast.) None of the players look particularly happy as they climb aboard the buses; they don't look much happier when they arrive back. Each player is carrying a small canoe paddle, about the right size for a well-built elf. Freebies from the canoe factory. None of the boys seem to know just what they should do with the paddles, but when I check later they're all gone, just like the Bangor pennants after that first game against Millinocket. Free souvenirs—good deal.

And there will be a game after all, it seems. At some point—perhaps while the Little Leaguers were watching the fellows at the James River mill turn trees into toilet paper—the rain stopped. The field has drained well, the pitcher's mound and the batters' boxes have been dusted with Quick-Dry, and now, at just past three in the afternoon, a watery sun takes its first peek through the clouds.

The Bangor West team has come back from the field trip flat and listless. No one has thrown a ball or swung a bat or run a single base so far today, but everybody already seems tired. The players walk toward the practice field without looking at each other; gloves dangle at the ends of arms. They walk like losers, and they talk like losers.

Instead of lecturing them, Dave lines them up and begins playing his version of pepper with them. Soon the Bangor players are razzing each other, catcalling, trying for circus catches, groaning and bitching when Dave calls an error and sends someone to the end of the line. Then, just before Dave is ready to call the workout off and take them over to Neil and Saint for batting practice, Roger Fisher steps out of the line and bends over with his glove against his belly. Dave goes to him at once, his smile becoming an expression of concern. He wants to know if Roger is all right.

“Yes,” Roger says. “I just wanted to get this.” He bends down a little farther, dark eyes intent, plucks something out of the grass, and hands it to Dave. It is a four-leaf clover.

*

In Little League tournament games, the home team is always decided by a coin toss. Dave has been extremely lucky at winning these, but today he loses, and Bangor West is designated the visiting team. Sometimes even bad luck turns out to be good, though, and this is one of those days. Nick Trzaskos is the reason.

The skills of all the players have improved during their six-week season, but in some cases attitudes have improved as well. Nick started deep on the bench, despite his proven skills as a defensive player and his potential as a hitter; his fear of failure made him unready to play. Little by little, he has begun to trust himself, and now Dave is ready to try starting him. “Nick finally figured out that the other guys weren’t going to give him a hard time if he dropped a ball or struck out,” St. Pierre says. “For a kid like Nick, that’s a big change.”

Today, Nick cranks the third pitch of the game to deep center field. It is a hard, rising line drive, over the fence and gone before the center fielder has a chance to turn and look, let alone cruise back and grab it. As Nick Trzaskos rounds second and slows down, breaking into the home-run trot all these boys know so well from TV, the fans behind the backstop are treated to a rare sight: Nick is grinning. As he crosses home plate and his surprised, happy teammates mob him, he actually begins to laugh. As he enters the dugout, Neil claps him on the back, and Dave Mansfield gives him a brief, hard hug.

Nick has also finished what Dave started with his game of pepper: the team is fully awake now, and ready to do some business. Matt Kinney gives up a leadoff single to Carl Gagnon, the pest who began the process of dismantling Stanley Sturgis. Gagnon goes to second on Ryan Stretton’s sacrifice, advances to third on a wild pitch, and scores on another wild pitch. It is an almost uncanny repetition of his

first at bat against Belfast. Kinney's control is not great this afternoon, but Gagnon's is the only run the team from Lewiston can manage in the early going. This is unfortunate for them, because Bangor comes up hitting in the top of the second.

Owen King leads off with a deep single; Arthur Dorr follows with another; Mike Arnold reaches when Lewiston's catcher, Jason Auger, picks up Arnold's bunt and throws wild to first base. King scores on the error, putting Bangor West back on top, 2-1. Joe Wilcox, Bangor's catcher, scratches out an infield hit to load the bases. Nick Trzaskos strikes out his second time up, and that brings Ryan Iarrobino to the plate. He struck out his first time up, but not now. He turns Matt Noyes's first pitch into a grand-slam home run, and after an inning and a half the score is Bangor West 6, Lewiston 1.

Up to the sixth, it is an authentic four-leaf-clover day for Bangor West. When Lewiston comes to bat for what the Bangor fans hope will be the last time, they are down by a score of 9-1. The pest, Carlton Gagnon, leads off and reaches on an error. The next batter, Ryan Stretton, also reaches on an error. The Bangor fans, who have been cheering wildly, begin to look a little uneasy. It's hard to choke when you're eight runs ahead, but not impossible. These northern New Englanders are Red Sox fans. They have seen it happen many times.

Bill Paradis makes the jitters worse by singling sharply up the middle. Both Gagnon and Stretton come home. The score is now 9-3, runner on first, nobody out. The Bangor fans shuffle and look at each other uneasily. It can't really get away from us this late in the game, can it? their looks ask. Their answer is, Of course, you bet it can. In Little League, anything can and often does happen.

But not this time. Lewiston scores one more time, and that's it. Noyes, who fanned three times against Sturgis, fans for the third time today, and there is finally one out. Auger, Lewiston's catcher, hits the first pitch hard to the shortstop, Roger Fisher. Roger booted Carl Gagnon's ball earlier in the inning to open the door, but he picks

this one up easily and shovels it to Mike Arnold, who feeds it on to Owen King at first. Auger is slow, and King's reach is long. The result is a game-ending 6-4-3 double play. You don't often see around-the-horn d.p.s in the scaled-down world of Little League, where the base paths are only sixty feet long, but Roger found a four-leaf clover today. If you have to chalk it up to anything, it might as well be that. Whatever you chalk it up to, the boys from Bangor have won another one, 9-4.

Tomorrow, there are the giants from York.

*

It is August 5, 1989, and in the state of Maine only twenty-nine boys are still playing Little League ball—fourteen on the Bangor West squad and fifteen on York's team. The day is an almost exact replica of the day before: hot, foggy, and threatening. The game is scheduled to begin promptly at 12:30, but the skies open once again, and by 11 it looks as though the game will be—must be—cancelled. The rain comes pouring down in buckets.

Dave, Neil, and Saint are taking no chances, however. None of them liked the flat mood the kids were in when they returned from their impromptu tour of the day before, and they have no intention of allowing a repeat. No one wants to end up counting on a game of pepper or a four-leaf clover today. If there is a game—and TV is a powerful motivator, no matter how murky the weather—it will be for all the marbles. The winners go on to Bristol; the losers go home.

So a makeshift cavalcade of vans and station wagons driven by coaches and parents is assembled at the field behind the Coke plant, and the team is ferried the ten miles up to the University of Maine field house, a barnlike indoor facility where Neil and Saint rally them through their paces until the boys are soaked with sweat. Dave has arranged for the York team to use the field house, too, and as the Bangor team exits into the overcast the York team, dressed in their natty blue uniforms, troops in.

The rain is down to isolated dribbles by three o'clock, and the ground crew works frantically to return the field to playable shape. Five makeshift TV platforms have been constructed on steel frames around the field. In a nearby parking lot is a huge truck with MAINE BROADCASTING SYSTEM LIVE REMOTE painted on the side. Thick bundles of cable, held together with cinches of electrician's tape, lead from the cameras and the temporary announcer's booth back to this truck. One door stands open, and many TV monitors glimmer within.

York hasn't arrived from the field house yet. The Bangor West squad begins throwing outside the left-field fence, mostly to have something to do and keep the jitters at bay; they certainly don't need to warm up after the humid hour they just spent at the University. The camerapersons stand on their towers and watch the ground crew try to get rid of the water.

The outfield is in fair shape, and the skin parts of the infield have been raked and coated with Quick-Dry. The real problem is the area between home plate and the pitcher's mound. This section of the diamond was freshly resodded before the tournament began, and there has been no time for the roots to take hold and provide some natural drainage. The result is a swampy mess in front of home plate—a mess that slops off toward the third-base line.

Someone has an idea—an inspiration, as it turns out—that involves actually removing a large section of the wounded infield. While this is being done, a truck arrives from Old Town High School and two industrial-size Rinsenvacs are off-loaded. Five minutes later, the ground crew is literally vacuuming the subsurface of the infield. It works. By 3:25, the groundkeepers are replacing chunks of sod like pieces in a large green jigsaw puzzle. By 3:35, a local music teacher, accompanying herself on an acoustic guitar, is winging her way through a gorgeous rendition of "The Star-Spangled Banner." And at 3:37 Bangor West's Roger Fisher, Dave's dark-horse pick to start in place of the absent Mike Pelkey, is warming up. Did Roger's find of the day before have anything to do with Dave's decision to start him

instead of King or Arnold? Dave only puts his finger on the side of his nose and smiles wisely.

At 3:40, the umpire steps in. “Send it down, catcher,” he says briskly. Joey does. Mike Arnold makes the sweep tag on the invisible runner, then sends the baseball on its quick journey around the infield. A TV audience that stretches from New Hampshire to the Maritime Provinces of Canada watches as Roger fusses nervously with the sleeves of his green jersey and the gray warm-up shirt he wears beneath it. Owen King tosses him the ball from first base. Fisher takes it and holds it against his hip.

“Let’s play ball,” the umpire invites—an invitation that umpires have been extending to Little League players for fifty years now—and Dan Bouchard, York’s catcher and leadoff hitter, steps into the box. Roger goes to the set position and prepares to throw the first pitch of the 1989 State Championship game.

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Five days earlier:

Dave and I take the Bangor West pitching staff up to Old Town. Dave wants them all to know how the mound feels when they come up here to play for real. With Mike Pelkey gone, the staff consists of Matt Kinney (his triumph over Lewiston still four days in the future), Owen King, Roger Fisher, and Mike Arnold. We get off to a late start, and as the four boys take turns throwing, Dave and I sit in the visitors’ dugout, watching the boys as the light slowly leaves the summer sky.

On the mound, Matt Kinney is throwing one hard curve after another to J. J. Fiddler. In the home dugout, across the diamond, the three other pitchers, their workouts finished, are sitting on the bench with a few teammates who have come along for the ride. Although the talk comes to me only in snatches, I can tell it’s mostly about school—a subject that comes up with greater and greater frequency during the last month of summer vacation. They talk about teachers past and

teachers future, passing on the anecdotes that form an important part of their preadolescent mythology: the teacher who blew her cool during the last month of the school year because her oldest son was in a car accident; the crazy grammar-school coach (they make him sound like a lethal combination of Jason, Freddy, and Leatherface); the science teacher who supposedly once threw a kid against his locker so hard the kid was knocked out; the home-room teacher who will give you lunch money if you forget, or if you just say you forgot. It is junior high apocrypha, powerful stuff, and they tell it with great relish as twilight closes in.

Between the two dugouts, the baseball is a white streak as Matt throws it again and again. His rhythm is a kind of hypnosis: Set, wind, and fire. Set, wind, and fire. Set, wind, and fire. J.J.'s mitt cracks with each reception.

“What are they going to take with them?” I ask Dave. “When this is all over, what are they going to take with them? What difference does it make for them, do you think?”

The look on Dave's face is surprised and considering. Then he turns back to look at Matt and smiles. “They're going to take each other,” he says.

It is not the answer I have been expecting—far from it. There was an article about Little League in the paper today—one of those think pieces that usually run in the ad-littered wasteland between the obituaries and the horoscopes. This one summarized the findings of a sociologist who spent a season monitoring Little Leaguers, and then followed their progress for a short time thereafter. He wanted to find out if the game did what Little League boosters claim it does—that is, pass on such old-fashioned American values as fair play, hard work, and the virtue of team effort. The fellow who did the study reported that it did, sort of. But he also reported that Little League did little to change the individual lives of the players. School troublemakers were still school troublemakers when classes started again in September, good scholars were still good scholars; the class clown (read Fred Moore) who took June and July off to play

some serious Little League ball was still the class clown after Labor Day. The sociologist found exceptions; exceptional play sometimes bred exceptional changes. But in the main this fellow found that the boys were about the same coming out as they were going in.

I suppose my confusion at Dave's answer grows out of my knowledge of him—he is an almost fanatic booster of Little League. I'm sure he must have read the article, and I have been expecting him to refute the sociologist's conclusions, using the question as a springboard. Instead, he has delivered one of the hoariest chestnuts of the sports world.

On the mound, Matt continues to throw to J.J., harder than ever now. He has found that mystic place pitchers call "the groove," and even though this is only an informal practice session to familiarize the boys with the field, he is reluctant to quit.

I ask Dave if he can explain a little more fully, but I do so in a gingerly way, half expecting that I am on the verge of hitting a hitherto unsuspected jackpot of clichés: night owls never fly in the daytime; winners never quit and quitters never win; use it, don't lose it. Maybe even, God save us, a little Hummm, baby.

"Look at them," Dave says, still smiling. Something in that smile suggests he may be reading my mind. "Take a good look."

I do. There are perhaps half a dozen of them on the bench, still laughing and telling junior high school war stories. One of them breaks out of the discussion long enough to ask Matt Kinney to throw the curve, and Matt does—one with a particularly nasty break. The boys on the bench all laugh and cheer.

"Look at those two guys," Dave says, pointing. "One of them comes from a good home. The other one, not so good." He tosses some sunflower seeds into his mouth and then indicates another boy. "Or that one. He was born in one of the worst sections of Boston. Do you think he'd know a kid like Matt Kinney or Kevin Rochefort, if it wasn't for Little League? They won't be in the same classes at junior high,

wouldn't talk to each other in the halls, wouldn't have the slightest idea the other one was alive."

Matt throws another curve, this one so nasty J.J. can't handle it. It rolls all the way to the backstop, and as J.J. gets up and trots after it the boys on the bench cheer again.

"But this changes all that," Dave says. "These boys have played together and won their district together. Some come from families that are well-to-do, and there's a couple from families as poor as used dishwater, but when they put on the uniform and cross the chalk they leave all that on the other side. Your school grades can't help you between the chalk, or what your parents do, or what they don't do. Between the chalk, what happens is the kids' business. They tend it, too, as well as they can. All the rest—" Dave makes a shooing gesture with one hand. "All left behind. And they know it, too. Just look at them if you don't believe me, because the proof is right there."

I look across the field and see my own kid and one of the boys Dave has mentioned sitting side by side, heads together, talking something over seriously. They look at each other in amazement, then break out laughing.

"They played together," Dave repeats. "They practiced together, day after day, and that's probably even more important than the games. Now they're going into the State Tournament. They've even got a chance to win it. I don't think they will, but that doesn't matter. They're going to be there, and that's enough. Even if Lewiston knocks them out in the first round, that's enough. Because it's something they did together between those chalk lines. They're going to remember that. They're going to remember how that felt."

"Between the chalk," I say, and all at once I get it—the penny drops. Dave Mansfield believes this old chestnut. Not only that, he can afford to believe it. Such cliches may be hollow in the big leagues, where some player or other tests positive for drugs every week or two and the free agent is God, but this is not the big leagues. This is

where Anita Bryant sings the national anthem over battered PA speakers that have been wired to the chain-link behind the dugouts. This is where, instead of paying admission to watch the game, you put something in the hat when it comes around. If you want to, of course. None of these kids are going to spend the off-season playing fantasy baseball in Florida with overweight businessmen, or signing expensive baseball cards at memorabilia shows, or touring the chicken circuit at two thousand bucks a night. When it's all free, Dave's smile suggests, they have to give the cliches back and let you own them again, fair and square. You are once more allowed to believe in Red Barber, John Tunis, and the Kid from Tomkinsville. Dave Mansfield believes what he is saying about how the boys are equal between the chalk, and he has a right to believe, because he and Neil and Saint have patiently led these kids to a point where they believe it. They do believe it; I can see it on their faces as they sit in the dugout on the far side of the diamond. It could be why Dave Mansfield and all the other Dave Mansfields across the country keep on doing this, year after year. It's a free pass. Not back into childhood—it doesn't work that way—but back into the dream.

Dave falls silent for a moment, thinking, bouncing a few sunflower seeds up and down in the palm of his hand.

"It's not about winning or losing," he says finally. "That comes later. It's about how they'll pass each other in the corridor this year, or even down the road in high school, and look at each other, and remember. In a way, they're going to be on the team that won the district in 1989 for a long time." Dave glances across into the shadowy first-base dugout, where Fred Moore is now laughing about something with Mike Arnold. Owen King glances from one to the other, grinning. "It's about knowing who your teammates are. The people you had to depend on, whether you wanted to or not."

He watches the boys as they laugh and joke four days before their tournament is scheduled to begin, then raises his voice and tells Matt to throw four or five more and knock off.

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Not all coaches who win the coin toss—as Dave Mansfield does on August 5, for the sixth time in nine postseason games—elect to be the home team. Some of them (the coach from Brewer, for instance) believe the so-called home-team advantage is a complete fiction, especially in a tournament game, where neither team is actually playing on its home field. The argument for being the visitors in a jackpot game runs like this: At the start of such a game, the kids on both teams are nervous. The way to take advantage of those nerves, the reasoning goes, is to bat first and let the defending team commit enough walks, balks, and errors to put you in the driver's seat. If you bat first and score four runs, these theorists conclude, you own the game before it's barely begun. QED. It's a theory Dave Mansfield has never subscribed to. "I want my lasties," he says, and for him that's the end of it.

Except today is a little different. It is not only a tournament game, it is a championship tournament game—a televised championship game, in fact. And as Roger Fisher winds and fires his first pitch past everything for ball one, Dave Mansfield's face is that of a man who is fervently hoping he hasn't made a mistake. Roger knows that he is a spot starter—that Mike Pelkey would be out here in his place if Pelkey weren't currently shaking hands with Goofy down in Disney World—but he manages his first-inning jitters as well as one could expect, maybe a little better. He backs off the mound following each return from the catcher, Joe Wilcox, studies the batter, fiddles with his shirtsleeves, and takes all the time he needs. Most important of all, he understands how necessary it is to keep the ball in the lowest quarter of the strike zone. The York lineup is packed with power from top to bottom. If Roger makes a mistake and gets one up in the batter's eyes—especially a batter like Tarbox, who hits as powerfully as he throws—it's going to get lost in a hurry.

He loses the first York batter nevertheless. Bouchard trots down to first, accompanied by the hysterical cheers of the York rooting section. The next batter is Philbrick, the shortstop. He bangs the first pitch back to Fisher. In one of those plays that sometimes decide ball games, Roger elects to go to second and try to force the lead runner.

In most Little League games, this turns out to be a bad idea. Either the pitcher throws wild into center field, allowing the lead runner to get to third, or he discovers that his shortstop has not moved over to cover second and the bag is undefended. Today, however, it works. St. Pierre has drilled these boys well on their defensive positions. Matt Kinney, today's shortstop, is right where he's supposed to be. So is Roger's throw. Philbrick reaches first on a fielder's choice, but Bouchard is out. This time, it is the Bangor West fans who roar out their approval.

The play settles most of Bangor West's jitters and gives Roger Fisher some badly needed confidence. Phil Tarbox, York's most consistent hitter as well as their ace pitcher, strikes out on a pitch low and out of the strike zone. "Get him next time, Phil!" a York player calls from the bench. "You're just not used to pitching this slow!"

But speed is not the problem the York batters are having with Roger; it's location. Ron St. Pierre has preached the gospel of the low pitch all season long, and Roger Fisher—Fish, the boys call him—has been a quiet but extremely attentive student during Saint's ball-yard seminars. Dave's decisions to pitch Roger and bat last look pretty good as Bangor comes in to bat in the bottom of the first. I see several of the boys touch Mo, the little plastic sandal, as they enter the dugout.

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Confidence—of the team, of the fans, of the coaches—is a quality that can be measured in different ways, but whatever yardstick you choose, York comes out on the long side. The hometown cheering section has hung a sign on the lower posts of the score-board. YORK IS BRISTOL BOUND, this exuberant Fan-O-Gram reads. And there is the matter of those District 4 pins, all made up and ready for trading. But the clearest indicator of the deep confidence York's coach has in his players is revealed in his starting pitcher. All the other clubs, including Bangor West, pitched their number one starter in their first game, bearing an old playoff axiom in mind: if you don't get a date, you can't dance at the prom. If you can't win your prelim,

you don't have to worry about the final. Only the coach from York ran counter to this wisdom, and pitched his number two starter, Ryan Fernald, in the first game, against Yarmouth. He got away with it—by a whisker—as his team outlasted Yarmouth, 9-8. That was a close shave, but today should be the payoff. He has saved Phil Tarbox for the final, and while Tarbox may not be technically as good as Stanley Sturgis, he's got something going for him that Sturgis did not. Phil Tarbox is scary.

Nolan Ryan, probably the greatest fastball pitcher ever to play the game of baseball, likes to tell a story about a Babe Ruth League tournament game he pitched in. He hit the opposing team's leadoff batter in the arm, breaking it. He hit the second batter in the head, splitting the boy's helmet in two and knocking him out for a few moments. While this second boy was being attended to, the number three batter, ashen-faced and trembling, went up to his coach and begged the man not to make him hit. "And I didn't blame him," Ryan adds.

Tarbox is no Nolan Ryan, but he throws hard and he is aware that intimidation is the pitcher's secret weapon. Sturgis also threw hard, but he kept the ball low and outside. Sturgis was polite. Tarbox likes to work high and tight. Bangor West has got to where they are today by swinging the bat. If Tarbox can intimidate them, he will take the bats out of their hands, and if he does that Bangor is finished.

Nick Trzaskos doesn't come anywhere near a leadoff home run today. Tarbox strikes him out with an intimate fastball that has Nick ducking out of the box. Nick looks around unbelievably at the home-plate umpire and opens his mouth to protest. "Don't say a word, Nick!" Dave blares from the dugout. "Just hustle back in there!" Nick does, but his face has resumed its former narrow look. Once inside the dugout, he slings his batting helmet disgustedly under the bench.

Tarbox will try to work everyone but Ryan Larrobino high and tight today. Word on Larrobino has got around, and not even Phil Tarbox, confident as he appears to be, will challenge him. He works Ryan low and outside, finally walking him. He also walks Matt Kinney, who

follows Ryan, but now he is high and tight again. Matt has superb reflexes, and he needs them to avoid being hit, and hit hard. By the time he is awarded first base, Larrobino is already at second, courtesy of a wild pitch that came within inches of Matt's face. Then Tarbox settles down a little, striking out Kevin Rochefort and Roger Fisher to end the first inning.

Roger Fisher continues to work slowly and methodically, fiddling with his sleeves between pitches, glancing around at his infield, occasionally even checking the sky, possibly for UFOs. With two on and one out, Estes, who reached on a walk, breaks for third on a pitch that bounces out of Joe Wilcox's glove and lands at his feet. Joe recovers quickly and guns the ball down to Kevin Rochefort at third. The ball is waiting for Estes when he arrives, and he trots back to the dugout. Two out; Fernald has gone to second on the play.

Wyatt, York's number eight hitter, dribbles one up the right side of the infield. The ball's progress is slowed further by the soggy condition of the ground. Fisher goes for the ball. So does King, the first baseman. Roger grabs it, then slips on the wet grass and crawls for the bag, ball in hand. Wyatt beats him easily. Fernald comes all the way home on the play to score the first run of the game.

If Roger is going to crack, one would expect it to happen right here. He checks his infield, and examines the ball. He appears ready to pitch, and then steps off the rubber. His sleeves, it seems, are not quite to his liking after all. He takes his time fixing them while Matt Francke, the York batter, grows old and mouldy in the batter's box. By the time Fisher finally gets around to throwing, he all but owns Francke, who hits an easy hopper to Kevin Rochefort at third. Rochefort throws on to Matt Kinney, forcing Wyatt. Still, York has drawn first blood and leads, 1-0, at the end of an inning and a half.

Bangor West doesn't put any runs on the board in the second inning, either, but they score against Phil Tarbox just the same. The rangy York pitcher trotted off the mound with his head up at the end of the first inning. Going in after pitching the second, he trudges with his head down, and some of his teammates glance at him uneasily.

Owen King, who bats first in Bangor's half of the second, isn't intimidated by Tarbox, but he is a big boy, much slower than Matt Kinney. After running the count full, Tarbox tries to jam him inside. The fastball runs up and in—too much of both. King is hit hard in the armpit. He falls to the ground, clutching the hurt place, too stunned to cry at first, but obviously in pain. Eventually, the tears do come—not a lot of them, but real tears, for all that. At six foot two and over two hundred pounds, he's as big as a man, but he's still only twelve and not used to being hit by seventy-mile-an-hour inside fastballs. Tarbox immediately rushes off the mound toward him, his face a mask of concern and contrition. The umpire, already bending over the downed player, waves him off impatiently. The on-duty paramedic who hurries out doesn't even give Tarbox a second look. The fans do, however. The fans are giving him all kinds of second looks.

"Take him out before he hits someone else!" one yells.

"Pull him before someone really gets hurt!" another adds, as if being hit in the ribcage by a fastball weren't really getting hurt.

"Warn im, ump!" a third voice chimes in. "That was a deliberate brushback! Warn im what happens if he does it again!"

Tarbox glances toward the fans, and for a moment this boy, who has formerly radiated a kind of serene confidence, looks very young and very uncertain. He looks, in fact, the way Stanley Sturgis did as the Belfast-Lewiston game neared its conclusion. As he goes back to the mound, he slams the ball into his glove in frustration.

King, meanwhile, has been helped to his feet. After making it clear to Neil Waterman, the paramedic, and the umpire that he wants to stay in the game and is capable of doing so, he trots down to first base. Both sets of fans give him a solid round of applause.

Phil Tarbox, who of course had no intention of hitting the leadoff batter in a one-run game, immediately shows how shaken he is by grooving one right down the middle to Arthur Dorr. Arthur, the

second-smallest boy in Bangor West's starting lineup, accepts this unexpected but welcome gift by driving it deep to right center.

King is off at the crack of the bat. He rounds third, knowing he can't score but hoping to draw the throw that will assure Arthur of second base, and, as he does, the wet conditions become a factor. The third-base side of the diamond is still damp. When King tries to put on the brakes, his feet go out from under him and he lands on his ass. The relay has come in to Tarbox, and Tarbox will not risk a throw; he charges King, who is making feeble efforts to regain his feet. At the end, Bangor's biggest player just raises his arms in an eloquent, touching gesture: I surrender. Thanks to the slippery conditions, Tarbox now has a runner on second with one out instead of runners on second and third with none out. It is a big difference, and Tarbox displays his renewed confidence by striking out Mike Arnold.

Then, on his third pitch to Joe Wilcox, the next batter, he hits him smack in the elbow. This time, the cries of outrage from the Bangor West fans are louder, and tinged with threat. Several of them direct their ire at the home-plate umpire, demanding that Tarbox be taken out. The ump, who understands this situation completely, does not bother even to warn Tarbox. The stricken look on the boy's face as Wilcox jogs shakily down to first undoubtedly tells him it isn't necessary. But York's manager has to come out and settle the pitcher down, to point out the obvious: You have two outs and first base was open anyway. There's no problem.

But for Tarbox there is a problem. He has hit two boys this inning, hit both of them hard enough to make them cry. If that weren't a problem, he would need a mental examination.

York puts together three singles to score two runs in the top of the third, opening up a 3-0 lead. If these runs, both solidly earned, had come in the top of the first, Bangor would have been in serious trouble, but when the players come in for their raps they look eager and excited. There is no feeling among them that the game is lost, no whiff of failure.

Ryan Larrobino is Bangor's first batter in the bottom of the third, and Tarbox works him carefully—too carefully. He has begun to aim the ball, and the result is fairly predictable. With the count at 1-2, he plinks Larrobino on the shoulder. Larrobino turns and pounds his bat once on the ground—whether in pain, frustration, or anger is impossible to tell. Most probably it is all three. Reading the mood of the crowd is much easier. The Bangor fans are on their feet, yelling angrily at Tarbox and at the ump. On the York side, the fans are silent and bewildered; it is not the game they were expecting. As Ryan trots down to first, he glances over at Tarbox. It is brief, that glance, but it seems clear enough: That's the third time, you. Make it the last time.

Tarbox confers briefly with his coach, then faces Matt Kinney. His confidence is in shambles, and his first pitch to Matt, a wild one, suggests that he wants to continue pitching this game about as much as a cat wants a bubble bath. Larrobino beats York catcher Dan Bouchard's throw to second easily. Tarbox walks Kinney. The next batter is Kevin Rochefort. After two failed bunt attempts, Roach settles back and allows Phil Tarbox the chance to dig his hole a little deeper. He does, walking Kevin after having him 1-1. Tarbox has now thrown more than sixty pitches in less than three innings.

Roger Fisher also goes 3-2 with Tarbox, who is now relying almost exclusively on soft breaking stuff; he seems to have decided that if he does hit another batter he will not hit him hard. There is no place to put Fish; the bases are jammed. Tarbox knows it and takes a calculated risk, grooving another one, believing Fish will lay off in the hope of a walk. Roger snaps hungrily at it instead, bouncing one between first and second for a base hit. Larrobino trots home with Bangor's first run.

Owen King, the player who was at bat when Phil Tarbox started to self-destruct, is the next batter. The York coach, suspecting his ace will work even less successfully to King this time, has seen enough. Matt Francke comes in to relieve, and Tarbox becomes York's catcher. As he squats behind the plate to warm Francke up, he looks

both resigned and relieved. Francke doesn't hit anyone, but he is unable to stop the bleeding. At the end of three innings, Bangor West has only two hits, but they lead York, 5-3.

It is now the fifth inning. The air is full of gray moisture, and the YORK IS BRISTOL BOUND banner tacked to the Scoreboard uprights has begun to sag. The fans look a little saggy themselves, and increasingly uneasy. Is York Bristol bound? Well, we're supposed to be, their faces say, but it's the fifth inning now, and we're still two runs behind. My God, how did it get so late so early?

Roger Fisher continues to cruise, and in the bottom of the fifth Bangor West puts what appear to be the final nails in York's coffin. Mike Arnold leads off with a single. Joe Wilcox sacrifices pinch-runner Fred Moore to second, and Larrobino doubles off Francke, scoring Moore. This brings Matt Kinney to the plate. After a passed ball advances Ryan to third, Kinney hits an easy grounder to short, but it squirts off the infielder's glove and Larrobino trots home.

Bangor West takes the field jubilantly, owning a 7-3 lead and only needing three more outs.

When Roger Fisher takes the mound to face York in the top of the sixth, he has thrown ninety-seven pitches, and he's a tired boy. He shows it at once by walking pinch-hitter Tim Pollack on a full count. Dave and Neil have seen enough. Fisher goes to second base, and Mike Arnold, who has been warming up between innings, takes over on the mound. He is ordinarily a good reliever, but it's not his day. Tension, maybe, or maybe it's just that the damp dirt of the mound has caused a change in his normal motion. He gets Francke to fly out, but then Bouchard walks, Philbrick doubles, and Pollack, the runner charged to Fish, scores, and Bouchard is held up at third; by itself, Pollack's run means nothing. The important thing is that York now has runners on second and third, and the potential tying run is coming to the plate. The potential tying run is someone with a very personal interest in getting a hit, because he is the main reason York is only two outs away from extinction. The potential tying run is Phil Tarbox.

Mike works the count to 1-1, and then throws a fastball right down the middle of the plate. In the Bangor West dugout, Dave Mansfield winces and raises one hand toward his forehead in a warding-off gesture even as Tarbox begins his swing. There is the hard sound of Tarbox accomplishing that most difficult of baseball feats: using the round bat to hit the round ball squarely on the button.

Ryan Larrobino takes off the instant Tarbox connects, but he runs out of room much too early. The ball clears the fence by twenty feet, bangs off a TV camera, and bounces back onto the field. Ryan looks at it disconsolately as the York fans go mad, and the entire York team boils out of the dugout to greet Tarbox, who has hit a three-run homer and redeemed himself in spectacular fashion. He does not step on home plate but jumps on it. His face wears an expression of near-beatific satisfaction. He is mobbed by his ecstatic teammates; on his way back to the dugout, his feet are barely allowed to touch the ground.

The Bangor fans sit in silence, utterly stunned by this awful reversal. Yesterday, against Lewiston, Bangor flirted with disaster; today they have swooned in its arms. Mo has changed sides again, and the fans are clearly afraid that this time it has changed for good. Mike Arnold confers with Dave and Neil. They are telling him to go on back and pitch hard, that the game is only tied, not lost, but Mike is clearly a dejected, unhappy boy.

The next batter, Hutchins, hits an easy two-hopper to Matt Kinney, but Arnold is not the only one who is shaken; the usually dependable Kinney boots the ball, and Hutchins is on. Andy Estes pops out to Rochefort at third, but Hutchins advances to second on a passed ball. King grabs Matt Hoyt's pop-up for the third out, and Bangor West is out of trouble.

The team has a chance to put it away in the bottom of the sixth, except that doesn't quite happen, either. They go one-two-three against Matt Francke, and all at once Bangor West is in its first extra-innings game of postseason play, tied 7-7 with York.

During the game against Lewiston, the muddy weather eventually unravelled. Not today. As Bangor West takes the field in the top of the seventh, the skies grow steadily darker. It's now approaching six o'clock, and even under these conditions the field should still be clear and fairly bright, but fog has begun to creep in. Watching a videotape of the game would make someone who wasn't there believe something was wrong with the TV cameras; everything looks listless, dull, underexposed. Shirtsleeve fans in the center-field bleachers are becoming disembodied heads and hands; in the outfield, Trzaskos, Iarrobino, and Arthur Dorr are discernible chiefly by their shirts.

Just before Mike throws the first pitch of the seventh, Neil elbows Dave and points out to right field. Dave immediately calls time and trots out to see what's the matter with Arthur Dorr, who is standing bent over, with his head almost between his knees.

Arthur looks up at Dave with some surprise as he approaches. "I'm O.K.," he says in answer to the unspoken question.

"Then what in hell are you doing?" Dave asks.

"Looking for four-leaf clovers," Arthur responds.

Dave is too flabbergasted, or too amused, to lecture the boy. He simply tells Arthur it might be more appropriate to look for them after the game is over.

Arthur glances around at the creeping fog before looking back at Dave. "I think by then it's gonna be too dark," he says.

With Arthur set to rights, the game can continue, and Mike Arnold does a creditable job—possibly because he's facing the substitute-riddled bottom of York's order. York does not score, and Bangor comes up in the bottom of the seventh with another chance to win it.

They come close to doing just that. With the bases loaded and two out, Roger Fisher hits one hard up the first-base line. Matt Hoyt is

right there to pounce on it, however, and the teams change sides again.

Philbrick flies out to Nick Trzaskos to open the eighth, and then Phil Tarbox steps in. Tarbox is not finished working Bangor West over yet. He has regained his confidence; his face is utterly serene as he takes Mike's first pitch for a called strike. He swings at the next one, a pretty decent changeup that bounces off Joe Wilcox's shin guard. He steps out of the box, squats with the bat between his knees, and concentrates. This is a Zen technique the York coach has taught these boys—Francke has done it several times on the mound while in tight spots—and it works for Tarbox this time, along with a little help from Mike Arnold.

Arnold's final pitch to Tarbox is a hanging curve up in the batter's eyes, exactly where Dave and Neil hoped no pitch would be today, and Tarbox creams it. It goes deep to left center, high over the fence. There is no camera stanchion to stop this one; it ends up in the woods, and the York fans are on their feet again, chanting "Phil-Phil-Phil" as Tarbox circles third, comes down the line, and jumps high in the air. He doesn't just jump on home plate; he spikes it.

Nor, it seems at first, will that be all. Hutchins bangs a single up the middle and gets second on an error. Estes follows this by hitting one to third, and Rochefort throws badly to second. Luckily, Roger Fisher is backed up by Arthur Dorr, saving a second run, but now York has guys at first and second with only one out.

Dave calls Owen King in to pitch, and Mike Arnold moves over to first. Following a wild pitch that moves the runners up to second and third, Matt Hoyt bangs one on the ground to Kevin Rochefort. In the game that Bangor West lost to Hampden, Casey Kinney was able to come back and make the play after committing an error. Rochefort does it today, and in spades. He comes up with the ball, then holds it for a moment, making sure Hutchins isn't going to break for the plate. Then he throws across the diamond to Mike, getting the slow-running Matt Hoyt by two steps. Considering the wringer these boys have been through, it is an incredibly canny piece of baseball.

Bangor West has recovered itself, and King works Ryan Fernald—who hit a three-run homer against Yarmouth—perfectly, nipping at the corners, using his weirdly effective sidearm delivery to supplement the over-the-top fastball. Fernald pops weakly to first and the inning is over. At the end of seven and a half, York leads Bangor, 8-7. Six of York's RBIs belong to Philip Tarbox.

Matt Francke, York's pitcher, is as tired as Fisher was when Dave finally elected to replace him with Mike Arnold. The difference is that Dave had a Mike Arnold and, behind Mike, an Owen King. The York coach has no one; he used Ryan Fernald against Yarmouth, making him ineligible to pitch today, and now it's Francke forever.

He starts off the eighth well enough, striking out King. Arthur Dorr comes up next, one for four on the day (a double off Tarbox). Francke, obviously struggling now but just as obviously determined to finish this game, goes full with Arthur, then serves one up that's way outside. Arthur trots down to first.

Mike Arnold comes up next. It wasn't his day on the mound, but he does well this time at the plate, laying down a perfect bunt. The intent is not to sacrifice; Mike is bunting for the base hit, and almost gets it. But the ball will not quite die in that soggy patch between home and the pitcher's mound. Francke snatches it, glances toward second, and then elects to go to first. Now there are two men out with a runner at second. Bangor West is an out away from the end.

Joe Wilcox, the catcher, is up next. With the count 2-1, he hits a chalk hugger up the first-base line. Matt Hoyt grabs it, but just an instant too late; he takes the ball less than half a foot into foul territory, and the first-base umpire is right there to call it. Hoyt, who has been ready to charge the mound and embrace Matt Francke, instead returns the ball.

Now the count on Joey is 2-2. Francke steps off the rubber, stares straight up into the sky, and concentrates. Then he steps back on and delivers one high and out of the strike zone. Joey goes for it anyway, not even looking, swinging in self-defense. The bat makes

contact with the ball—pure luck—and it bounces foul. Francke does the concentration bit again, then throws—just outside. Ball three.

Now comes what may be the pitch of the game. It appears to be a high strike, a game-ending strike, but the umpire calls ball four. Joe Wilcox trots down to first base with a faint expression of disbelief on his face. It is only later, watching the slow-motion replay on the TV tape of the game, that one can see how right, and how good, the umpire's call was. Joe Wilcox, so anxious that he is pinwheeling the bat in his hands like a golf club right up to the moment of the pitch, rises on his tiptoes as the ball approaches, and this is the reason it appears to be letter-high to him as it crosses the plate. The umpire, who never moves, discounts all of Joe's nervous tics and makes a major league call. The rules say you cannot shrink the strike zone by crouching; by the same token, you cannot expand it by stretching. If Joe hadn't gone up on his toes, Francke's pitch would have been throat-high instead of letter-high. So, instead of becoming the third out and ending the game, Joe becomes another base runner.

One of the TV cameras was trained on York's Matt Francke as he made the pitch, and it caught a remarkable image. A video replay shows Francke light up as the ball breaks downward just a moment too late to earn the strike. His pitching hand comes up in a victorious fist salute. At this moment, he begins to move to his right, toward the York dugout, and the umpire blocks him out. When he returns to view a second later, his expression has become one of unhappiness and incredulity. He does not argue with the call—these kids are taught not to do that in their regular seasons, and to never, never, never do it in a championship situation—but as he prepares to work the next batter Francke appears to be crying.

Bangor West is still alive, and as Nick Trzaskos approaches the plate they come to their feet and begin to yell. Nick is obviously hoping for a free ride, and he gets one. Francke walks him on five pitches. It is the eleventh walk given up by York pitching today. Nick trots down to first, loading the bases, and Ryan Larrobino steps in. Again and again, it has been Ryan Larrobino in these situations, and now it is

Ryan once more. The Bangor West fans are on their feet, screaming. The Bangor players crowd the dugout, fingers hooked through the mesh, watching anxiously.

“I can’t believe it,” one of the TV commentators says. “I can’t believe the script of this game.”

His partner chips in, “Well, I’ll tell you what. Either way, this is how both teams would want the game to end.”

As he speaks, the camera offers its own ghastly counterpoint to the comment by focusing on the stricken face of Matt Francke. The image strongly suggests that this is the last thing the York lefty wanted. Why would he? Larrobino has doubled twice, walked twice, and been hit by a pitch. York hasn’t retired him a single time. Francke throws high and outside, then low. These are his 135th and 136th pitches. The boy is exhausted. Chuck Bittner, the York manager, calls him over for a brief conference. Larrobino waits for the conference to end, then steps in again.

Matt Francke concentrates, head back and eyes closed; he looks like a baby bird waiting to be fed. Then he winds up and throws the last pitch of the Maine Little League season.

Larrobino has not been watching the concentration bit. His head is down; he is only watching to see how Francke will come, and his eyes never leave the ball. It is a fastball, low and tailing toward the outside corner of the plate. Ryan Larrobino dips a little. The head of the bat whips around. He catches all of this one, really cranks it, and as the ball flies out of the park to deep right-center field, his arms shoot up over his head and he begins to tap-dance deliriously down the first-base line.

On the mound, Matt Francke, who was twice within inches of winning his game, lowers his head, not wanting to look. And as Ryan rounds second and starts back toward home, he seems to finally understand what he has done, and at that point he begins to weep.

The fans are in hysterics; the sports commentators are in hysterics; even Dave and Neil seem close to hysterics as they block the plate, making room for Ryan to touch it. Rounding third, he passes the umpire there, who is still twirling one magisterial finger in the gray air, signalling home run.

Behind the plate, Phil Tarbox takes off his mask and walks away from the celebration. He stamps his foot once, his face clenched with deep frustration. He walks off-camera and out of Little League for good. He will play Babe Ruth ball next year, and probably he will play it well, but there will be no more games like this for Tarbox, or for any of these boys. This one is, as they say, in the books.

Ryan Larrobino, laughing, crying, holding his helmet on his head with one hand and pointing straight up to the gray sky with the other, leaps high, comes down on home plate, and then leaps again, straight into the arms of his teammates, who bear him away in triumph. The game is over; Bangor West has won, 11-8. They are Maine's 1989 Little League Champions.

I look toward the fence on the first-base side and see a remarkable sight: a forest of waving hands. The parents of the players have crowded against the chain-link and are reaching across the top to touch their sons. Many of the parents are also in tears. The boys all wear identical expressions of happy disbelief, and all these hands—hundreds of them, it seems—wave toward them, wanting to touch, wanting to congratulate, wanting to hug, wanting to feel.

The boys ignore them. Later, there will be touches and hugs. First, however, there is business to take care of. They line up and slap hands with the boys from York, crossing at home plate in the ritual manner. Most of the boys on both teams are crying now, some so hard they can barely walk.

Then, in the instant before the Bangor boys go to the fence, where all those hands are still waving, they surround their coaches and pummel them and each other in joyful triumph. They have held on to win their tournament—Ryan and Matt, Owen and Arthur, Mike and

Roger Fisher, finder of four-leaf clovers. At this moment they are cheering each other, and everything else will just have to wait. Then they break for the fence, going toward their crying, cheering, laughing parents, and the world begins to turn in its ordinary course once again.

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“How long are we gonna keep on playing, Coach?” J. J. Fiddler asked Neil Waterman after Bangor clinched the division against Machias.

“J.J.,” Neil replied, “we’re gonna play until someone makes us stop.”

The team that finally made Bangor West stop was Westfield, Massachusetts. Bangor West played them in the second round of the Eastern Regional Little League Championship, at Bristol, Connecticut, on August 15th, 1989. Matt Kinney pitched for Bangor West and threw the game of his life, striking out nine, walking five (one intentional), and giving up only three hits. Bangor West, however, got only one hit off Westfield pitcher Tim Laurita, and that one belonged, predictably enough, to Ryan Iarrobino. The final score was 2-1, Westfield. Credit Bangor’s one RBI in the game to King, on a bases-loaded walk. Credit the game-winning RBI to Laurita, also on a bases-loaded walk. It was a hell of a game, a purist’s game, but it couldn’t match the one against York.

In the pro world, it was a bad year for baseball. A future Hall of Famer was banned from the sport for life; a retired pitcher shot his wife and then took his own life; the commissioner suffered a fatal heart attack; the first World Series game to be played at Candlestick Park in over twenty years was postponed when an earthquake shook northern California. But the majors are only a small part of what baseball is about. In other places and in other leagues—Little League, for instance, where there are no free agents, no salaries, and no gate admissions—it was a pretty fine year. The Eastern Regional Tournament winner was Trumbull, Connecticut. On August 26, 1989, Trumbull beat Taiwan to win the Little League World

Series. It was the first time an American team had won the Williamsport World Series since 1983, and the first time in fourteen years that the winner had come from the region in which Bangor West plays.

In September, the Maine division of the United States Baseball Federation voted Dave Mansfield amateur coach of the year.

HEAVENLY SHADES OF NIGHT ARE FALLING

Stephen King

1999: Come on, you bastard, come on home.

On an afternoon in the last summer before the year 2000, Bobby Garfield came back to Harwich, Connecticut. He went to West Side Cemetery first, where the actual memorial service took place at the Sullivan family plot. Old Sully-John got a good crowd; the Post story had brought them out in droves. Several small children were startled into tears when the American Legion honor-guard fired their guns. After the graveside service there was a reception at the local Amvets Hall. Bobby made a token appearance—long enough to have a slice of cake and a cup of coffee and say hello to Mr. Oliver—but he saw no one he knew, and there were places he wanted to go while there was still plenty of good daylight. He hadn't been back to Harwich in almost forty years.

The Nutmeg Mall stood where St. Gabriel the Steadfast Upper and Secondary Schools had been. The old post office was now a vacant lot. The railway station continued to overlook the Square, but the stone overpass support-posts were covered with graffiti and Mr. Burton's newsstand kiosk was boarded up. There were still grassy swards between River Avenue and the Housatonic, but the ducks were gone. Bobby remembered throwing one of those ducks at a man in a tan suit—improbable but true. I'll give you two bucks to let me blow you, the man had said, and Bobby had hucked a duck at him. He could grin about it now, but that nimrod had scared the hell out of him, and for all sorts of reasons.

There was a great beige UPS warehouse where the Asher Empire had stood. Farther along toward Bridgeport, where Asher Avenue emptied into Puritan Square, the William Penn Grille was also gone, replaced by a Pizza Uno. Bobby thought about going in there, but not very seriously. His stomach was fifty, just like the rest of him, and it didn't do so well with pizza anymore.

Except that wasn't really the reason. It would be too easy to imagine things, that was the real reason—too easy to envision big vulgar cars out front, the paintjobs so bright they seemed to howl.

So he had driven back to Harwich proper, and damned if the Colony Diner wasn't still where it had always been, and damned if there weren't still grilled hotdogs on the menu. Hotdogs were as bad as fuckin pizza, maybe worse, but what the hell was Prilosec for, if not the occasional gastronomic ramble down memory lane? He had swallowed one, and chased it with two hotdogs. They still came in those little grease-spotted cardboard sleeves, and they still tasted like heaven.

He tamped the hotdogs down with pie a la mode, then went out and stood by his car for a moment. He decided to leave it where it was—there were only two more stops he wanted to make, and both were within walking distance. He took the gym bag off the passenger seat and walked slowly past Spicer's, which had evolved into a 7-Eleven store with gas-pumps out front. Voices came to him as he passed, 1960 ghost-voices, voices of the Sigsby twins.

Mumma-Daddy havin a fight.

Mumma said stay out.

Why'd you do that, stupid old Bobby Garfield?

Stupid old Bobby Garfield, yes, that had been him. He might have gotten a little smarter over the years, but probably not that much.

Halfway up Broad Street Hill he spied a faded hopscotch grid on the sidewalk. He dropped to one knee and looked at it closely in the latening light, brushing at the squares with the tips of his fingers.

"Mister? You all right?" It was a young woman with a 7-Eleven bag in her arms. She was looking at Bobby with equal parts concern and mistrust.

"I'm fine," he said, getting to his feet and dusting off his hands. He was, too. Not a single moon or star beside the grid, let alone a comet. Nor had he seen any lost-pet posters in his rambles around town. "I'm fine."

“Well, good for you,” the young woman said, and hurried on her way. She did not smile. Bobby watched her go and then started walking again himself, wondering what had happened to the Sigsby twins, where they were now. He remembered Ted Brautigan talking about time once, calling it the old bald cheater.

Until he actually saw 149 Broad Street, Bobby hadn't realized how sure he'd been that it would have become a video-rental store or a sandwich shop or maybe a condominium. Instead it was exactly the same except for the trim, now cream instead of green. There was a bike on the porch, and he thought of how desperately he had wanted a bike that last summer in Harwich. He'd even had a jar to save money in, with a label on it that said Bike Account, or something.

More ghost-voices as he stood there with his shadow lengthening into the street.

If we were the Gotrocks, you wouldn't have to borrow from your bike-jar if you wanted to take your little girlfriend on the Loop-the-Loop.

She's not my girlfriend! She is not my little girlfriend!

In his memory he had said that out loud to his mother, screamed it at her, in fact ... but he doubted the accuracy of that memory. He hadn't had the kind of mother you could scream at. Not if you wanted to keep your scalp.

And besides. Carol had been his little girlfriend, hadn't she? She had been.

He had one more stop to make before returning to his car, and after a final long look at the house where he had lived with his mother until August of 1960, Bobby started back down Broad Street Hill, swinging the gym bag in one hand.

There had been magic that summer, even at the age of fifty he did not question that, but he no longer knew of what sort it had been. Perhaps he had experienced only the Ray Bradbury kind of

childhood so many smalltown kids had, or at least remembered having; the kind where the real world and that of dreams sometimes overlapped, creating a kind of magic.

Yes, but ... well ...

There were the rose petals, of course, the ones which had come by way of Carol ... but had they meant anything? Once it had seemed so—to the lonely, almost lost boy he had been, it had seemed so—but the rose petals were long gone. He had lost them right around the time he'd seen the photograph of that burned-out house in Los Angeles and realized that Carol Gerber was dead.

Her death cancelled not only the idea of magic but, it seemed to Bobby, the very purpose of childhood. What good was it if it brought you to such things? Bad eyes and bad blood-pressure were one thing; bad ideas, bad dreams, and bad ends were another. After awhile you wanted to say to God, ah, come on, Big Boy, quit it. You lost your innocence when you grew up, all right, everyone knew that, but did you have to lose your hope, as well? What good was it to kiss a girl on the Ferris wheel when you were eleven if you were to open the paper eleven years later and learn that she had burned to death in a slummy little house on a slummy little dead-end street? What good was it to remember her beautiful alarmed eyes or the way the sun had shone in her hair?

He would have said all of this and more a week ago, but then a tendril of that old magic had reached out and touched him. Come on, it had whispered. Come on, Bobby, come on, you bastard, come home. So here he was, back in Harwich. He had honored his old friend, he had had himself a little sightseeing tour of the old town (and without misting up a single time), and now it was almost time to go. He had, however, one more stop to make before he did.

It was the supper hour and Commonwealth Park was nearly empty. Bobby walked to the wire backstop behind the Field B home plate as three dawdling players went past him in the other direction. Two were carrying equipment in big red duffel bags; the third had a

boombox from which The Offspring blasted at top volume. All three boys gave him mistrustful looks, which Bobby found unsurprising. He was an adult in the land of children, living in a time when all such as he were suspect. He avoided making things worse by giving them a nod or a wave or saying something stupid like How was the game, fellas? They passed on their way.

He stood with his fingers hooked into the wire diamonds of the backstop, watching the late red light slant across the outfield grass, reflecting from the scoreboard and the signs reading STAY IN SCHOOL and WHY DO YOU THINK THEY CALL IT DOPE. And again he felt that breathless sense of magic, that sense of the world as a thin veneer stretched over something else, something both brighter and darker. The voices were everywhere now, spinning like the lines on a top.

Don't you call me stupid, Bobby-O.

You shouldn't hit Bobby, he's not like those men.

A real sweetie, kid, he'd play that song by Jo Stafford.

It's ka ... and ka is destiny.

I love you, Ted ...

"I love you, Ted." Bobby spoke the words, not declaiming them but not whispering them, either. Trying them on for size. He couldn't even remember what Ted Brautigan had looked like, not with any real clarity (only the Chesterfields, and the endless bottles of rootbeer), but saying it still made him feel warm.

There was another voice here, too. When it spoke, Bobby felt tears sting the corners of his eyes for the first time since coming back.

I wouldn't mind being a magician when I grow up, Bobby, you know it? Travel around with a carnival or a circus, wear a black suit and a top hat ...

“And pull rabbits and shit out of the hat,” Bobby said, turning away from Field B. He laughed, wiped his eyes, then ran one hand over the top of his head. No hair up there; he’d lost the last of it right on schedule, about fifteen years ago. He crossed one of the paths (gravel in 1960, now asphalt and marked with little signs reading BIKES ONLY NO ROLLERBLADES!) and sat down on one of the benches, possibly the same one where he’d sat on the day Sully had asked him to come to the movies and Bobby had turned him down, wanting to finish Lord of the Flies instead. He put his gym bag on the bench next to him.

Directly ahead was a grove of trees. Bobby was pretty sure it was the one where Carol had taken him when he started to cry. She did it so no one would see him bawling like a baby. No one but her. Had she taken him in her arms until it was cried out of him? He wasn’t sure, but he thought she had. What he remembered more clearly was how the three St. Gabe’s boys had almost beaten them up later. Carol’s mother’s friend had saved them. He couldn’t remember her name, but she’d come along just in the nick of time ... the way the Navy guy came along just in time to save Ralph’s bacon at the end of Lord of the Flies.

Rionda, that was her name. She told them she’d tell the priest, and the priest would tell their folks.

But Rionda hadn’t been around when those boys found Carol again. Would Carol have burned to death in Los Angeles if Harry Doolin and his friends had left her alone? You couldn’t say for sure, of course, but Bobby thought the answer was probably no. And even now he felt his hands clenching as he thought: But I got you, Harry, didn’t I? Yes indeed.

Too late by then, though. By then everything had changed.

He unzipped the gym bag, rummaged, and brought out a battery radio. It was nowhere as big as the boombox which had just gone past him toward the equipment sheds, but big enough for his purposes. All he had to do was turn it on; it was already tuned to

WKND, Southern Connecticut's Home of the Oldies. Troy Shondell was singing "This Time." That was fine with Bobby.

"Sully," he said, looking into the grove of trees, "you were one cool bastard."

From behind him, very prim, a woman said: "If you swear, I won't walk with you."

Bobby swivelled around so rapidly that the radio fell out of his lap and tumbled into the grass. He couldn't see the woman's face; she was nothing but a silhouette with red sky spread out on either side of her like wings. He tried to speak and couldn't. His breathing had come to a dead stop and his tongue was stuck to the roof of his mouth. Far back in his brain a voice mused: So this is what seeing a ghost is like.

"Bobby, are you all right?"

She moved fast, coming around the bench, and the red setting sun smacked him full in the eyes when she did. Bobby gasped, raised a hand, shut his eyes. He smelled perfume ... or was it summer grass? He didn't know. And when he opened his eyes again, he could still see nothing but the woman's shape; there was a hanging green afterimage of the sun where her face belonged.

"Carol?" he asked. His voice was hoarse and uneven. "Dear God, is it really you?"

"Carol?" the woman asked. "I don't know any Carol. My name is Denise Schoonover."

Yet it was her. She'd only been eleven the last time he had seen her, but he knew. He rubbed his eyes frantically. From the radio on the grass the dj said, "This is WKND, where your past is always present. Here's Clyde McPhatter. He's got 'A Lover's Question.' "

You knew if she was alive she'd come. You knew that.

Of course; wasn't that why he had come himself? Surely not for Sully, or not just for Sully. And yet at the same time he had been so sure she was dead. From the instant he'd seen the picture of that burned-out house in Los Angeles, he had been positive. And how that had hurt his heart, not as if he had last seen her forty years before, running across Commonwealth Avenue, but as if she had always remained his friend, as close as a phone-call or a trip up the street.

While he was still trying to blink away the floating sunspot afterimage hanging before his eyes, the woman kissed him firmly on the mouth, and then whispered in his ear: "I have to go home. I have to make the salad. What's that?"

"The last thing you ever said to me when we were kids," he replied, and turned to her. "You came. You're alive and you came."

The sunset light fell on her face, and the afterimage had diminished enough for him to see her. She was beautiful in spite of the scar which began at the corner of her right eye and ran down to her chin in a cruel fishhook ... or perhaps because of it. There were tiny sprays of crow's-feet beside her eyes, but no lines on her forehead or bracketing her paintless mouth.

Her hair, Bobby saw with wonder, was almost entirely gray.

As if reading his mind, she reached out and touched his head. "I'm so sorry," she said ... but he thought he saw her old merriness dancing in her eyes. "You had the most gorgeous hair. Rionda used to say that was half of what I was in love with."

"Carol—"

She reached out and put her fingers over his lips. There were scars on her hand, as well, Bobby saw, and her little finger was misshapen, almost melted. These were burn scars.

“I told you, I don’t know anyone named Carol. My name is Denise. Like in the old Randy and The Rainbows song?” She hummed a snatch of it. Bobby knew it well. He knew all the oldies. “If you were to check my ID, you’d see Denise Schoonover all up and down the line. I saw you at the service.”

“I didn’t see you.”

“I’m good at not being seen,” she said. “It’s a trick someone taught me a long time ago. The trick of being dim.” She shuddered a little. Bobby had read of people shuddering—mostly in bad novels—but had never actually seen it done. “And when it comes to crowd scenes, I’m good at standing all the way at the back. Poor old Sully-John. Do you remember his Bo-lo Bouncer?”

Bobby nodded, starting to smile. “I remember one time when he tried to get extra-cool with it, hit it between his legs as well as between his arms and behind his back? He bopped himself a good one in the balls and we all just about killed ourselves laughing. A bunch of girls ran over—you were one of them, I’m pretty sure—wanting to know what happened, and we wouldn’t tell you. You were pretty mad.”

She smiled, a hand going to her mouth, and in that old gesture Bobby could see the child she had been with complete clarity.

“How did you know he died?” Bobby asked.

“Read it in the New York Post. There was one of those horrible headlines that are their specialty—JAMBO!, it said—and pictures of him. I live in Poughkeepsie, where the Post is regularly available.” She paused. “I teach at Vassar.”

“You teach at Vassar and you read the Post?”

She shrugged, smiling. “Everyone has their vices. How about you, Bobby? Did you read it in the Post?”

“I don’t get the Post. Ted told me. Ted Brautigan.”

She only sat there looking at him, her smile fading.

“You remember Ted?”

“I thought I’d never be able to use my arm again and Ted fixed it like magic. Of course I remember him. But Bobby—”

“He knew you’d be here. I thought that as soon as I opened the package, but I don’t think I believed it until I saw you.” He reached out to her and with the unself-consciousness of a child traced the course of the scar on her face. “You got this in L.A., didn’t you? What happened? How did you get out?”

She shook her head. “I don’t talk about any of that. I’ve never talked about what went on in that house. I never will. That was a different life. That was a different girl. That girl died. She was very young, very idealistic, and she was tricked. Do you remember the Monte Man at Savin Rock?”

He nodded, smiling a little. He took her hand and she gripped his own tightly. “Now they go, now they slow, now they rest, here’s the test. His name was McCann or McCausland or something like that.”

“The name doesn’t matter. What matters is that he always let you think you knew where the queen was. He always let you think you could win. Right?”

“Right.”

“This girl got involved with a man like that. A man who could always move the cards just a little faster than you thought he could. He was looking for some confused, angry kids, and he found them.”

“Did he have a yellow coat?” Bobby asked. He didn’t know if he was joking or not.

She looked at him, frowning a little, and he understood she didn’t remember that part. Had he even told her about the low men? He

thought so, he thought he had told her just about everything, but she didn't remember. Perhaps what had happened to her in L.A. had burned a few holes in her memory. Bobby could see how a thing like that might happen. And it wouldn't exactly make her unique, would it? A lot of people their age had worked very hard to forget who they had been and what they had believed during those years between the murder of John Kennedy in Dallas and the murder of John Lennon in New York City.

"Never mind," he said. "Go on."

She shook her head. "I've said all I'm going to about that part. All I can. Carol Gerber died on Benefit Street in Los Angeles. Denise Schoonover lives in Poughkeepsie. Carol hated math, couldn't even get fractions, but Denise teaches math. How could they be the same person? It's a ridiculous idea. Case closed. I want to know what you mean about Ted. He can't still be alive, Bobby. He'd be over a hundred. Well over."

"I don't think time means much if you're a Breaker," Bobby said. Nor did it mean much on WKND, where Jimmy Gilmer was now singing about the Sugar Shack to the tooting accompaniment of what sounded like a sweet potato.

"A Breaker? What's—"

"I don't know and it doesn't matter," Bobby said. "This part might, so listen closely. Okay?"

"Okay."

"I live in Philadelphia. I've got a lovely wife who's a professional photographer, three lovely grown children, a lovely old dog with bad hips and a good disposition, and an old house which is always in desperate need of repairs. My wife says that's because the shoemaker's kids always go barefoot and the carpenter's house always has a leaky roof."

“Is that what you are? A carpenter?”

He nodded. “I live in Redmont Hills, and when I remember to get a paper, the Philly Inquirer is the one I buy.”

“A carpenter,” she mused. “I always thought you’d wind up a writer, or something.”

“I did, too. But I also went through a period when I thought I’d wind up in Connecticut State Prison and that never happened, so I guess things have a way of balancing out.”

“What was in the package you mentioned? And what does it have to do with Ted?”

“The package came FedEx, from a guy named Norman Oliver. A banker. He was Sully-John’s executor. This was inside.”

He reached into the gym bag again and brought out a battered old baseball glove. He laid it in the lap of the woman sitting next to him on the bench. She tipped it at once and looked at the name inked on the side.

“My God,” she said. Her voice was flat, shocked.

“I haven’t seen this baby since the day I found you over there in those trees with your arm dislocated. I suppose some kid came along, saw it lying on the grass, and just gleepped it. Although it wasn’t in very good shape, even then.”

“Willie stole it,” she said, almost inaudibly. “Willie Shearman. I thought he was nice. You see what a fool I was about people? Even back then.”

He looked at her in silent surprise, but she didn’t see his look; she was gazing down at the old Alvin Dark-model glove, plucking at the tangle of rawhide strings somehow still holding the webbing in place. And then she delighted and touched him by doing what he had done

as soon as he opened the box and saw what was there: she lifted the baseball glove to her face and smelled the sweet oil-and-leather aroma of the pocket. Only he had slipped it on his hand first, without even thinking about it. It was a baseball-player thing to do, a kid-thing, automatic as breathing. Norman Oliver must have been a kid at some point, but he'd apparently never been a ballplayer, because he hadn't found the piece of paper poked deep into the last finger of the glove—the finger with the deep scratch in the old cowhide. Bobby was the one who found the paper. The nail of his little finger poked against it and made it crackle.

Carol put the glove down again. Gray hair or no gray hair, she looked young again, and fully alive. "Tell me."

"It was on Sully's hand when they found him sitting dead in his car."

Her eyes went huge and round. In that instant she did not just look like the little girl who had ridden the Ferris wheel with him at Savin Rock; she was that little girl.

"Look on the heel of the glove, there by Alvin Dark's signature. Do you see?"

The light was fading fast now, but she saw, all right.

B.G.

1464 Dupont Circle Road

Redmont Hills, Pennsylvania

Zone 11

“Your address,” she murmured. “Your address now.”

“Yes, but look at this.” He tapped the words Zone 11. “The post office quit zoning mail in the sixties. I checked. Ted either didn’t know or forgot.”

“Maybe he put it that way on purpose.”

Bobby nodded. “It’s possible. In any case, Oliver read the address and sent me the glove—said he saw no need to put an old fielder’s mitt through probate. He mostly wanted me to know that Sully had died, if I didn’t know already, and that there was going to be a memorial service in Harwich. I believe he wanted me to come so he could hear the story of the glove. I couldn’t help him much with that, though. Carol, are you sure Willie—”

“I saw him wearing it. I told him to give it back so I could send it to you, but he wouldn’t.”

“Do you suppose he gave it to Sully-John later?”

“He must have.” Yet it did not ring true to her, somehow; she felt the truth must be stranger than that. Willie’s attitude to the glove itself had been strange, although she could no longer exactly remember how.

“Anyway,” he said, tapping the address on the heel of the glove, “that’s Ted’s printing. I’m sure it is. Then I put my hand up inside the glove, and I found something. It’s really why I came.”

He reached into the gym bag a third time. The redness was going out of the light now; the remains of the day were a fading pink, the color of wild roses. The radio, still lying in the grass, played “Don’tcha Just Know It,” by Huey “Piano” Smith and The Clowns.

Bobby brought out a crumpled piece of paper. It had been stained in a couple of places by the glove’s sweaty innards, but otherwise it looked remarkably white and fresh. He handed it to Carol.

She held it up to the light and slightly away from her face—her eyes, Bobby saw, were not as good as they once had been. “It’s the title-page from a book,” she said, and then laughed. “Lord of the Flies, Bobby! Your favorite!”

“Look at the bottom,” he said. “Read what’s there.”

“Faber and Faber, Limited ... 24 Russell Square ... London.” She looked at him questioningly.

“It’s from the Faber paperback edition published in 1960,” Bobby said. “That’s on the back. But look at it, Carol! It looks brand-new. I think the book this page came from might have been in 1960 only weeks ago. Not the glove, that’s a lot more beat-up than when I found it, but the title-page.”

“Bobby, not all old books turn yellow if they’re kept well. Even an old paperback might—”

“Turn it over,” he said. “Take a look at the other side.”

Carol did. Printed below the line reading All rights reserved was this: Tell her she was as brave as a lion.

“That’s when I knew I had to come because he thought you’d be here, that you were still alive. I couldn’t believe that, it was easier to believe in him than it was to believe—Carol? What’s wrong? Is it the thing at the very bottom? What is that thing at the very bottom?”

She was crying now, and crying hard, holding the torn-out title-page in her hand and looking at what had been placed there on the back, squeezed into the scant white space below the conditions of sale:

“What does it mean? Do you know? You do, don’t you?”

Carol shook her head. “It doesn’t matter. It’s special to me, that’s all. Special to me the way the glove is special to you. For an old guy, he sure knows how to push the right buttons, doesn’t he?”

“I guess so. Maybe that’s what a Breaker does.”

She looked at him. She was still weeping but was not, Bobby thought, truly unhappy. “Bobby, why would he do this? And how did he know we’d come? Forty years is a long time. People grow up, they grow up and leave the kids they were behind.”

“Do they?”

She continued to look at him in the darkening day. Beyond them, the shadows of the grove deepened. In there—in the trees where he had wept on one day and found her, hurt and alone, the next—dark had almost come.

“Sometimes a little of the magic sticks around,” Bobby said. “That’s what I think. We came because we still hear some of the right voices. Do you hear them? The voices?”

“Sometimes,” she said, almost reluctantly. “Sometimes I do.”

Bobby took the glove from her. “Will you excuse me for a second?”

“Sure.”

Bobby went to the grove of trees, dropped down on one knee to get beneath a low-hanging branch, and placed his old baseball glove on the grass with the pocket up to the darkening sky. Then he came back to the bench and sat down beside Carol again. “That’s where it belongs,” he said.

“Some kid’ll just come along tomorrow and pick it up, you know that, don’t you?” She laughed and wiped her eyes.

“Maybe,” he agreed. “Or maybe it’ll be gone. Back to wherever it came from.”

As the day’s last pink faded to ash, Carol put her head on Bobby’s shoulder and he put an arm around her. They sat that way without speaking, and from the radio at their feet, The Platters began to sing.



HERE THERE BE TYGERS

Stephen King

Charles needed to go to the bathroom very badly.

There was no longer any use in trying to fool himself that he could wait for recess. His bladder was screaming at him, and Miss Bird had caught him squirming.

There were three third-grade teachers in the Acorn Street Grammar School. Miss Kinney was young and blond and bouncy and had a boyfriend who picked her up after school in a blue Camaro. Mrs. Trask was shaped like a Moorish pillow and did her hair in braids and laughed booming. And there was Miss Bird.

Charles had known he would end up with Miss Bird. He had known that. It had been inevitable. Because Miss Bird obviously wanted to destroy him. She did not allow children to go to the basement. The basement, Miss Bird said, was where the boilers were kept, and well-groomed ladies and gentlemen would never go down there, because basements were nasty, sooty old things. Young ladies and gentlemen do not go to the basement, she said. They go to the bathroom.

Charles squirmed again.

Miss Bird cocked an eye at him. "Charles," she said clearly, still pointing her pointer at Bolivia, "do you need to go to the bathroom?"

Cathy Scott in the seat ahead of him giggled, wisely covering her mouth.

Kenny Griffen sniggered and kicked Charles under his desk.

Charles went bright red.

"Speak up, Charles," Miss Bird said brightly. "Do you need to—" (urinate she'll say urinate she always does)

"Yes, Miss Bird."

“Yes, what?”

“I have to go to the base—to the bathroom.”

Miss Bird smiled. “Very well, Charles. You may go to the bathroom and urinate. Is that what you need to do? Urinate?”

Charles hung his head, convicted.

“Very well, Charles. You may do so. And next time kindly don’t wait to be asked.”

General giggles. Miss Bird rapped the board with her pointer.

Charles trudged up the row toward the door, thirty pairs of eyes boring into his back, and every one of those kids, including Cathy Scott, knew that he was going into the bathroom to urinate. The door was at least a football field’s length away. Miss Bird did not go on with the lesson but kept her silence until he had opened the door, entered the blessedly empty hall, and shut the door again.

He walked down toward the boys’ bathroom

(basement basement basement IF I WANT)

dragging his fingers along the cool tile of the wall, letting them bounce over the thumbtack-stippled bulletin board and slide lightly across the red

(BREAK GLASS IN CASE OF EMERGENCY)

fire-alarm box.

Miss Bird liked it. Miss Bird liked making him have a red face. In front of Cathy Scott—who never needed to go to the basement, was that fair?—and everybody else.

Old b-i-t-c-h, he thought. He spelled because he had decided last year God didn’t say it was a sin if you spelled.

He went into the boys' bathroom.

It was very cool inside, with a faint, not unpleasant smell of chlorine hanging pungently in the air. Now, in the middle of the morning, it was clean and deserted, peaceful and quite pleasant, not at all like the smoky, stinky cubicle at the Star Theatre downtown.

The bathroom

(!basement!)

was built like an L, the short side lined with tiny square mirrors and white porcelain washbowls and a paper towel dispenser,

(NIBROC)

the longer side with two urinals and three toilet cubicles.

Charles went around the corner after glancing morosely at his thin, rather pallid face in one of the mirrors.

The tiger was lying down at the far end, just underneath the pebbly-white window. It was a large tiger, with tawny venetian blinds and dark stripes laid across its pelt. It looked up alertly at Charles, and its green eyes narrowed. A kind of silky, purring grunt issued from its mouth. Smooth muscles flexed, and the tiger got to its feet. Its tail switched, making little chinking sounds against the porcelain side of the last urinal.

The tiger looked quite hungry and very vicious.

Charles hurried back the way he had come. The door seemed to take forever to wheeze pneumatically closed behind him, but when it did, he considered himself safe. This door only swung in, and he could not remember ever reading or hearing that tigers are smart enough to open doors.

Charles wiped the back of his hand across his nose. His heart was thumping so hard he could hear it. He still needed to go to the

basement, worse than ever.

He squirmed, winced, and pressed a hand against his belly. He really had to go to the basement. If he could only be sure no one would come, he could use the girls'. It was right across the hall. Charles looked at it longingly, knowing he would never dare, not in a million years. What if Cathy Scott should come? Or—black horror!—what if Miss Bird should come?

Perhaps he had imagined the tiger.

He opened the door wide enough for one eye and peeked in.

The tiger was peeking back from around the angle of the L, its eye a sparkling green. Charles fancied he could see a tiny blue fleck in that deep brilliance, as if the tiger's eye had eaten one of his own. As if—

A hand slid around his neck.

Charles gave a stifled cry and felt his heart and stomach cram up into his throat. For one terrible moment he thought he was going to wet himself.

It was Kenny Griffen, smiling complacently. "Miss Bird sent me after you 'cause you been gone six years. You're in trouble."

"Yeah, but I can't go to the basement," Charles said, feeling faint with the fright Kenny had given him.

"Yer constipated!" Kenny chortled gleefully. "Wait'll I tell Caaathy!"

"You better not!" Charles said urgently. "Besides, I'm not. There's a tiger in there."

"What's he doing?" Kenny asked. "Takin a piss?"

"I don't know," Charles said, turning his face to the wall. "I just wish he'd go away." He began to weep.

“Hey,” Kenny said, bewildered and a little frightened. “Hey. “

“What if I have to go? What if I can’t help it? Miss Bird’ll say—”

“Come on,” Kenny said, grabbing his arm in one hand and pushing the door open with the other. “You’re making it up.”

They were inside before Charles, terrified, could break free and cower back against the door.

“Tiger,” Kenny said disgustedly. “Boy, Miss Bird’s gonna kill you.”

“It’s around the other side.”

Kenny began to walk past the washbowls. “Kitty-kitty-kitty? Kitty?”

“Don’t!” Charles hissed.

Kenny disappeared around the corner. “Kitty-kitty? Kitty-kitty? Kit—”

Charles darted out the door again and pressed himself against the wall, waiting, his hands over his mouth and his eyes squinched shut, waiting, waiting for the scream.

There was no scream.

He had no idea how long he stood there, frozen, his bladder bursting. He looked at the door to the boys’ basement. It told him nothing. It was just a door.

He wouldn’t.

He couldn’t.

But at last he went in.

The washbowls and the mirrors were neat, and the faint smell of chlorine was unchanged. But there seemed to be a smell under it. A faint, unpleasant smell, like freshly sheared copper.

With groaning (but silent) trepidation, he went to the corner of the L and peeped around.

The tiger was sprawled on the floor, licking its large paws with a long pink tongue. It looked incuriously at Charles. There was a torn piece of shirt caught in one set of claws.

But his need was a white agony now, and he couldn't help it. He had to. Charles tiptoed back to the white porcelain basin closest the door.

Miss Bird slammed in just as he was zipping his pants.

"Why, you dirty, filthy little boy," she said almost reflectively.

Charles was keeping a weather eye on the corner. "I'm sorry, Miss Bird ... the tiger ... I'm going to clean the sink ... I'll use soap ... I swear I will ..."

"Where's Kenneth?" Miss Bird asked calmly.

"I don't know."

He didn't, really.

"Is he back there?"

"No!" Charles cried.

Miss Bird stalked to the place where the room bent. "Come here, Kenneth. Right this moment."

"Miss Bird—"

But Miss Bird was already around the corner. She meant to pounce. Charles thought Miss Bird was about to find out what pouncing was really all about.

He went out the door again. He got a drink at the drinking fountain. He looked at the American flag hanging over the entrance to the

gym. He looked at the bulletin board. Woodsy Owl said GIVE A HOOT, DON'T POLLUTE. Officer Friendly said NEVER RIDE WITH STRANGERS. Charles read everything twice.

Then he went back to the classroom, walked down his row to his seat with his eyes on the floor, and slid into his seat. It was a quarter to eleven. He took out Roads to Everywhere and began to read about Bill at the Rodeo.

*

“Here There Be Tygers”—My first-grade teacher in Stratford, Connecticut, was Mrs. Van Buren. She was pretty scary. I guess if a tiger had come along and eaten her up, I could have gotten behind that. You know how kids are.

HERMAN WOOUK IS STILL ALIVE

Stephen King

Brenda should be happy. The kids are quiet, the road stretches ahead of her like an airport runway, she's behind the wheel of a brand-new van. The speedometer reads 70. Nonetheless, that grayness has begun to creep over her again. The van isn't hers, after all. She'll have to give it back. A foolish expense, really, because what's at the far end of this trip, up in Mars Hill? She looks at her old friend. Jasmine is looking back at her. The van, now doing almost a hundred miles an hour, begins to drift. Jasmine gives a small nod. Brenda nods back. Then she pushes down harder with her foot, trying to find the van's carpeted floor.

I. BRENDA HITS PICK-4 FOR \$2,700 AND RESISTS HER FIRST IMPULSE.

Instead of going out for a bottle of Orange Driver to celebrate with, she pays off the MasterCard, which has been maxed like forever. Then calls Hertz and asks a question. Then calls her friend Jasmine, who lives in North Berwick, and tells her about the Pick-4. Jasmine screams and says, "Girl, you're rich!"

If only. Brenda explains how she paid off the credit card so she can rent a Chevy Express if she wants to. It's a van that seats nine, that's what the Hertz girl told her. "We could get all the kids in there and drive up to Mars Hill. See your folks and mine. Show off the grandchildren. Squeeze 'em for a little more dough. What do you think?"

Jasmine is dubious. The glorified shack her folks call home doesn't have room, and she wouldn't want to stay with them even if it did. She hates those two. With good reason, Brenda knows; her own father broke Jasmine in at fifteen. Her mother knew what was going on and did nothing. When Jasmine went to her in tears, her ma said, "You got nothing to worry about, he's had his nuts cut."

Jas married Mitch Robicheau to get away from them, and now, three men, four kids, and eight years later, she's on her own. And on welfare, although she gets sixteen hours a week at the Roll Around,

handing out skates and making change for the video arcade, where the machines take only special tokens. They let her bring her two youngest. Delight sleeps in the office and Truth, her three-year-old, wanders around in the arcade hitching at his diapers. He doesn't get into too much trouble, although last year he got head lice and the two women had to shave all his hair off. How he howled.

"There's six hundred left over after I paid off the credit balance," Brenda says. "Well, four hundred if you count the rental, only I don't, because I can put that on MasterCard. We could stay at the Red Roof, watch Home Box. It's free. We can get takeout from downstreet and the kids can swim in the pool. What do you say?"

From behind her comes yelling. Brenda raises her voice and screams, "Freddy, you stop teasing your sister and give that back!" Then, oh goody, their squabbling wakes up the baby. Either that or Freedom has messed in her diapers and awakened herself. Freedom always messes in her diapers. To Brenda it seems like Free is making poop her life's work. Takes after her father that way.

"I suppose ..." Jasmine says, drawing suppose out to four syllables. Maybe five.

"Come on, girl! Road trip! Get with the program! We take the bus down to the Jetport and rent the van. Three hundred miles, we can be there in four hours. The girl says they can watch DVDs. The Little Mermaid and all that good stuff."

"Maybe I could get some of that government money from my ma before it's all gone," Jasmine says thoughtfully. Her brother Tommy died the year before, in Afghanistan. IED. Her ma and dad got eighty thousand out of it. Her ma has promised her some, although not when the old man is in hearing distance of the phone. Of course it may be gone already. Probably is. She knows Mr. Romance bought a Yamaha rice rocket, although what he wants with a thing like that at his age, Jasmine has no idea. And she knows things like government money are mostly a mirage. This is something they both

know. Every time you see bright stuff, somebody turns on the rain machine. The bright stuff is never colorfast.

“Come on,” Brenda says. She has fallen in love with the idea of loading up the van with kids and her best (her only) friend from high school, who ended up living just one town over. Both of them on their own, seven kids between them, too many lousy men in the rearview, but sometimes they still have a little fun.

She hears a thunk sound. Freddy starts to scream. Glory has whopped him in the eye with an action figure.

“Glory you stop that or I’ll tear you a new one!” Brenda screams.

“He won’t give back my Powerpuff!” Glory shrieks, and she starts to cry. Now they’re all crying—Freddy, Glory, and Freedom—and for a moment grayness creeps over Brenda’s vision. She’s seen a lot of that grayness lately. Here they are in a three-room third-floor apartment, no guy in the picture (Tim, the latest in her life, took off six months ago), living pretty much on noodles and Pepsi and that cheap ice cream they sell at Walmart, no air-conditioning, no cable TV, she had a job at the Quik-Flash store but the company went busted and now the store’s an On the Run and the manager hired some Taco Paco to do her job because Taco Paco can work twelve or fourteen hours a day. Taco Paco wears a do-rag on his head and a nasty little mustache on his upper lip and he’s never been pregnant. Taco Paco’s job is to get girls pregnant. They fall for that little mustache and then boom, the line in the little drugstore testing gadget turns blue and here comes another one, just like the other one.

Brenda has personal experience; she tells people she knows who Freddy’s father is, but she really doesn’t, she had a few drunk nights when they all looked good, and really, come on, how is she supposed to look for a job anyway? She’s got these kids. What’s she supposed to do, leave Freddy to mind Glory and take Freedom to the goddamn job interviews? Sure, that’ll work. And what is there, besides drive-up-window girl at Mickey D’s or the Booger King?

Portland has a couple of strip clubs, but wide loads like her don't get that kind of work, and everyone else is broke.

She reminds herself she hit the lottery. She reminds herself they could be in a couple of air-conditioned rooms tonight at the Red Roof—three, even! Why not? Things are turning around!

“Brennie?” Her friend sounds more doubtful than ever. “Are you still there?”

“Yeah,” she says. “Come on, girl, I'm approved. The Hertz chick says the van is red.” She lowers her voice and adds: “Your lucky color.”

“Did you pay off the credit card online? How'd you do that?” Jasmine knows what happened to Brenda's laptop. Freddy and Glory got fighting last month and knocked Brenda's laptop off the bed. It fell on the floor and broke.

“I used the one at the library.” She says it the way she grew up in Mars Hill saying it: liberry. “I had to wait awhile to get on, but it's worth it. It's free. So what do you say?”

“Maybe we could get a bottle of Allen's,” her friend says. Jasmine loves that Allen's Coffee Brandy, when she can get it. In truth, Jasmine loves anything when she can get it.

“Apple-solutely,” Brenda says. “And a bottle of Driver for me. But I won't drink while I'm behind the wheel, Jas. You can, but I'll wait. I have to keep my license. It's about all I got left.”

“Can you really get any money out of your folks, do you think?”

Brenda tells herself that once they see the kids—assuming the kids can be bribed (or intimidated) into good behavior—she can. “But not a word about the lottery,” she says.

“No way,” Jasmine says. “I was born at night but it wasn't last night.”

They yuk at this one, an oldie but a goodie.

“So what do you think?”

“I’ll have to take Eddie and Rosellen out of school ...”

“BFD,” Brenda says. “So what do you think, girl?”

After a long pause on the other end, Jasmine says, “Road trip!”

“Road trip!” Brenda hollers back.

Then they are chanting it while the three kids bawl in Brenda’s Sanford apartment and at least one (maybe two) is bawling in Jasmine’s North Berwick apartment. These are the fat women nobody wants to see when they’re on the streets, the ones no guy wants to pick up in the bars unless the hour is late and the mood is drunk and there’s nobody better in sight. What men think when they’re drunk—Brenda and Jasmine both know this—is that thunder thighs are better than no thighs at all. They went to high school together in Mars Hill and now they’re downstate and they help each other when they can. They are the fat women nobody wants to see, they have a litter of children between them, and they are chanting Road trip, road trip like a couple of cheerleading fools. On a September morning, already hot at eight-thirty, this is the way things happen. It’s never been any different.

II. SO THESE TWO OLD POETS WHO WERE ONCE LOVERS IN PARIS HAVE A PICNIC NEAR THE BATHROOMS.

Phil Henreid is seventy-eight now, and Pauline Enslin is seventy-five. They’re both skinny. They both wear spectacles. Their hair, white and thin, blows in the breeze. They’ve paused at a rest area on I-95 near Fairfield, which is about twenty miles north of Augusta. The rest-area building is barnboard, and the adjacent bathrooms are brick. They’re good-looking bathrooms. Modest bathrooms. There’s no odor. Phil, who lives in Maine and knows this rest area well, would never have proposed a picnic here in the summertime. When the traffic on the interstate swells with out-of-state vacationers, the Turnpike Authority brings in a line of plastic Port-O-Sans, and this

pleasant grassy area stinks like hell on New Year's Eve. But now the Port-O-Sans are in storage somewhere, and the rest area is nice.

Pauline puts a checked cloth on the initial-scarred picnic table standing in the shade of an old oak, and anchors it with a wicker picnic basket against a slight warm breeze. From the basket she takes sandwiches, potato salad, melon wedges, and two slices of coconut-custard pie. She also has a large glass bottle of red tea. Ice cubes clink cheerfully inside.

"If we were in Paris, we'd have wine," Phil says.

"In Paris, we never had another sixty miles to drive on the turnpike," she replies. "That tea is cold and it's fresh. You'll have to make do."

"I wasn't carping," he says, and lays an arthritis-swollen hand over hers (which is also swollen, although marginally less so). "This is a feast, my dear."

They smile into each other's used faces. Although Phil has been married three times (and has scattered five children behind him like confetti) and Pauline has been married twice (no children, but lovers of both sexes in the dozens), they still have quite a lot between them. Much more than a spark. Phil is both surprised and not surprised. At his age—late, but not quite yet last call—you take what you can and are happy to get it. They are on their way to a poetry festival at the University of Maine's Orono campus, and while the compensation for their joint appearance isn't huge, it's perfectly adequate. Since he has an expense account, Phil has splurged and rented a Cadillac from Hertz at the Portland Jetport, where he met her plane. Pauline jeered at this, said she always knew he was a plastic hippie, but she does it gently. He wasn't a hippie, but he was a genuine whatever-he-was, and she knows it. As he knows that her osteoporotic bones have enjoyed the ride.

Now, a picnic. Tonight they'll have a catered meal, but the food will be a lukewarm, sauce-covered mess o' mystery supplied by the cafeteria in one of the college commons. "Beige food" is what

Pauline calls it. Visiting-poet food is always beige, and in any case it won't be served until eight o'clock. With some cheap yellowish-white wine seemingly created to saw at the guts of semi-retired alcohol abusers such as themselves. This meal is nicer, and iced tea is fine. Phil even indulges the fantasy of leading her by the hand to the high grass behind the bathrooms once they have finished eating, like in that old Van Morrison song, and—

Ah, but no. Elderly poets whose sex drives are now permanently stuck in first gear should not chance such a potentially ludicrous site of assignation. Especially poets of long, rich, and varied experience, who now know that each time is apt to be largely unsatisfactory, and each time may well be the last time. Besides, Phil thinks, I have already had two heart attacks. Who knows what's up with her?

Pauline thinks, Not after sandwiches and potato salad, not to mention custard pie. But perhaps tonight. It is not out of the question. She smiles at him and takes the last item from the hamper. It is a New York Times, bought at the same Augusta convenience store where she got the rest of the picnic things, checked cloth and iced-tea bottle included. As in the old days, they flip for the Arts section. In the old days, Phil—who won the National Book Award for *Burning Elephants* in 1970—always called tails and won far more times than the odds said he should. Today he calls heads ... and wins again.

“Why, you snot!” she cries, and hands it over.

They eat. They read the divided paper. At one point she looks at him over a forkful of potato salad and says, “I still love you, you old fraud.”

Phil smiles. The wind blows the gone-to-seed dandelion puff of his hair. His scalp shines gauzily through. He's not the young man who once came roistering out of Brooklyn, broad-shouldered as a longshoreman (and just as foulmouthed), but Pauline can still see the shadow of that man, who was so full of anger, despair, and hilarity.

“Why, I love you, too, Paulie,” he says.

“We’re a couple of old crocks,” she says, and bursts into laughter. Once she had sex with a king and a movie star at pretty much the same time on a balcony while “Maggie May” played on the gramophone, Rod Stewart singing in French. Now the woman The New York Times once called America’s greatest living female poet lives in a walk-up in Queens. “Doing poetry readings in tank towns for dishonorable honorariums and eating alfresco in rest areas.”

“We’re not old,” he says, “we’re young, ma bébé.”

“What in the world are you talking about?”

“Look at this,” he says, and holds out the first page of the Arts section. She takes it and sees a photograph. It’s a dried-up string of a man wearing a straw hat and a smile.

Nonagenarian Wouk to Publish New Book

By Motoko Rich

By the time they reach the age of 94—if they do—most writers have retired long ago. Not Herman Wouk, author of such famous novels as *The Caine Mutiny* (1951) and *Marjorie Morningstar* (1955). Many of those who remember the TV miniseries presentations of his exhaustive World War II novels, *The Winds of War* (1971) and *War and Remembrance* (1978), are now drawing Social Security themselves. It’s a retirement premium Wouk became eligible for in 1980.

Wouk, however, is not done. He published a well-reviewed surprise novel, *A Hole in Texas*, a year shy of his 90th birthday, and expects to publish a book-length essay called “The Language God Talks” next year. Is it his final word?

“I’m not prepared to speak on that subject, one way or the other,” Wouk said with a smile. “The ideas don’t stop just because one is

old. The body weakens, but the words never do.” When asked about his

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As she looks at that old, seamed face beneath the rakishly tilted straw hat, Pauline feels the sudden sting of tears. “The body weakens but the words never do,” she says. “That’s lovely.”

“Have you ever read him?” Phil asks.

“Marjorie Morningstar, in my youth. It’s an annoying hymn to virginity, but I was swept away in spite of myself. Have you?”

“I tried Youngblood Hawke, but couldn’t finish it. Still ... he’s in there pitching. And he’s old enough to be our father.” He folds the paper and puts it into the picnic basket. Below them, light traffic on the turnpike runs beneath a high September sky full of fair-weather clouds. “Before we get back on the road, do you want to do swapsies? Like in the old days?”

She thinks about it, then nods. Many years have passed since she listened to someone else read one of her poems, and the experience is always a little dismaying—like having an out-of-body experience—but why not? They have the rest area to themselves. “In honor of Herman Wouk, who’s still in there pitching. My work folder’s in the front pocket of my carrybag.”

“You trust me to go through your things?”

She gives him her old slanted smile, then stretches into the sun with her eyes closed. Relishing the heat. Soon the days will turn cold, but now there is heat. “You can go through my things all you want, Philip.” She opens one eye in a reverse wink that is amusingly seductive. “Explore to your heart’s content.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” he says, and goes back to the Cadillac he has rented for them.

Poets in a Cadillac, she thinks. The very definition of absurdity. For a moment she watches the cars rush by. Then she picks up the Arts section and looks again at the narrow, smiling face of the old scribbler. Still alive. Perhaps at this very moment looking up at the high blue September sky, with his notebook open on a patio table and a glass of Perrier (or wine, if his stomach will still stand it) near to hand.

If there is a God, Paulie Enslin thinks, she can occasionally be very generous.

She waits for Phil to come back with her work folder and one of the steno pads he favors for composition. They will play swapsies. Tonight they may play other games. Once again she tells herself, It is not out of the question.

III. SITTING BEHIND THE WHEEL OF THE CHEVY VAN, BRENDA FEELS LIKE SHE'S IN THE COCKPIT OF A JET FIGHTER.

Everything is digital. There's a satellite radio with a GPS screen above it. When she backs up, the GPS turns into a TV monitor, so you can see what's behind you. Everything on the dashboard shines, that new-car smell fills the interior, and why not, with only seven hundred and fifty miles on the odometer? She has never in her life been behind the wheel of a motor vehicle with such low mileage. You can push buttons on the control-stalk to show you your average speed, how many miles per gallon you're getting, and how many gallons you've got left. The engine makes hardly any noise at all. The seats up front are twin buckets, upholstered in bone-white material that looks like leather. The shocks are like butter.

In back is a pop-down TV screen with a DVD player. The Little Mermaid won't work because Truth, Jasmine's three-year-old, spread peanut butter all over the disc at some point, but they are content with Shrek, even though all of them have seen it like a billion times. The thrill is watching it while they're on the road! Driving! Freedom is asleep in her car seat between Freddy and Glory; Delight, Jasmine's six-month-old, is asleep in Jasmine's lap, but the

other five cram together in the two back seats, watching, entranced. Their mouths are hanging open. Jasmine's Eddie is picking his nose, and Eddie's older sister, Rosellen, has got drool on her sharp little chin, but at least they are quiet and not beating away at each other for once. They are hypnotized.

Brenda should be happy, she knows she should. The kids are quiet, the road stretches ahead of her like an airport runway, she's behind the wheel of a brand-new van, and the traffic is light, especially once they leave Portland behind. The digital speedometer reads 70, and this baby hasn't even broken a sweat. Nonetheless, that grayness has begun to creep over her again. The van isn't hers, after all. She'll have to give it back. A foolish expense, really, because what's at the far end of this trip, up in Mars Hill? Food brought in from the Round-Up Restaurant, where she used to work when she was in high school and still had a figure. Hamburgers and fries covered with plastic wrap. The kids splashing in the pool before and maybe after. At least one of them will get hurt and bawl. Maybe more. And Glory will complain that the water is too cold, even if it isn't. Glory always complains. She will complain her whole life. Brenda hates that whining and likes to tell Glory it's her father coming out ... but the truth is, the kid gets it from both sides. Poor kid. All of them, really. All poor kids, headed into poor lives.

She looks to her right, hoping Jas will say something funny and cheer her up, and is dismayed to see that Jasmine is crying. Silent tears well up in her eyes and shine on her cheeks. In her lap, baby Delight sleeps on, sucking one of her fingers. It's her comfort-finger, and all blistered down the inside. Once, Jas slapped her good and hard when she saw Dee sticking it in her mouth, but what good is slapping a kid that's only six months old? Might as well slap a door. But sometimes you do it. Sometimes you can't help it. Sometimes you don't want to help it. Brenda has done it herself.

"What's wrong, girl?" Brenda asks.

"Nothing. Never mind me, just watch your driving."

Behind them, Donkey says something funny to Shrek, and some of the kids laugh. Not Glory, though; she's nodding off.

"Come on, Jas. Tell me. I'm your friend."

"Nothing, I said." Jas leans over the sleeping infant. Delight's baby seat is on the floor. Resting in it on a pile of diapers is the bottle of Allen's they stopped for in South Portland, before hitting the turnpike. Jas has only had a couple of sips, but this time she takes two good long swallows before putting the cap back on. The tears are still running down her cheeks. "Nothing. Everything. Comes to the same either way you say it, that's what I think."

"Is it Tommy? Is it your bro?"

Jas laughs angrily. "They'll never give me a cent of that money, who'm I kidding? Ma'll blame it on Dad because that's easier for her, but she feels the same. It'll mostly be gone, anyway. What about you? Will your folks really give you something?"

"Sure, I think so." Well. Yeah. Probably. Like forty dollars. A bag and a half's worth of groceries. Two bags if she uses the coupons in Uncle Henry's Swap or Sell It Guide. Just the thought of flipping through that raggy little cheap magazine—the poor people's Bible—and getting the ink on her fingers causes the grayness around her to thicken. The afternoon is beautiful, more like summer than September, but a world where you have to depend on Uncle Henry's is a gray world. Brenda thinks, How did we end up with all these kids? Wasn't I letting Mike Higgins cop a feel of me out behind the metal shop just yesterday?

"Bully for you," Jasmine says, and snorks back tears. "My folks, they'll have three new gasoline toys in the dooryard and then plead poverty. And do you know what my dad'll say about the kids? Don't let 'em touch anything,' that's what he'll say."

"Maybe he'll be different," Brenda says. "Better."

“He’s never different and he’s never better,” Jasmine says, “and he never will be.”

In the backseat, Rosellen is drifting off. She tries to put her head on her brother Eddie’s shoulder and he punches her in the arm. She rubs it and begins to snivel, but pretty soon she’s watching Shrek again. The drool is still on her chin. Brenda thinks it makes her look like an idiot, which she pretty close to is.

“I don’t know what to say,” Brenda says. “We’ll have some fun, anyway. Red Roof, girl! Swimming pool!”

“Yeah, and some guy knocking on the wall at one in the morning, telling me to shut my kid up. Like, you know, I want Dee awake in the middle of the night because all those stinkin’ teeth are coming in at once.”

She takes another slug from the coffee-brandy bottle, then holds it out to Brenda. Brenda knows better than to take it, to risk her license ... but no cops are in sight and if she did lose her ticket, how much would she really be out? The car was Tim’s, he took it when he left, and it was a half-dead beater anyway, a Bondo-and-chicken-wire special. No great loss there. Besides, there’s that grayness. She takes the bottle and tips it. Just a little sip, but the brandy’s warm and nice, a shaft of dark sunlight, so she takes another one.

“They’re closing the Roll Around at the end of the month,” Jasmine says, taking the bottle back.

“Jassy, no!”

“Jassy yes.” She stares straight ahead at the unrolling road. “Jack finally went broke. The writing’s been on the wall since last year. So there goes that ninety a week.” She drinks. In her lap, Delight stirs, then goes back to sleep with her comfort-finger plugged in her gob. Where, Brenda thinks, some boy like Mike Higgins will want to put his dick not all that many years from now. And she’ll probably let him. I did. Jas did too. It’s just how things go.

Behind them Princess Fiona is now saying something funny, but none of the kids laugh. They're getting glassy, even the older kids. Eddie and Freddy, names like a TV-sitcom joke.

"The world is gray," Brenda says. She didn't know she was going to say those words until she hears them come out of her mouth.

Jasmine looks at her, surprised. "That's right," she says. "Now you're getting with the program."

Brenda says, "Pass me that bottle."

Jasmine does. Brenda drinks some more, then hands it back. "Okay, enough of that."

Jasmine gives her her old sideways grin, the one Brenda remembers from study hall on Friday afternoons. It looks strange, below her wet cheeks and bloodshot eyes. "You sure?"

Brenda doesn't reply, but she pushes the accelerator a little deeper with her foot. Now the digital speedometer reads 80.

IV. "YOU FIRST," PAULINE SAYS.

All at once she feels shy, afraid to hear her words coming out of Phil's mouth, sure they will sound booming yet false, like dry thunder. But she has forgotten the difference between his public voice—declamatory and a little corny, like the voice of a movie attorney in a summing-up-to-the-jury scene—and the one he uses when he's with just a friend or two (and hasn't had anything to drink). It is a softer, kinder voice, and she is pleased to hear her poem coming out of his mouth. No, more than pleased. She is grateful. He makes it sound far better than it is.

Shadows print the road

with black lipstick kisses.

Decaying snow in farmhouse fields

shines like cast-off bridal dresses.

The rising mist turns to gold dust.

The clouds boil apart and a phantom disc
seems to race behind them.

It bursts through!

For five seconds it could be summer

and I seventeen with flowers

in the lap of my dress.

He puts the sheet down. She looks at him, smiling a little, but anxious. He nods his head. "It's fine, dear," he says. "Fine enough. Now you."

She opens the steno pad, finds what appears to be the last poem, and pages through four or five scribbled drafts. She knows how he works, and she goes on until she comes to a version not in mostly illegible cursive but in small neat printing. She shows it to him. Phil nods, then turns to look at the turnpike. All of this is very nice, but they will have to go soon. They don't want to be late.

He sees a bright-red van coming. It's going fast.

She begins.

V. BRENDA SEES A HORN OF PLENTY SPILLING ROTTEN
FRUIT.

Yes, she thinks, that's just about right. Thanksgiving for fools.

Freddy will go for a soldier and fight in foreign lands, the way Jasmine's brother Tommy did. Jasmine's boys, Eddie and Truth, will do the same. They'll own muscle cars when and if they come home,

and if gas is still available twenty years from now. And the girls? They'll go with boys. They'll give up their virginity while game shows play on TV. They'll have babies and fry meat in skillets and put on weight, same as she and Jasmine did. They'll smoke a little dope and eat a lot of ice cream—the cheap stuff from Walmart. Maybe not Rosellen, though. Something is wrong with Rosellen. She'll need to go to the special-ed classes. She'll still have drool on her sharp little chin when she's in the eighth grade, same as now. The seven kids will beget seventeen, and the seventeen will beget seventy, and the seventy will beget two hundred. She can see a ragged fool's parade marching into the future, some wearing jeans that show the ass of their underwear, some wearing heavy-metal T-shirts, some wearing gravy-spotted waitress uniforms, some wearing stretch pants from Kmart that have little MADE IN PARAGUAY tags sewn into the seams of the roomy seats. She can see the mountain of Fisher-Price toys they will own and that will later be sold at yard sales (which was where most were bought in the first place). They will buy the products they see on TV and go in debt to the credit-card companies, as she did ... and will again, because the Pick-4 was a fluke and she knows it. Worse than a fluke, really: a tease. Life is basically a rusty hubcap lying in a ditch at the side of the road, and life goes on. She will never again feel like she's sitting in the cockpit of a jet fighter. This is as good as it gets. Her ship will not come in. There are no boats for nobody, and no camera is filming her life. This is reality, not a reality show.

Shrek is over and all the kids are asleep, even Eddie. Rosellen's head is once more on Eddie's shoulder. She's snoring like an old woman. She has red marks on her arms, because sometimes she can't stop scratching herself.

Jasmine screws the cap on the bottle of Allen's and drops it back into the baby seat in the footwell. In a low voice she says, "When I was five, I believed in unicorns."

"So did I," Brenda says. She looks at Jasmine. "I wonder how fast this thing goes."

Jasmine looks at the road ahead. They flash past a blue sign that says REST AREA 1 MI. She sees no traffic northbound; both lanes are entirely theirs. "Let's find out," Jasmine says.

The numbers on the speedometer rise from 80 to 85. Then 87. There's still some room left between the accelerator pedal and the floor. All the kids are sleeping.

Here is the rest area, coming up fast. Brenda sees only one car in the parking lot. It looks like a fancy one, a Lincoln or maybe a Cadillac. I could have rented one of those, she thinks. I had enough money but too many kids. Couldn't fit them all in. Story of her life, really.

She looks away from the road. She looks at her old friend from high school, who ended up living just one town away. Jasmine is looking back at her. The van, now doing almost a hundred miles an hour, begins to drift.

Jasmine gives a small nod and then lifts Dee, cradling the baby against her big breasts. Dee's still got her comfort-finger in her mouth.

Brenda nods back. Then she pushes down harder with her foot, trying to find the van's carpeted floor. It's there, and she lays the accelerator pedal softly against it.

VI. "STOP, PAULIE, STOP."

He reaches out and grabs her shoulder with his bony hand, startling her. She looks up from his poem and sees him staring at the turnpike. His mouth is open and behind his glasses his eyes appear to be bulging out almost far enough to touch the lenses. She follows his gaze in time to see a red van slide smoothly from the travel lane into the breakdown lane and from the breakdown lane across the rest-area entrance ramp. It doesn't turn in. It's going far too fast to turn in. It crosses, doing at least ninety miles an hour, and plows onto the slope just below them, where it hits a tree. She hears a

loud, toneless bang and the sound of breaking glass. The windshield disintegrates; glass pebbles sparkle for a moment in the sun and she thinks—blasphemously—beautiful.

The tree shears the van into two ragged pieces. Something—Phil Henreid can't bear to believe it's a child—is flung high into the air and comes down in the grass. Then the van's gas tank begins to burn, and Pauline screams.

He gets to his feet and runs down the slope, vaulting over the shakepole fence like the young man he once was. These days his failing heart is seldom far from his mind, but as he runs down to the burning pieces of the van, he never even thinks of it.

Cloud-shadows roll across the field, then across the woods beyond. Wildflowers nod their heads.

He stops twenty yards from the gasoline funeral pyre, the heat baking his face. He sees what he knew he would see—no survivors—but he never imagined so many non-survivors. He sees blood on the grass. He sees a shatter of taillight glass like a patch of strawberries. He sees a severed arm caught in a bush. In the flames he sees a melting baby seat. He sees shoes.

Pauline comes up beside him. She's gasping for breath. The only thing wilder than her hair are her eyes.

"Don't look," he says.

"What's that smell? Phil, what's that smell?"

"Burning gas and rubber," he says, although that's probably not the smell she's talking about. "Don't look. Go back and—do you have your cell phone?"

"Yes, of course I have it—"

"Go back and call 911. Don't look at this. You don't want to see this."

He doesn't want to see it either, but cannot look away. How many? He can see the bodies of at least three children and one adult—probably a woman, but he can't be sure. Yet so many shoes ... and all the clothes ... he can see a DVD package ...

“What if I can't get through?” she asks.

He points to the smoke. Then to the three or four cars that are already pulling over. “Getting through won't matter,” he says, “but try.”

She starts to go, then turns back. She's crying. “Phil ... how many?”

“I don't know. A lot. Go on, Paulie. Some of them might still be alive.”

“You know better,” she says through her sobs. “Damn thing was going too fast.”

She begins trudging back up the hill. Halfway to the rest-area parking lot (more cars are pulling in now), a terrible idea crosses her mind and she looks back, sure she will see her old friend and lover lying in the grass himself, perhaps clutching his chest, perhaps unconscious. But he's on his feet, cautiously circling the blazing left half of the van. As she watches, he takes off his natty sport jacket with the patches on the elbows. He kneels and covers something with it. Either a person or a part of a person. Then he goes on.

Climbing the hill, she thinks that all their efforts to make beauty out of words is an illusion. Or a joke played on children who have selfishly refused to grow up. Yes, probably that. Children like that, she thinks, deserve to be pranked.

As she reaches the parking lot, still gasping for breath, she sees the Times Arts section flipping lazily through the grass on the breath of a light breeze and thinks, Never mind. Herman Wouk is still alive and writing a book about God's language. Herman Wouk believes that the body weakens, but the words never do. So that's all right, isn't it?

A man and a woman rush up. The woman raises her own cell phone and takes a picture with it. Pauline Enslin observes this without much surprise. She supposes the woman will show it to friends later. Then they will have drinks and a meal and talk about the grace of God. God's grace looks intact every time it's not you.

"What happened?" the man shouts into her face.

Down below them a skinny old poet is happening. He's now naked to the waist. He has taken off his shirt to cover one of the other bodies. His ribs are a stack outlined against white skin. He kneels and spreads the shirt. He raises his arms into the sky, then lowers them and wraps them around his head.

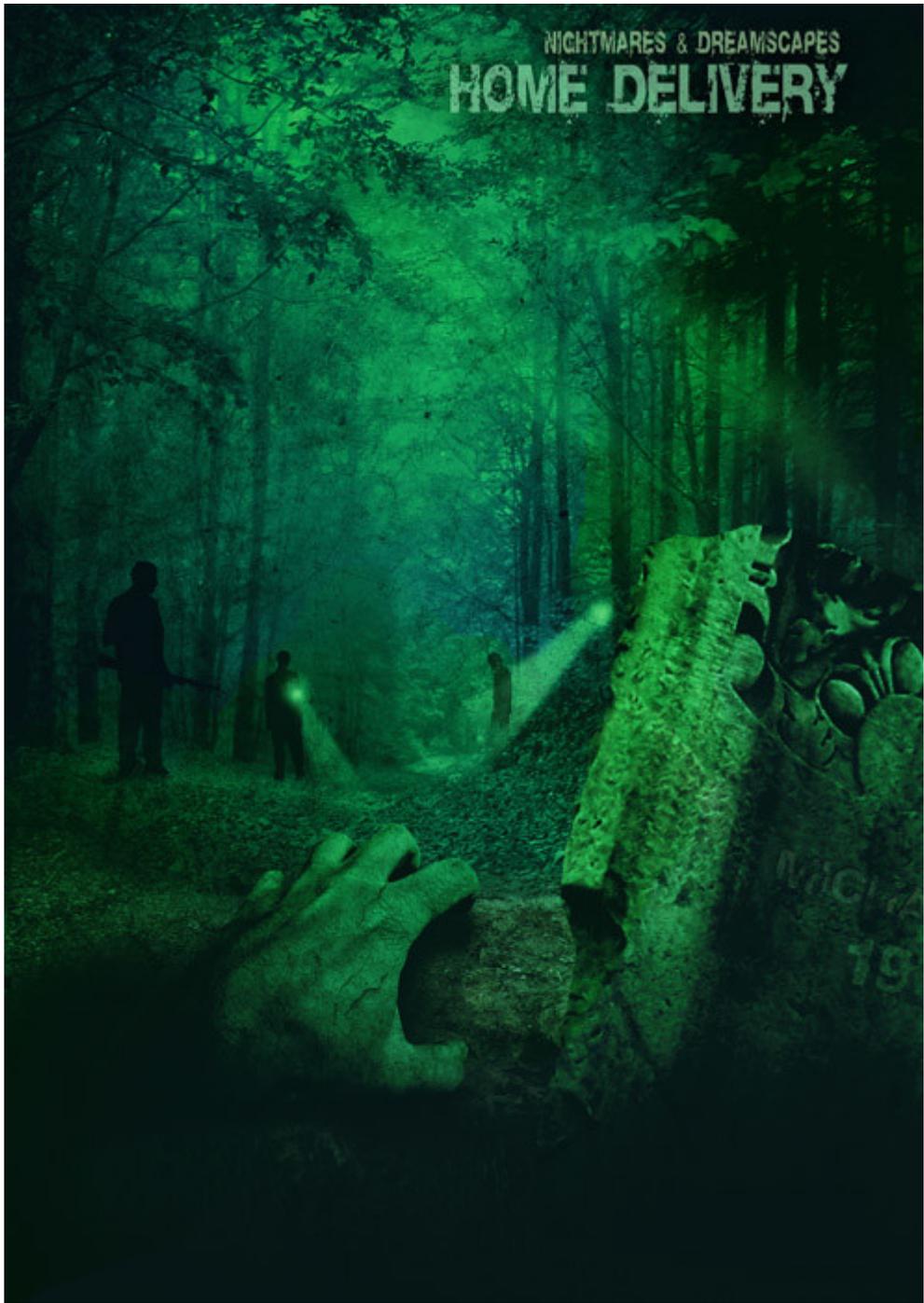
Pauline is also a poet, and as such feels capable of answering the man in the language God speaks.

"What the fuck does it look like?" she says.

—

For Owen King

NIGHTMARES & DREAMSCAPES
HOME DELIVERY



HOME DELIVERY

Stephen King

Considering that it was probably the end of the world, Maddie Pace thought she was doing a good job. Hell of a good job. She thought, in fact, that she just might be coping with the End of Everything better than anyone else on earth. And she was positive she was coping better than any other pregnant woman on earth.

Coping.

Maddie Pace, of all people.

Maddie Pace, who sometimes couldn't sleep if, after a visit from Reverend Johnson, she spied a single speck of dust under the dining-room table. Maddie Pace, who, as Maddie Sullivan, used to drive her fiance, Jack, crazy when she froze over a menu, debating entrees sometimes for as long as half an hour.

"Maddie, why don't you just flip a coin?" he'd asked her once after she had managed to narrow it down to a choice between the braised veal and the lamb chops, and then could get no further. "I've had five bottles of this goddam German beer already, and if you don't make up y'mind pretty damn quick, there's gonna be a drunk lobsterman under the table before we ever get any food on it!"

So she had smiled nervously, ordered the braised veal, and spent most of the ride home wondering if the chops might not have been tastier, and therefore a better bargain despite their slightly higher price.

She'd had no trouble coping with Jack's proposal of marriage, however; she'd accepted it—and him—quickly, and with tremendous relief. Following the death of her father, Maddie and her mother had lived an aimless, cloudy sort of life on Little Tall Island, off the coast of Maine. "If I wasn't around to tell them women where to squat and lean against the wheel," George Sullivan had been fond of saying while in his cups and among his friends at Fudgy's Tavern or in the back room of Prout's Barber Shop, "I don't know what'n hell they'd do."

When her father died of a massive coronary, Maddie was nineteen and minding the town library weekday evenings at a salary of \$41.50 a week. Her mother minded the house—or did, that was, when George reminded her (sometimes with a good hard shot to the ear) that she had a house which needed minding.

When the news of his death came, the two women had looked at each other with silent, panicky dismay, two pairs of eyes asking the same question: What do we do now?

Neither of them knew, but they both felt—felt strongly—that he had been right in his assessment of them: they needed him. They were just women, and they needed him to tell them not just what to do, but how to do it, as well. They didn't speak of it because it embarrassed them, but there it was—they hadn't the slightest clue as to what came next, and the idea that they were prisoners of George Sullivan's narrow ideas and expectations did not so much as cross their minds. They were not stupid women, either of them, but they were island women.

Money wasn't the problem; George had believed passionately in insurance, and when he dropped down dead during the tiebreaker frame of the League Bowl-Offs at Big Duke's Big Ten in Machias, his wife had come into better than a hundred thousand dollars. And island life was cheap, if you owned your place and kept your garden tended and knew how to put by your own vegetables come fall. The problem was having nothing to focus on. The problem was how the center seemed to have dropped out of their lives when George went facedown in his Island Amoco bowling shirt just over the foul line of lane nineteen (and goddam if he hadn't picked up the spare his team had needed to win, too). With George gone their lives had become an eerie sort of blur.

It's like being lost in a heavy fog, Maddie thought sometimes. Only instead of looking for the road, or a house, or the village, or just some landmark like that lightning-struck pine out on the point, I am looking for the wheel. If I can ever find it, maybe I can tell myself to squat and lean my shoulder to it.

At last she found her wheel: it turned out to be Jack Pace. Women marry their fathers and men their mothers, some say, and while such a broad statement can hardly be true all of the time, it was close enough for government work in Maddie's case. Her father had been looked upon by his peers with fear and admiration—"Don't fool with George Sullivan, dear," they'd say. "He'll knock the nose off your face if you so much as look at him wrong."

It was true at home, too. He'd been domineering and sometimes physically abusive, but he'd also known things to want and work for, like the Ford pick-up, the chainsaw, or those two acres that bounded their place to the south. Pop Cook's land. George Sullivan had been known to refer to Pop Cook as one armpit-stinky old bastid, but the old man's aroma didn't change the fact that there was quite a lot of good hardwood left on those two acres. Pop didn't know it because he had gone to living across the reach in 1987, when his arthritis really went to town on him, and George let it be known on Little Tall that what that bastid Pop Cook didn't know wouldn't hurt him none, and furthermore, he would disjunct the man or woman that let light into the darkness of Pop's ignorance. No one did, and eventually the Sullivans got the land, and the hardwood on it. Of course the good wood was all logged off inside of three years, but George said that didn't matter a tinker's damn; land always paid for itself in the end. That was what George said and they believed him, believed in him, and they worked, all three of them. He said: You got to put your shoulder to this wheel and push the bitch, you got to push ha'ad because she don't move easy. So that was what they did.

In those days Maddie's mother had kept a produce stand on the road from East Head, and there were always plenty of tourists who bought the vegetables she grew (which were the ones George told her to grow, of course), and even though they were never exactly what her mother called "the Gotrocks family," they made out. Even in years when lobstering was bad and they had to stretch their finances even further in order to keep paying off what they owed the bank on Pop Cook's two acres, they made out.

Jack Pace was a sweeter-tempered man than George Sullivan had ever thought of being, but his sweet temper only stretched so far, even so. Maddie suspected that he might get around to what was sometimes called home correction—the twisted arm when supper was cold, the occasional slap or downright paddling—in time; when the bloom was off the rose, so as to speak. There was even a part of her that seemed to expect and look forward to that. The women’s magazines said marriages where the man ruled the roost were a thing of the past, and that a man who put a hard hand on a woman should be arrested for assault, even if the man in question was the woman in question’s lawful wedded husband. Maddie sometimes read articles of this sort down at the beauty shop, but doubted if the women who wrote them had the slightest idea that places like the outer islands even existed. Little Tall had produced one writer, as a matter of fact—Selena St. George—but she wrote mostly about politics and hadn’t been back to the island, except for a single Thanksgiving dinner, in years.

“I’m not going to be a lobsterman all my life, Maddie,” Jack told her the week before they were married, and she believed him. A year before, when he had asked her out for the first time (she’d said yes almost before all the words could get out of his mouth, and she had blushed to the roots of her hair at the sound of her own naked eagerness), he would have said, “I ain’t going to be a lobsterman all my life.” A small change ... but all the difference in the world. He had been going to night school three evenings a week, taking the old Island Princess over and back. He would be dog-tired after a day of pulling pots, but off he’d go just the same, pausing only long enough to shower off the powerful smells of lobster and brine and to gulp two No Doz with hot coffee. After awhile, when she saw he really meant to stick to it, Maddie began putting up hot soup for him to drink on the ferry-ride over. Otherwise he would have had nothing but one of those nasty red hot dogs they sold in the Princess’s snack-bar.

She remembered agonizing over the canned soups in the store—there were so many! Would he want tomato? Some people didn’t like tomato soup. In fact, some people hated tomato soup, even if you

made it with milk instead of water. Vegetable soup? Turkey? Cream of chicken? Her helpless eyes roved the shelf display for nearly ten minutes before Charlene Nedeau asked if she could help her with something—only Charlene said it in a sarcastic way, and Maddie guessed she would tell all her friends at high school tomorrow, and they would giggle about it in the girls' room, knowing exactly what was wrong with her—poor mousy little Maddie Sullivan, unable to make up her mind over so simple a thing as a can of soup. How she had ever been able to decide to accept Jack Pace's proposal was a wonder and a marvel to all of them ... but of course they didn't know about the wheel you had to find, and about how, once you found it, you had to have someone to tell you when to stoop and where exactly to push the damned thing.

Maddie had left the store with no soup and a throbbing headache.

When she worked up nerve enough to ask Jack what his favorite soup was, he had said: "Chicken noodle. Kind that comes in the can."

Were there any others he specially liked?

The answer was no, just chicken noodle—the kind that came in the can. That was all the soup Jack Pace needed in his life, and all the answer (on that particular subject, at least) that Maddie needed in hers. Light of step and cheerful of heart, Maddie climbed the warped wooden steps of the store the next day and bought the four cans of chicken noodle soup that were on the shelf. When she asked Bob Nedeau if he had any more, he said he had a whole damn case of the stuff out back.

She bought the entire case and left him so flabbergasted that he actually carried the carton out to the truck for her and forgot all about asking why she wanted so much—a lapse for which his long-nosed wife and daughter took him sharply to task that evening.

"You just better believe it and never forget," Jack had said that time not long before they tied the knot (she had believed it, and had never

forgotten). “More than a lobsterman. My dad says I’m full of shit. He says if draggin pots was good enough for his old man, and his old man’s old man and all the way back to the friggin Garden of Eden to hear him tell it, it ought to be good enough for me. But it ain’t—isn’t, I mean—and I’m going to do better.” His eye fell on her, and it was a stern eye, full of resolve, but it was a loving eye, full of hope and confidence, too. “More than a lobsterman is what I mean to be, and more than a lobsterman’s wife is what I intend for you to be. You’re going to have a house on the mainland.”

“Yes, Jack.”

“And I’m not going to have any friggin Chevrolet.” He drew in a deep breath and took her hands in his. “I’m going to have an Oldsmobile.”

He looked her dead in the eye, as if daring her to scoff at this wildly upscale ambition. She did no such thing, of course; she said yes, Jack, for the third or fourth time that evening. She had said it to him thousands of times over the year they had spent courting, and she confidently expected to say it a million times before death ended their marriage by taking one of them—or, better, both of them together. Yes, Jack; had there ever in the history of the world been two words which made such beautiful music when laid side by side?

“More than a friggin lobsterman, no matter what my old man thinks or how much he laughs.” He pronounced this last word in the deeply downcast way: loffs. “I’m going to do it, and do you know who’s going to help me?”

“Yes,” Maddie had responded calmly. “I am.”

He had laughed and swept her into his arms. “You’re damned tooting, my little sweetheart,” he’d told her.

And so they were wed, as the fairytales usually put it, and for Maddie those first few months—months when they were greeted almost everywhere with jovial cries of “Here’s the newlyweds!”—were a fairytale. She had Jack to lean on, Jack to help her make decisions,

and that was the best of it. The most difficult household choice thrust upon her that first year was which curtains would look best in the living room—there were so many in the catalogue to choose from, and her mother was certainly no help. Maddie’s mother had a hard time deciding between different brands of toilet paper.

Otherwise, that year consisted mostly of joy and security—the joy of loving Jack in their deep bed while the winter wind scraped over the island like the blade of a knife across a breadboard, the security of having Jack to tell her what it was they wanted, and how they were going to get it. The loving was good—so good that sometimes when she thought of him during the days her knees would feel weak and her stomach fluttery—but his way of knowing things and her growing trust in his instincts were even better. So for awhile it was a fairytale, yes.

Then Jack died and things started getting weird. Not just for Maddie, either.

For everybody.

*

Just before the world slid into its incomprehensible nightmare, Maddie discovered she was what her mother had always called “preg,” a curt word that was like the sound you made when you had to rasp up a throatful of snot (that, at least, was how it had always sounded to Maddie). By then she and Jack had moved next to the Pulsifers on Gennesault Island, which was known simply as Jenny by its residents and those of nearby Little Tall.

She’d had one of her agonizing interior debates when she missed her second period, and after four sleepless nights she made an appointment with Dr. McElwain on the mainland. Looking back, she was glad. If she’d waited to see if she was going to miss a third period, Jack would not have had even one month of joy and she would have missed the concerns and little kindnesses he had showered upon her.

Looking back—now that she was coping—her indecision seemed ludicrous, but her deeper heart knew that going to have the test had taken tremendous courage. She had wanted to be more convincingly sick in the mornings so she could be surer; she had longed for nausea to drag her from her dreams. She made the appointment when Jack was out at work, and she went while he was out, but there was no such thing as sneaking over to the mainland on the ferry; too many people from both islands saw you. Someone would mention casually to Jack that he or she had seen his wife on the Princess t'other day, and then Jack would want to know what it was all about, and if she'd made a mistake, he would look at her like she was a goose.

But it hadn't been a mistake; she was with child (and never mind that word that sounded like someone with a bad cold trying to clear his throat), and Jack Pace had had exactly twenty-seven days to look forward to his first child before a bad swell had caught him and knocked him over the side of My Lady-Love, the lobster boat he had inherited from his Uncle Mike. Jack could swim, and he had popped to the surface like a cork, Dave Eamons had told her miserably, but just as he did, another heavy swell came, slewing the boat directly into him, and although Dave would say no more, Maddie had been born and brought up an island girl, and she knew: could, in fact, hear the hollow thud as the boat with its treacherous name smashed its way into her husband's head, letting out blood and hair and bone and perhaps the part of his brain that had made him say her name over and over again in the dark of night, when he came into her.

Dressed in a heavy hooded parka and down-filled pants and boots, Jack Pace had sunk like a stone. They had buried an empty casket in the little cemetery at the north end of Jenny Island, and the Reverend Johnson (on Jenny and Little Tall you had your choice when it came to religion: you could be a Methodist, or if that didn't suit you, you could be a lapsed Methodist) had presided over this empty coffin as he had so many others. The service ended, and at the age of twenty-two Maddie had found herself a widow with a bun

in the oven and no one to tell her where the wheel was, let alone when to put her shoulder to it or how far to push it.

She thought at first she'd go back to Little Tall, back to her mother, to wait her time, but a year with Jack had given her a little perspective and she knew her mother was as lost—maybe even more lost—than she was herself, and that made her wonder if going back would be the right thing to do.

“Maddie,” Jack told her again and again (he was dead in the world but not, it seemed, inside her head; inside her head he was as lively as any dead man could possibly get ... or so she had thought then), “the only thing you can ever decide on is not to decide.”

Nor was her mother any better. They talked on the phone and Maddie waited and hoped for her mother to just tell her to come back home, but Mrs. Sullivan could tell no one over the age of ten anything. “Maybe you ought to come on back over here,” she had said once in a tentative way, and Maddie couldn't tell if that meant please come home or please don't take me up on an offer which was really just made for form's sake. She spent long, sleepless nights trying to decide which it had been and succeeded only in confusing herself more.

Then the weirdness started, and the greatest mercy was that there was only the one small graveyard on Jenny (and so many of the graves filled with those empty coffins—a thing which had once seemed pitiful to her now seemed another blessing, a grace). There were two on Little Tall, both fairly large, and so it began to seem so much safer to stay on Jenny and wait.

She would wait and see if the world lived or died.

If it lived, she would wait for the baby.

*

And now she was, after a life of passive obedience and vague resolves that usually passed like dreams an hour or two after she got out of bed, finally coping. She knew that part of this was nothing more than the effect of being slammed with one massive shock after another, beginning with the death of her husband and ending with one of the last broadcasts the Pulsifers' high-tech satellite dish had picked up: a horrified young boy who had been pressed into service as a CNN reporter saying that it seemed certain that the President of the United States, the first lady, the Secretary of State, the honorable senior senator from Oregon, and the emir of Kuwait had been eaten alive in the White House East Room by zombies.

"I want to repeat this," the accidental reporter had said, the firespots of his acne standing out on his forehead and chin like stigmata. His mouth and cheeks had begun to twitch; his hands shook spastically. "I want to repeat that a bunch of corpses have just lunched up on the President and his wife and a whole lot of other political hotshots who were at the White House to eat poached salmon and cherries jubilee." Then the kid had begun to laugh maniacally and to scream Go, Yale! Boola-boola! at the top of his voice. At last he bolted out of the frame, leaving a CNN news-desk untenanted for the first time in Maddie's memory. She and the Pulsifers sat in dismayed silence as the news-desk disappeared and an ad for Boxcar Willie records—not available in any store, you could get this amazing collection only by dialing the 800 number currently appearing on the bottom of your screen—came on. One of little Cheyne Pulsifer's crayons was on the end table beside the chair Maddie was sitting in, and for some crazy reason she picked it up and wrote the number down on a sheet of scrap paper before Mr. Pulsifer got up and turned off the TV without a single word.

Maddie told them good night and thanked them for sharing their TV and their Jiffy Pop.

"Are you sure you're all right, Maddie dear?" Candi Pulsifer asked her for the fifth time that night, and Maddie said she was fine for the fifth time that night, that she was coping, and Candi said she knew

she was, but she was welcome to the upstairs bedroom that used to be Brian's anytime she wanted. Maddie hugged Candi, kissed her cheek, declined with the most graceful thanks she could find, and was at last allowed to escape. She had walked the windy half mile back to her own house and was in her own kitchen before she realized that she still had the scrap of paper on which she had jotted the 800 number. She had dialed it, and there was nothing. No recorded voice telling her all circuits were currently busy or that the number was out of service; no wailing siren sound that indicated a line interruption; no boops or beeps or clicks or clacks. Just smooth silence. That was when Maddie knew for sure that the end had either come or was coming. When you could no longer call the 800 number and order the Boxcar Willie records that were not available in any store, when there were for the first time in her living memory no Operators Standing By, the end of the world was a foregone conclusion.

She felt her rounding stomach as she stood there by the phone on the wall in the kitchen and said it out loud for the first time, unaware that she had spoken: "It will have to be a home delivery. But that's all right, as long as you get ready and stay ready, kiddo. You have to remember that there just isn't any other way. It has to be a home delivery."

She waited for fear and none came.

"I can cope with this just fine," she said, and this time she heard herself and was comforted by the sureness of her own words.

A baby.

When the baby came, the end of the world would itself end.

"Eden," she said, and smiled. Her smile was sweet, the smile of a madonna. It didn't matter how many rotting dead people (maybe Boxcar Willie among them, for all she knew) were shambling around the face of the earth.

She would have a baby, she would accomplish her home delivery, and the possibility of Eden would remain.

*

The first reports came from an Australian hamlet on the edge of the outback, a place with the memorable name of Fiddle Dee. The name of the first American town where the walking dead were reported was perhaps even more memorable: Thumper, Florida. The first story appeared in America's favorite supermarket tabloid, Inside View.

DEAD COME TO LIFE IN SMALL FLORIDA TOWN! the headline screamed. The story began with a recap of a film called Night of the Living Dead, which Maddie had never seen, and went on to mention another—Macumba Love—which she had also never seen. The article was accompanied by three photos. One was a still from Night of the Living Dead, showing what appeared to be a bunch of escapees from a loonybin standing outside an isolated farmhouse at night. One was from Macumba Love, showing a blonde whose bikini top appeared to be holding breasts the size of prize-winning gourds. The blonde was holding up her hands and screaming in horror at what could have been a black man in a mask. The third purported to be a picture taken in Thumper, Florida. It was a blurred, grainy shot of a person of indeterminate sex standing in front of a video arcade. The article described the figure as being “wrapped in the cerements of the grave,” but it could have been someone in a dirty sheet.

No big deal. BIGFOOT RAPES CHOIR BOY last week, dead people coming back to life this week, the dwarf mass murderer next week.

No big deal, at least, until they started to come out in other places, as well. No big deal until the first news film (“You may want to ask your children to leave the room,” Tom Brokaw introduced gravely) showed up on network TV, decayed monsters with naked bone showing through their dried skin, traffic accident victims, the morticians' concealing make-up sloughed away so that the ripped faces and bashed-in skulls showed, women with their hair teased

into dirt-clogged beehives where worms and beetles still squirmed and crawled, their faces alternately vacuous and informed with a kind of calculating, idiotic intelligence. No big deal until the first horrible stills in an issue of People magazine that had been sealed in shrink-wrap and sold with an orange sticker that read NOT FOR SALE TO MINORS!

Then it was a big deal.

When you saw a decaying man still dressed in the mud-streaked remnants of the Brooks Brothers suit in which he had been buried tearing at the throat of a screaming woman in a tee-shirt that read PROPERTY OF THE HOUSTON OILERS, you suddenly realized it might be a very big deal indeed.

That was when the accusations and saber rattling had started, and for three weeks the entire world had been diverted from the creatures escaping their graves like grotesque moths escaping diseased cocoons by the spectacle of the two great nuclear powers on what appeared to be an undivertible collision course.

There were no zombies in the United States, Communist Chinese television commentators declared; this was a self-serving lie to camouflage an unforgivable act of chemical warfare against the People's Republic of China, a more horrible (and deliberate) version of what had happened in Bhopal, India. Reprisals would follow if the dead comrades coming out of their graves did not fall down decently dead within ten days. All U.S. diplomatic people were expelled from the mother country and there were several incidents of American tourists being beaten to death.

The President (who would not long after become a Zombie Blue Plate Special himself) responded by becoming a pot (which he had come to resemble, having put on at least fifty pounds since his second-term election) calling a kettle black. The U.S. government, he told the American people, had incontrovertible evidence that the only walking-dead people in China had been set loose deliberately, and while the Head Panda might stand there with his slanty-eyed

face hanging out, claiming there were over eight thousand lively corpses striding around in search of the ultimate collectivism, we had definite proof that there were less than forty. It was the Chinese who had committed an act—a heinous act—of chemical warfare, bringing loyal Americans back to life with no urge to consume anything but other loyal Americans, and if these Americans—some of whom had been good Democrats—did not lie down decently dead within the next five days, Red China was going to be one large slag pit.

NORAD was at DEFCON-2 when a British astronomer named Humphrey Dagbolt spotted the satellite. Or the spaceship. Or the creature. Or whatever in hell's name it was. Dagbolt was not even a professional astronomer but only an amateur star-gazer from the west of England—no one in particular, you would have said—and yet he almost certainly saved the world from some sort of thermonuclear exchange, if not flat-out atomic war. All in all not a bad week's work for a man with a deviated septum and a bad case of psoriasis.

At first it seemed that the two nose-to-nose political systems did not want to believe in what Dagbolt had found, even after the Royal Observatory in London had pronounced his photographs and data authentic. Finally, however, the missile silos closed and telescopes all over the world homed in, almost grudgingly, on Star Wormwood.

The joint American/Chinese space mission to investigate the unwelcome newcomer lifted off from the Lanzhou Heights less than three weeks after the first photographs had appeared in the Guardian, and everyone's favorite amateur astronomer was aboard, deviated septum and all. In truth, it would have been hard to have kept Dagbolt off the mission—he had become a worldwide hero, the most renowned Briton since Winston Churchill. When asked by a reporter on the day before lift-off if he was frightened, Dagbolt had brayed his oddly endearing Robert Morley laugh, rubbed the side of his truly enormous nose, and exclaimed, "Petrified, dear boy! Utterly pet-trified!"

As it turned out, he had every reason to be petrified.

They all did.

*

The final sixty-one seconds of received transmission from the Xiaoping/Truman were considered too horrible for release by all three governments involved, and so no formal communique was ever issued. It didn't matter, of course; nearly twenty thousand ham operators had been monitoring the craft, and it seemed that at least nineteen thousand of them had been rolling tape when the craft had been—well, was there really any other word for it?—invaded.

Chinese voice: Worms! It appears to be a massive ball of—

American voice: Christ! Look out! It's coming for us!

Dagbolt: Some sort of extrusion is occurring. The portside window is —

Chinese voice: Breach! Breach! To your suits, my friends!
(Indecipherable gabble.)

American voice:—and appears to be eating its way in—

Female Chinese voice (Ching-Ling Soong): Oh stop it stop the eyes —

(Sound of an explosion.)

Dagbolt: Explosive decompression has occurred. I see three—er, four—dead, and there are worms ... everywhere there are worms—

American voice: Faceplate! Faceplate! Faceplate!

(Screaming.)

Chinese voice: Where is my mamma? Oh dear, where is my mamma?

(Screams. Sounds like a toothless old man sucking up mashed potatoes.)

Dagbolt: The cabin is full of worms—what appear to be worms, at any rate—which is to say that they really are worms, one realizes—that have apparently extruded themselves from the main satellite—what we took to be—which is to say one means—the cabin is full of floating body parts. These space-worms apparently excrete some sort of acid—

(Booster rockets fired at this point; duration of the burn is 7.2 seconds. This may have been an attempt to escape or possibly to ram the central object. In either case, the maneuver did not work. It seems likely that the blast-chambers themselves were clogged with worms and Captain Lin Yang—or whichever officer was then in charge—believed an explosion of the fuel tanks themselves to be imminent as a result of the clog. Hence the shutdown.)

American voice: Oh my Christ they're in my head, they're eating my fuckin br—

(Static.)

Dagbolt: I believe that prudence dictates a strategic retreat to the aft storage compartment; the rest of the crew is dead. No question about that. Pity. Brave bunch. Even that fat American who kept rooting around in his nose. But in another sense I don't think—

(Static.)

Dagbolt:—dead after all because Ching-Ling Soong—or rather, Ching-Ling Soong's severed head, one means to say—just floated past me, and her eyes were open and blinking. She appeared to recognize me, and to—

(Static.)

Dagbolt:—keep you—

(Explosion. Static.)

Dagbolt:—around me. I repeat, all around me. Squirming things. They—I say, does anyone know if—

(Dagbolt, screaming and cursing, then just screaming. Sounds of toothless old man again.)

(Transmission ends.)

The Xiaoping/Truman exploded three seconds later. The extrusion from the rough ball nicknamed Star Wormwood had been observed from better than three hundred telescopes earthside during the short and rather pitiful conflict. As the final sixty-one seconds of transmission began, the craft began to be obscured by something that certainly looked like worms. By the end of the final transmission, the craft itself could not be seen at all—only the squirming mass of things that had attached themselves to it. Moments after the final explosion, a weather satellite snapped a single picture of floating debris, some of which was almost certainly chunks of the worm-things. A severed human leg clad in a Chinese space suit floating among them was a good deal easier to identify.

And in a way, none of it even mattered. The scientists and political leaders of both countries knew exactly where Star Wormwood was located: above the expanding hole in earth's ozone layer. It was sending something down from there, and it was not Flowers by Wire.

Missiles came next. Star Wormwood jiggled easily out of their way and then returned to its place over the hole.

On the Pulsifers' satellite-assisted TV, more dead people got up and walked, but now there was a crucial change. In the beginning the zombies had only bitten living people who got too close, but in the weeks before the Pulsifers' high-tech Sony started showing only broad bands of snow, the dead folks started trying to get close to the living folks.

They had, it seemed, decided they liked what they were biting.

The final effort to destroy the thing was made by the United States. The President approved an attempt to destroy Star Wormwood with a number of orbiting nukes, stalwartly ignoring his previous statements that America had never put atomic SDI weapons in orbit and never would. Everyone else ignored them, as well. Perhaps they were too busy praying for success.

It was a good idea, but not, unfortunately, a workable one. Not a single missile from a single SDI orbiter fired. This was a total of twenty-four flat-out failures.

So much for modern technology.

*

And then, after all these shocks on earth and in heaven, there was the business of the one little graveyard right here on Jenny. But even that didn't seem to count much for Maddie because, after all, she had not been there. With the end of civilization now clearly at hand and the island cut off—thankfully cut off, in the opinion of the residents—from the rest of the world, old ways had reasserted themselves with unspoken but inarguable force. By then they all knew what was going to happen; it was only a question of when. That, and being ready when it did.

Women were excluded.

*

It was Bob Daggett, of course, who drew up the watch roster. That was only right, since Bob had been head selectman on Jenny for about a thousand years. The day after the death of the President (the thought of him and the first lady wandering witlessly through the streets of Washington, D.C., gnawing on human arms and legs like people eating chicken legs at a picnic was not mentioned; it was a little much to bear, even if the bastid and his blonde wife were

Democrats), Bob Daggett called the first men-only Town Meeting on Jenny since sometime before the Civil War. Maddie wasn't there, but she heard. Dave Eamons told her all she needed to know.

"You men all know the situation," Bob said. He looked as yellow as a man with jaundice, and people remembered his daughter, the one still living at home on the island, was only one of four. The other three were other places ... which was to say, on the mainland.

But hell, if it came down to that, they all had folks on the mainland.

"We got one boneyard here on Jenny," Bob continued, "and nothin ain't happened there yet, but that don't mean nothin will. Nothin ain't happened yet lots of places ... but it seems like once it starts, nothin turns to somethin pretty goddam quick."

There was a rumble of assent from the men gathered in the grammar-school gymnasium, which was the only place big enough to hold them. There were about seventy of them in all, ranging in age from Johnny Crane, who had just turned eighteen, to Bob's great-uncle Frank, who was eighty, had a glass eye, and chewed tobacco. There was no spittoon in the gym, of course, so Frank Daggett had brought an empty mayonnaise jar to spit his juice into. He did so now.

"Git down to where the cheese binds, Bobby," he said. "You ain't got no office to run for, and time's a-wastin."

There was another rumble of agreement, and Bob Daggett flushed. Somehow his great-uncle always managed to make him look like an ineffectual fool, and if there was anything in the world he hated worse than looking like an ineffectual fool, it was being called Bobby. He owned property, for Chrissake! And he supported the old fart—bought him his goddam chew!

But these were not things he could say; old Frank's eyes were like pieces of flint.

“Okay,” Bob said curtly. “Here it is. We want twelve men to a watch. I’m gonna set a roster in just a couple minutes. Four-hour shifts.”

“I can stand watch a helluva lot longer’n four hours!” Matt Arsenault spoke up, and Davey told Maddie that Bob said after the meeting that no welfare-slacker like Matt Arsenault would have had the nerve to speak up like that in a meeting of his betters if that old man hadn’t called him Bobby, like he was a kid instead of a man three months shy of his fiftieth birthday, in front of all the island men.

“Maybe you can n maybe you can’t,” Bob said, “but we got plenty of warm bodies, and nobody’s gonna fall asleep on sentry duty.”

“I ain’t gonna—”

“I didn’t say you,” Bob said, but the way his eyes rested on Matt Arsenault suggested that he might have meant him. “This is no kid’s game. Sit down and shut up.”

Matt Arsenault opened his mouth to say something more, then looked around at the other men—including old Frank Daggett—and wisely held his peace.

“If you got a rifle, bring it when it’s your trick,” Bob continued. He felt a little better with Arsenault more or less back in his place. “Unless it’s a twenty-two, that is. If you ain’t got somethin bigger’n that, come n get one here.”

“I didn’t know the school kep a supply of em handy,” Cal Partridge said, and there was a ripple of laughter.

“It don’t now, but it will,” Bob said, “because every man jack of you with more than one rifle bigger than a twenty-two is gonna bring it here.” He looked at John Wirley, the school principal. “Okay if we keep em in your office, John?”

Wirley nodded. Beside him, Reverend Johnson was drywashing his hands in a distraught way.

“Shit on that,” Orrin Campbell said. “I got a wife and two kids at home. Am I s’posed to leave em with nothin to defend themselves with if a bunch of cawpses come for an early Thanksgiving dinner while I’m on watch?”

“If we do our job at the boneyard, none will,” Bob replied stonily. “Some of you got handguns. We don’t want none of those. Figure out which women can shoot and which can’t and give em the pistols. We’ll put em together in bunches.”

“They can play Beano,” old Frank cackled, and Bob smiled, too. That was more like it, by the Christ.

“Nights, we’re gonna want trucks posted around so we got plenty of light.” He looked over at Sonny Dotson, who ran Island Amoco, the only gas station on Jenny. Sonny’s main business wasn’t gassing cars and trucks—shit, there was no place much on the island to drive, and you could get your go ten cents cheaper on the mainland—but filling up lobster boats and the motorboats he ran out of his jackleg marina in the summer. “You gonna supply the gas, Sonny?”

“Am I gonna get cash slips?”

“You’re gonna get your ass saved,” Bob said. “When things get back to normal—if they ever do—I guess you’ll get what you got coming.”

Sonny looked around, saw only hard eyes, and shrugged. He looked a bit sullen, but in truth he looked more confused than anything, Davey told Maddie the next day.

“Ain’t got n’more’n four hunnert gallons of gas,” he said. “Mostly diesel.”

“There’s five generators on the island,” Burt Dorfman said (when Burt spoke everyone listened; as the only Jew on the island, he was regarded as a creature both quixotic and fearsome, like an oracle that works about half the time). “They all run on diesel. I can rig lights if I have to.”

Low murmurs. If Burt said he could do it, he could. He was a Jewish electrician, and there was a feeling on the outer islands, unarticulated but powerful, that that was the best kind.

“We’re gonna light that graveyard up like a friggin stage,” Bob said.

Andy Kingsbury stood up. “I heard on the news that sometimes you can shoot one of them things in the head and it’ll stay down, and sometimes it won’t.”

“We’ve got chainsaws,” Bob said stonily, “and what won’t stay dead ... why, we can make sure it won’t move too far alive.”

And, except for making out the duty roster, that was pretty much that.

*

Six days and nights passed and the sentries posted around the little graveyard on Jenny were starting to feel a wee bit silly (“I dunno if I’m standin guard or pullin my pud,” Orrin Campbell said one afternoon as a dozen men stood around the cemetery gate, playing Liars’ Poker) when it happened ... and when it happened, it happened fast.

Dave told Maddie that he heard a sound like the wind wailing in the chimney on a gusty night, and then the gravestone marking the final resting place of Mr. and Mrs. Fournier’s boy Michael, who had died of leukemia at seventeen (bad go, that had been, him being their only child and them being such nice people and all), fell over. A moment later a shredded hand with a moss-caked Yarmouth Academy class ring on one finger rose out of the ground, shoving through the tough grass. The third finger had been torn off in the process.

The ground heaved like (like the belly of a pregnant woman getting ready to drop her load, Dave almost said, and hastily reconsidered) a big wave rolling into a close cove, and then the boy himself sat up, only he wasn’t anything you could really recognize, not after almost

two years in the ground. There were little splinters of wood sticking out of what was left of his face, Davey said, and pieces of shiny blue cloth in the draggles of his hair. “That was coffin-linin,” Davey told her, looking down at his restlessly twining hands. “I know that as well’s I know m’own name.” He paused, then added: “Thank Christ Mike’s dad dint have that trick.”

Maddie had nodded.

The men on guard, bullshit-scared as well as revolted, opened fire on the reanimated corpse of the former high-school chess champion and All-Star second baseman, tearing him to shreds. Other shots, fired in wild panic, blew chips off his marble gravestone, and it was just luck that the armed men had been loosely grouped together when the festivities commenced; if they had been divided up into two wings, as Bob Daggett had originally intended, they would very likely have slaughtered each other. As it was, not a single islander was hurt, although Bud Meechum found a rather suspicious-looking hole torn in the sleeve of his shirt the next day.

“Prob’ly wa’ant nothin but a blackberry thorn, just the same,” he said. “There’s an almighty lot of em out at that end of the island, you know.” No one would dispute that, but the black smudges around the hole made his frightened wife think that his shirt had been torn by a thorn with a pretty large caliber.

The Fournier kid fell back, most of him lying still, other parts of him still twitching ... but by then the whole graveyard seemed to be rippling, as if an earthquake were going on there—but only there, noplacelse.

Just about an hour before dusk, this had happened.

Burt Dorfman had rigged up a siren to a tractor battery, and Bob Daggett flipped the switch. Within twenty minutes, most of the men in town were at the island cemetery.

Goddam good thing, too, Dave Eamons said, because a few of the deaders almost got away. Old Frank Daggett, still two hours from the heart attack that would carry him off just as the excitement was dying down, organized the new men so they wouldn't shoot each other, either, and for the final ten minutes the Jenny boneyard sounded like Bull Run. By the end of the festivities, the powder smoke was so thick that some men choked on it. The sour smell of vomit was almost heavier than the smell of gunsmoke ... it was sharper, too, and lingered longer.

*

And still some of them wriggled and squirmed like snakes with broken backs—the fresher ones, for the most part.

“Burt,” Frank Daggett said. “You got them chainsaws?”

“I got em,” Burt said, and then a long, buzzing sound came out of his mouth, a sound like a cicada burrowing its way into tree bark, as he dry-heaved. He could not take his eyes from the squirming corpses, the overturned gravestones, the yawning pits from which the dead had come. “In the truck.”

“Gassed up?” Blue veins stood out on Frank's ancient, hairless skull.

“Yeah.” Burt's hand was over his mouth. “I'm sorry.”

“Work y'fuckin gut all you want,” Frank said briskly, “but toddle off n get them saws while you do. And you ... you ... you... you...”

The last “you” was his grandnephew Bob.

“I can't, Uncle Frank,” Bob said sickly. He looked around and saw five or six of his friends and neighbors lying crumpled in the tall grass. They had not died; they had swooned. Most of them had seen their own relatives rise out of the ground. Buck Harkness over there lying by an aspen tree had been part of the crossfire that had cut his late wife to ribbons; he had fainted after observing her decayed,

worm-riddled brains exploding from the back of her head in a grisly gray splash. “I can’t. I c—”

Frank’s hand, twisted with arthritis but as hard as stone, cracked across his face.

“You can and you will, chummy,” he said.

Bob went with the rest of the men.

Frank Daggett watched them grimly and rubbed his chest, which had begun to send cramped throbs of pain all the way down his left arm to the elbow. He was old but he wasn’t stupid, and he had a pretty good idea what those pains were, and what they meant.

*

“He told me he thought he was gonna have a blow-out, and he tapped his chest when he said it,” Dave went on, and placed his hand on the swell of muscle over his own left nipple to demonstrate.

Maddie nodded to show she understood.

“He said, ‘If anything happens to me before this mess is cleaned up, Davey, you and Burt and Orrin take over. Bobby’s a good boy, but I think he may have lost his guts for at least a little while ... and you know, sometimes when a man loses his guts, they don’t come back.’”

Maddie nodded again, thinking how grateful she was—how very, very grateful—that she was not a man.

“So then we did it,” Dave said. “We cleaned up the mess.”

Maddie nodded a third time, but this time she must have made some sound, because Dave told her he would stop if she couldn’t bear it; he would gladly stop.

“I can bear it,” she said quietly. “You might be surprised how much I can bear, Davey.” He looked at her quickly, curiously, when she said that, but Maddie had averted her eyes before he could see the secret in them.

*

Dave didn't know the secret because no one on Jenny knew. That was the way Maddie wanted it, and the way she intended to keep it. There had been a time when she had, perhaps, in the blue darkness of her shock, pretended to be coping. And then something happened that made her cope. Four days before the island cemetery vomited up its corpses, Maddie Pace was faced with a simple choice: cope or die.

She had been sitting in the living room, drinking a glass of the blueberry wine she and Jack had put up during August of the previous year—a time that now seemed impossibly distant—and doing something so trite it was laughable. She was Knitting Little Things. Booties, in fact. But what else was there to do? It seemed that no one would be going across the reach to the Wee Folks store at the Ellsworth Mall for quite some time.

Something had thumped against the window.

A bat, she thought, looking up. Her needles paused in her hands, though. It seemed that something bigger had moved jerkily out there in the windy dark. The oil lamp was turned up high and kicking too much reflection off the panes for her to be sure. She reached to turn it down and the thump came again. The panes shivered. She heard a little pattering of dried putty falling on the sash. Jack had been planning to reglaze all the windows this fall, she remembered, and then thought, Maybe that's what he came back for. That was crazy, he was on the bottom of the ocean, but ...

She sat with her head cocked to one side, her knitting now motionless in her hands. A little pink bootie. She had already made a blue set. All of a sudden it seemed she could hear so much. The

wind. The faint thunder of surf on Cricket Ledge. The house making little groaning sounds, like an elderly woman making herself comfortable in bed. The tick of the clock in the hallway.

“Jack?” she asked the silent night that was now no longer silent. “Is it you, dear?” Then the living-room window burst inward and what came through was not really Jack but a skeleton with a few mouldering strings of flesh hanging from it.

His compass was still around his neck. It had grown a beard of moss.

*

The wind flapped the curtains in a cloud above him as he sprawled, then got up on his hands and knees and looked at her from black sockets in which barnacles had grown.

He made grunting sounds. His fleshless mouth opened and the teeth chomped down. He was hungry ... but this time chicken noodle soup would not serve. Not even the kind that came in the can.

Gray stuff hung and swung beyond those dark barnacle-encrusted holes, and she realized she was looking at whatever remained of Jack’s brain. She sat where she was, frozen, as he got up and came toward her, leaving black kelpy tracks on the carpet, fingers reaching. He stank of salt and fathoms. His hands stretched. His teeth chomped mechanically up and down. Maddie saw he was wearing the remains of the black-and-red-checked shirt she had bought him at L. L. Bean’s last Christmas. It had cost the earth, but he had said again and again how warm it was, and look how well it had lasted, how much of it was left even after being under water all this time.

The cold cobwebs of bone which were all that remained of his fingers touched her throat before the baby kicked in her stomach—for the first time—and her shocked horror, which she had believed to

be calmness, fled, and she drove one of the knitting needles into the thing's eye.

Making horrid thick choking noises that sounded like the suck of a swill pump, he staggered backward, clawing at the needle, while the half-made pink bootie swung in front of the cavity where his nose had been. She watched as a sea slug squirmed from that nasal cavity and onto the bootie, leaving a trail of slime behind it.

Jack fell over the end table she'd gotten at a yard sale just after they had been married—she hadn't been able to make her mind up about it, had been in agonies about it, until Jack finally said either she was going to buy it for their living room or he was going to give the biddy running the sale twice what she was asking for the goddam thing and then bust it up into firewood with—

—with the—

He struck the floor and there was a brittle, cracking sound as his febrile, fragile form broke in two. The right hand tore the knitting needle, slimed with decaying brain tissue, from his eye-socket and tossed it aside. His top half crawled toward her. His teeth gnashed steadily together.

She thought he was trying to grin, and then the baby kicked again and she remembered how uncharacteristically tired and out of sorts he'd sounded at Mabel Hanratty's yard-sale that day: Buy it, Maddie, for Chrissake! I'm tired! Want to go home and get m'dinner! If you don't get a move on, I'll give the old bat twice what she wants and bust it up for firewood with my—

Cold, dank hand clutching her ankle; polluted teeth poised to bite. To kill her and kill the baby. She tore loose, leaving him with only her slipper, which he chewed on and then spat out.

When she came back from the entry, he was crawling mindlessly into the kitchen—at least the top half of him was—with the compass dragging on the tiles. He looked up at the sound of her, and there

seemed to be some idiot question in those black eye-sockets before she brought the ax whistling down, cleaving his skull as he had threatened to cleave the end table.

His head fell in two pieces, brains dribbling across the tile like spoiled oatmeal, brains that squirmed with slugs and gelatinous sea worms, brains that smelled like a woodchuck exploded with gassy decay in a high-summer meadow.

Still his hands clashed and clattered on the kitchen tiles, making a sound like beetles.

She chopped ... chopped ... chopped.

At last there was no more movement.

A sharp pain rippled across her midsection and for a moment she was gripped by terrible panic: Is it a miscarriage? Am I going to have a miscarriage? But the pain left and the baby kicked again, more strongly than before.

She went back into the living room, carrying an ax that now smelled like tripe.

His legs had somehow managed to stand.

“Jack, I loved you so much,” she said, “but this isn’t you.” She brought the ax down in a whistling arc that split him at the pelvis, sliced the carpet, and drove deep into the solid oak floor beneath.

The legs separated, trembled wildly for almost five minutes, and then began to grow quiet. At last even the toes stopped twitching.

She carried him down to the cellar piece by piece, wearing her oven gloves and wrapping each piece with the insulating blankets Jack had kept in the shed and which she had never thrown away—he and the crew threw them over the pots on cold days so the lobsters wouldn’t freeze.

Once a severed hand closed upon her wrist. She stood still and waited, her heart drumming heavily in her chest, and at last it loosened again. And that was the end of it. The end of him.

There was an unused cistern, polluted, below the house—Jack had been meaning to fill it in. Maddie slid the heavy concrete cover aside so that its shadow lay on the earthen floor like a partial eclipse and then threw the pieces of him down, listening to the splashes. When everything was gone, she worked the heavy cover back into place.

“Rest in peace,” she whispered, and an interior voice whispered back that her husband was resting in pieces, and then she began to cry, and her cries turned to hysterical shrieks, and she pulled at her hair and tore at her breasts until they were bloody, and she thought, I am insane, this is what it’s like to be insa—

But before the thought could be completed, she had fallen down in a faint, and the faint became a deep sleep, and the next morning she felt all right.

She would never tell, though.

Never.

*

“I can bear it,” she told Dave Eamons again, thrusting aside the image of the knitting needle with the bootie swinging from the end of it jutting out of the kelp-slimed eye-socket of the thing which had once been her husband, and co-creator of the child in her womb. “Really.”

So he told her, perhaps because he had to tell someone or go mad, but he glossed over the worst parts. He told her that they had chainsawed the corpses that absolutely refused to return to the land of the dead, but he did not tell her that some parts had continued to squirm—hands with no arms attached to them clutching mindlessly, feet divorced from their legs digging at the bullet-chewed earth of the

graveyard as if trying to run away—and that these parts had been doused with diesel fuel and set afire. Maddie did not have to be told this part. She had seen the pyre from the house.

Later, Gennesault Island's one firetruck had turned its hose on the dying blaze, although there wasn't much chance of the fire spreading, with a brisk easterly blowing the sparks off Jenny's seaward edge. When there was nothing left but a stinking, tallowy lump (and still there were occasional bulges in this mass, like twitches in a tired muscle), Matt Arsenault fired up his old D-9 Caterpillar—above the nicked steel blade and under his faded pillowtick engineer's cap, Matt's face had been as white as cottage cheese—and plowed the whole hellacious mess under.

*

The moon was coming up when Frank took Bob Daggett, Dave Eamons, and Cal Partridge aside. It was Dave he spoke to.

"I knew it was coming, and here it is," he said.

"What are you talking about, Unc?" Bob asked.

"My heart," Frank said. "Goddam thing has thrown a rod."

"Now, Uncle Frank—"

"Never mind Uncle Frank this n Uncle Frank that," the old man said. "I ain't got time to listen to you play fiddlyfuck on the mouth-organ. Seen half my friends go the same way. It ain't no day at the races, but it could be worse; beats hell out of getting whacked with the cancer-stick.

"But now there's this other sorry business to mind, and all I got to say on that subject is, when I go down I intend to stay down. Cal, stick that rifle of yours in my left ear. Dave, when I raise my left arm, you sock yours into my armpit. And Bobby, you put yours right over

my heart. I'm gonna say the Lord's Prayer, and when I hit amen, you three fellows are gonna pull your triggers at the same time."

"Uncle Frank—" Bob managed. He was reeling on his heels.

"I told you not to start in on that," Frank said. "And don't you dare faint on me, you friggin pantywaist. Now get your country butt over here."

Bob did.

Frank looked around at the three men, their faces as white as Matt Arsenault's had been when he drove the 'dozer over men and women he had known since he was a kid in short pants and Buster Browns.

"Don't you boys frig this up," Frank said. He was speaking to all of them, but his eye might have been particularly trained on his grandnephew. "If you feel like maybe you're gonna backslide, just remember I'd'a done the same for any of you."

"Quit with the speech," Bob said hoarsely. "I love you, Uncle Frank."

"You ain't the man your father was, Bobby Daggett, but I love you, too," Frank said calmly, and then, with a cry of pain, he threw his left hand up over his head like a guy in New York who has to have a cab in a rip of a hurry, and started in with his last prayer. "Our Father who art in heaven—Christ, that hurts!—hallow'd be Thy name—oh, son of a gun!—Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it ... as it ..."

Frank's upraised left arm was wavering wildly now. Dave Eamons, with his rifle socked into the old geezer's armpit, watched it as carefully as a logger would watch a big tree that looked like it meant to do evil and fall the wrong way. Every man on the island was watching now. Big beads of sweat had formed on the old man's pallid face. His lips had pulled back from the even, yellowy-white of

his Roebuckers, and Dave had been able to smell the Polident on his breath.

“... as it is in heaven!” the old man jerked out. “Lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil oh shit on it forever and ever AMEN!”

All three of them fired, and both Cal Partridge and Bob Daggett fainted, but Frank never did try to get up and walk.

Frank Daggett had meant to stay dead, and that was just what he did.

*

Once Dave started that story he had to go on with it, and so he cursed himself for ever starting. He'd been right the first time; it was no story for a pregnant woman.

But Maddie had kissed him and told him she thought he had done wonderfully, and that Frank Daggett had done wonderfully, too. Dave went out feeling a little dazed, as if he had just been kissed on the cheek by a woman he had never met before.

In a very real sense, that was true.

She watched him go down the path to the dirt track that was one of Jenny's two roads and turn left. He was weaving a little in the moonlight, weaving with tiredness, she thought, but reeling with shock, as well. Her heart went out to him ... to all of them. She had wanted to tell Dave she loved him and kiss him squarely on the mouth instead of just skimming his cheek with her lips, but he might have taken the wrong meaning from something like that, even though he was bone-weary and she was almost five months pregnant.

But she did love him, loved all of them, because they had gone through hell in order to make this little lick of land forty miles out in

the Atlantic safe for her.

And safe for her baby.

“It will be a home delivery,” she said softly as Dave went out of sight behind the dark hulk of the Pulsifers’ satellite dish. Her eyes rose to the moon. “It will be a home delivery ... and it will be fine.”



HOTEL AT THE END OF THE ROAD

Stephen King

“Faster !” Tommy Riviera said. “Faster !”

“I’m hitting 85 now,” Kelso Black said.

“The cops are right behind us,” Riviera said. “Put it up to 90.” He leaned out the window. Behind the fleeing car was a police car, with siren wailing and red light flashing.

“I’m hitting the side road ahead,” Black grunted. He turned the wheel and the car turned into the winding road-spraying gravel.

The uniformed policeman scratched his head. “Where did they go ?”.

His partner frowned. “I don’t know. They just - disappeared .”

“Look,” Black said. “Lights ahead.”

“It’s a hotel,” Riviera said wonderingly. “Out on this wagon track, a hotel ! If that don’t beat all ! The police’ll never look for us there.”

Black, unheeding of the car’s tires, stamped on the brake. Riviera reached into the back seat and got a black bag. They walked in.

The hotel looked just like a scene out of the early 1900s.

Riviera rang the bell impatiently. An old man shuffled out. “We want a room,” Black said.

The man stared at them silently.

“A room,” Black repeated.

The man turned around to go back into his office.

“Look, old man,” Tommy Riviera said. “I don’t take that from anybody.” He pulled out his thirty-eight. “Now you give us a room.”

The man looked ready to keep going, but at last he said : “Room five. End of the hall.”

He gave them no register to sign, so they went up. The room was barren except for an iron double bed, a cracked mirror, and soiled wallpaper.

“Aah, what a crummy joint,” Black said in disgust. “I’ll bet there’s enough cockroaches here to fill a five-gallon can.”

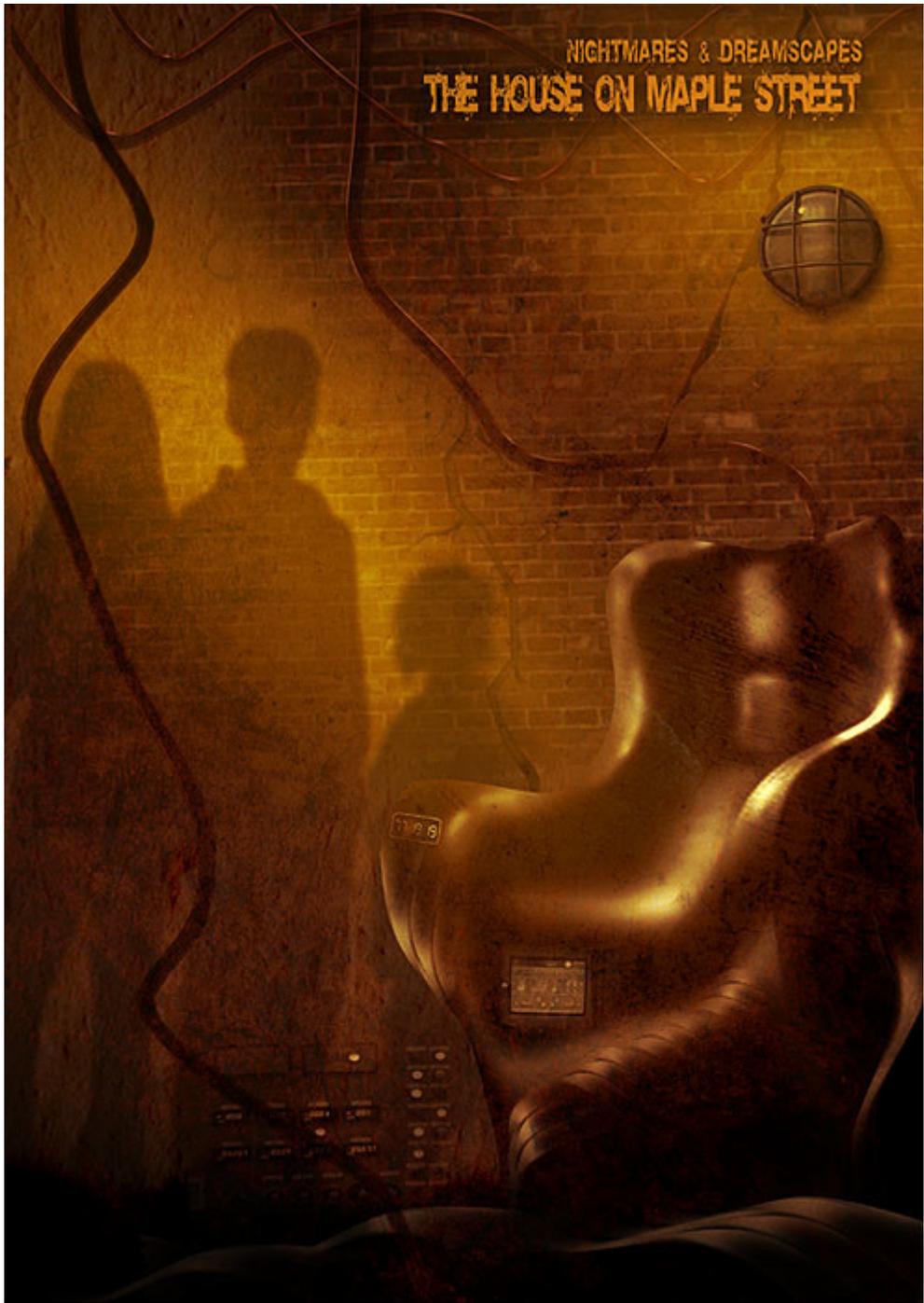
The next morning when Riviera woke up, he couldn’t get out of bed. He couldn’t move a muscle. He was paralyzed. Just then the old man came into view. He had a needle wich he put into Black’s arms.

“So you’re awake,” he said. “My, my, you two are the first additions to my museum in twenty-five years. But you’ll be well preserved. And you won’t die.

“You’ll go with the rest of my collection of living museum. Nice specimens.”

Tommy Riviera couldn’t even express his horror.

NIGHTMARES & DREAMSCAPES
THE HOUSE ON MAPLE STREET



THE HOUSE ON MAPLE STREET

Stephen King

Although she was only five, and the youngest of the Bradbury children, Melissa had very sharp eyes and it wasn't really surprising that she was the first to discover something strange had happened to the house on Maple Street while the Bradbury family was summering in England.

She ran and found her older brother, Brian, and told him something was wrong upstairs, on the third floor. She said she would show him, but not until he swore not to tell anyone what she had found. Brian swore, knowing it was their stepfather Lissa was afraid of; Daddy Lew didn't like it when any of the Bradbury children "got up to foolishness" (that was how he always put it), and he had decided that Melissa was the prime offender in that area. Lissa, who was stupid no more than she was blind, was aware of Lew's prejudices, and had become wary of them. In fact, all of the Bradbury children had become rather wary of their mother's second husband.

It would probably turn out to be nothing, anyway, but Brian was delighted to be back home and willing enough to humor his baby sister (Brian was two full years her senior), at least for awhile; he followed her down the third-floor hallway without so much as a murmur of argument, and he only pulled her braids—he called these braid-pulls "emergency stops"—once.

They had to tiptoe past Lew's study, which was the only finished-off room up here, because Lew was inside, unpacking his notebooks and papers and muttering in an ill-tempered way. Brian's thoughts had actually turned to what might be on TV tonight—he was looking forward to a pig-out on good old American cable after three months of BBC and ITV—when they reached the end of the hall.

What he saw beyond the tip of his little sister's pointing finger drove all thoughts of television from Brian Bradbury's mind.

"Now swear again!" Lissa whispered. "Never tell anyone, Daddy Lew or anyone, or hope to die!"

“Hope to die,” Brian agreed, still staring, and it was a half-hour before he told his big sister, Laurie, who was unpacking in her room. Laurie was possessive of her room as only an eleven-year-old girl can be, and she gave Brian the very dickens for coming in without knocking, even though she was completely dressed.

“Sorry,” Brian said, “but I gotta show you something. It’s very weird.”

“Where?” She went on putting clothes in her drawers as if she didn’t care, as if there was nothing any dopey little seven-year-old could tell her which would be of the slightest interest to her, but when it came to eyes, Brian’s weren’t exactly dull. He could tell when Laurie was interested, and she was interested now.

“Upstairs. Third floor. End of the hall past Daddy Lew’s study.”

Laurie’s nose wrinkled as it always did when Brian or Lissa called him that. She and Trent remembered their real father, and they didn’t like his replacement at all. They made it their business to call him Just Plain Lew. That Lewis Evans clearly did not like this—found it vaguely impertinent, in fact—simply added to Laurie and Trent’s unspoken but powerful conviction that it was the right way to address the man their mother (uck!) slept with these days.

“I don’t want to go up there,” Laurie said. “He’s been in a pissy mood ever since we got back. Trent says he’ll stay that way until school starts and he can settle back into his rut again.”

“His door’s shut. We can be quiet. Lissa n me went up and he didn’t even know we were there.”

“Lissa and I.”

“Yeah. Us. Anyway, it’s safe. The door’s shut and he’s talking to himself like he does when he’s really into something.”

“I hate it when he does that,” Laurie said darkly. “Our real father never talked to himself, and he didn’t use to lock himself in a room

by himself, either.”

“Well, I don’t think he’s locked in,” Brian said, “but if you’re really worried about him coming out, take an empty suitcase. We’ll pretend like we’re putting it in the closet where we keep them, if he comes out.”

“What is this amazing thing?” Laurie demanded, putting her fists on her hips.

“I’ll show you,” Brian said earnestly, “but you have to swear on Mom’s name and hope to die if you tell anyone.” He paused, thinking, for a moment, and then added: “You specially can’t tell Lissa, because I swore to her.”

Laurie’s ears were finally all the way up. It was probably a big nothing, but she was tired of putting clothes away. It was really amazing how much junk a person could accumulate in just three months. “Okay, I swear.”

They took along two empty suitcases, one for each of them, but their precautions proved unnecessary; their stepfather never came out of his study. It was probably just as well; he had worked up a grand head of steam, from the sound. The two children could hear him stamping about, muttering, opening drawers, slamming them shut again. A familiar odor seeped out from under the door—to Laurie it smelled like smouldering athletic socks. Lew was smoking his pipe.

She stuck her tongue out, crossed her eyes, and twiddled her fingers in her ears as they tiptoed by.

But a moment later, when she looked at the place Lissa had pointed out to Brian and which Brian now pointed out to her, she forgot Lew just as completely as Brian had forgotten about all the wonderful things he could watch on TV that night.

“What is it?” she whispered to Brian. “My gosh, what does it mean?”

“I dunno,” Brian said, “but just remember, you swore on Mom’s name, Laurie.”

“Yeah, yeah, but—”

“Say it again!” Brian didn’t like the look in her eyes. It was a telling look, and he felt she really needed a little reinforcement.

“Yeah, yeah, on Mom’s name,” she said perfunctorily, “but, Brian, jeezly crow—”

“And hope to die, don’t forget that part.”

“Oh, Brian, you are such a cheeser!”

“Never mind, just say you hope to die!”

“Hope to die, hope to die, okay?” Laurie said. “Why do you have to be such a cheeser, Bri?”

“Dunno,” he said, smirking in that way she absolutely hated, “just lucky, I guess.”

She could have strangled him ... but a promise was a promise, especially one given on the name of your one and only mother, so Laurie held on for over one full hour before getting Trent and showing him. She made him swear, too, and her confidence that Trent would keep his promise not to tell was perfectly justified. He was almost fourteen, and as the oldest, he had no one to tell ... except a grownup. Since their mother had taken to her bed with a migraine, that left only Lew, and that was the same as no one at all.

The two oldest Bradbury children hadn’t needed to bring up empty suitcases as camouflage this time; their stepfather was downstairs, watching some British fellow lecture on the Normans and Saxons (the Normans and Saxons were Lew’s specialty at the college) on the VCR, and enjoying his favorite afternoon snack—a glass of milk and a ketchup sandwich.

Trent stood at the end of the hall, looking at what the other children had looked at before him. He stood there for a long time.

“What is it, Trent?” Laurie finally asked. It never crossed her mind that Trent wouldn’t know. Trent knew everything. So she watched, almost incredulously, as he slowly shook his head.

“I don’t know,” he said, peering into the crack. “Some kind of metal, I think. Wish I’d brought a flashlight.” He reached into the crack and tapped. Laurie felt a vague sense of disquiet at this, and was relieved when Trent pulled his finger back. “Yeah, it’s metal.”

“Should it be in there?” Laurie asked. “I mean, was it? Before?”

“No,” Trent said. “I remember when they replastered. That was just after Mom married him. There wasn’t anything in there then but laths.”

“What are they?”

“Narrow boards,” he said. “They go between the plaster and the outside wall of the house.” Trent reached into the crack in the wall and once again touched the metal which showed dull white in there. The crack was about four inches long and half an inch across at its widest point. “They put in insulation, too,” he said, frowning thoughtfully and then shoving his hands into the back pockets of his wash-faded jeans. “I remember. Pink, billowy stuff that looked like cotton candy.”

“Where is it, then? I don’t see any pink stuff.”

“Me either,” Trent said. “But they did put it in. I remember.” His eyes traced the four-inch length of the crack. “That metal in the wall is something new. I wonder how much of it there is, and how far it goes. Is it just up here on the third floor, or ...”

“Or what?” Laurie looked at him with big round eyes. She had begun to be a little frightened.

“Or is it all over the house,” Trent finished thoughtfully.

*

After school the next afternoon, Trent called a meeting of all four Bradbury children. It got off to a somewhat bumpy start, with Lissa accusing Brian of breaking what she called “your solemn swear” and Brian, who was deeply embarrassed, accusing Laurie of putting their mother’s soul in dire jeopardy by telling Trent. Although he wasn’t very clear on exactly what a soul was (the Bradburys were Unitarians), he seemed quite sure that Laurie had condemned Mother’s to hell.

“Well,” Laurie said, “you’ll have to take some of the blame, Brian. I mean, you were the one who brought Mother into it. You should have had me swear on Lew’s name. He could go to hell.”

Lissa, who was young enough and kind-hearted enough not to wish anyone in hell, was so distressed by this line of discourse that she began to cry.

“Hush, all of you,” Trent said, and hugged Lissa until she had regained most of her composure. “What’s done is done, and I happen to think it all worked out for the best.”

“You do?” Brian asked. If Trent said a thing was good, Brian would have died defending it, that went without saying, but Laurie had sworn on Mom’s name.

“Something this weird needs to be investigated, and if we waste a lot of time arguing over who was right or wrong to break their promise, we’ll never get it done.”

Trent glanced pointedly up at the clock on the wall of his room, where they had gathered. It was twenty after three. He really didn’t have to say any more. Their mother had been up this morning to get Lew his breakfast—two three-minute eggs with whole-wheat toast and marmalade was one of his many daily requirements—but

afterward she had gone back to bed, and there she had remained. She suffered from dreadful headaches, migraines that sometimes spent two or even three days snarling and clawing at her defenseless (and often bewildered) brain before decamping for a month or so.

She would not be apt to see them on the third floor and wonder what they were up to, but “Daddy Lew” was a different kettle of fish altogether. With his study just down the hall from the strange crack, they could count on avoiding his notice—and his curiosity—only if they conducted their investigations while he was away, and that was what Trent’s pointed glance at the clock had meant.

The family had returned to the States a full ten days before Lew was scheduled to begin teaching classes again, but he could no more stay away from the University once he was back within ten miles of it than a fish could live out of water. He had left shortly after noon, with a briefcase crammed full of papers he had collected at various spots of historical interest in England. He said he was going up to file these papers away. Trent thought that meant he’d cram them into one of his desk drawers, then lock his office and go down to the History Department’s Faculty Lounge. There he would drink coffee and gossip with his buddies ... except, Trent had discovered, when you were a college teacher, people thought you were dumb if you had buddies. You were supposed to say they were your colleagues. So he was away, and that was good, but he might be back at any time between now and five, and that was bad. Still, they had some time, and Trent was determined they weren’t going to spend it squabbling about who swore what to who.

“Listen to me, you guys,” he said, and was gratified to see that they actually were listening, their differences and recriminations forgotten in the excitement of an investigation. They had also been caught by Trent’s inability to explain what Lissa had found. All three of them shared, at least to some extent, Brian’s simple faith in Trent—if Trent was puzzled by something, if Trent thought that something was strange and just possibly amazing, they all thought so.

Laurie spoke for all of them when she said: “Just tell us what to do, Trent—we’ll do it.”

“Okay,” Trent said. “We’ll need some things.” He took a deep breath and began explaining what they were.

*

Once they were convened around the crack at the end of the third-floor hallway, Trent held Lissa up so she could shine the beam of a small flashlight—it was the one their mother used to inspect their ears, eyes, and noses when they weren’t feeling well—into the crack. They could all see the metal; it wasn’t shiny enough to throw back a clear reflection of the beam, but it shone silkily just the same. Steel, was Trent’s opinion—steel, or some sort of alloy.

“What’s an alloy, Trent?” Brian asked.

Trent shook his head. He didn’t know exactly. He turned to Laurie and asked her to give him the drill.

Brian and Lissa exchanged an uneasy glance as Laurie passed it over. It had come from the basement workshop, and the basement was the one remaining place in the house which was their real father’s. Daddy Lew hadn’t been down there a dozen times since he had married Catherine Bradbury. The smaller children knew that as well as Trent and Laurie. They weren’t afraid Daddy Lew would notice someone had been using the drill; it was the holes in the wall outside his study they were worried about. Neither one of them said this out loud, but Trent read it on their troubled faces.

“Look,” Trent said, holding the drill out so they could get a good look. “This is what they call a needle-point drillbit. See how tiny it is? And since we’re only going to drill behind the pictures, I don’t think we have to worry.”

There were about a dozen framed prints along the third-floor hallway, half of them beyond the study door, on the way to the closet at the

end where the suitcases were stored. Most of these were very old (and mostly uninteresting) views of Titusville, where the Bradburys lived.

“He doesn’t even look at them, let alone behind them,” Laurie agreed.

Brian touched the tip of the drill with one finger, then nodded. Lissa watched, then copied both the touch and the nod. If Laurie said something was okay, it probably was; if Trent said so, it almost certainly was; if they both said so, there could be no question.

Laurie took down the picture which hung closest to the small crack in the plaster and gave it to Brian. Trent drilled. They stood watching him in a tight little circle of three, like infielders encouraging their pitcher at a particularly tense moment of the game.

The drillbit went easily into the wall, and the hole it made was every bit as tiny as promised. The darker square of wallpaper which had been revealed when Laurie took the print off its hook was also encouraging. It suggested that no one had bothered taking the dark line engraving of the Titusville Public Library off its hook for a very long time.

After a dozen turns of the drill’s handle, Trent stopped and reversed, pulling the bit free.

“Why’d you quit?” Brian asked.

“Hit something hard.”

“More metal?” Lissa asked.

“I think so. Sure wasn’t wood. Let’s see.” He shone the light in and cocked his head this way and that before shaking it decisively. “My head’s too big. Let’s boost Lissa.”

Laurie and Trent lifted her up and Brian handed her the Pen Lite. Lissa squinted for a time, then said, “Just like in the crack I found.”

“Okay,” Trent said. “Next picture.”

The drill hit metal behind the second, and the third, as well. Behind the fourth—by this time they were quite close to the door of Lew’s study—it went all the way in before Trent pulled it out. This time when she was boosted up, Lissa told them she saw “the pink stuff.”

“Yeah, the insulation I told you about,” Trent said to Laurie. “Let’s try the other side of the hall.”

They had to drill behind four pictures on the east side of the corridor before they struck first wood-lath and then insulation behind the plaster ... and as they were re-hanging the last picture, they heard the out-of-tune snarl of Lew’s elderly Porsche turning into the driveway.

Brian, who had been in charge of hanging this picture—he could just reach the hook on tip-toe—dropped it. Laurie reached out and grabbed it by the frame on the way down. A moment later she found herself shaking so badly she had to hand the picture to Trent, or she would have dropped it herself.

“You hang it,” she said, turning a stricken face to her older brother. “I would have dropped it if I’d been thinking about what I was doing. I really would.”

Trent hung the picture, which showed horse-drawn carriages clopping through City Park, and saw it was hanging slightly askew. He reached out to adjust it, then pulled back just before his fingers touched the frame. His sisters and his brother thought he was something like a god; Trent himself was smart enough to know he was only a kid. But even a kid—assuming he was a kid with half a brain—knew that when things like this started to go bad, you ought to leave them alone. If he messed with it anymore, this picture would

fall for sure, spraying the floor with broken glass, and somehow Trent knew it.

“Go!” he whispered. “Downstairs! TV room!”

The back door slammed downstairs as Lew came in.

“But it’s not straight!” Lissa protested. “Trent, it’s not—”

“Never mind!” Laurie said. “Do what Trent says!”

Trent and Laurie looked at each other, wide-eyed. If Lew went into the kitchen to fix himself a bite to tide himself over until supper, all still might be well. If he didn’t, he would meet Lissa and Brian on the stairs. One look at them and he’d know something was going on. The two younger Bradbury children were old enough to close their mouths, but not their faces.

Brian and Lissa went fast.

Trent and Laurie came behind, more slowly, listening. There was a moment of almost unbearable suspense when the only sounds were the little kids’ footsteps on the stairs, and then Lew bawled up at them from the kitchen: “KEEP IT DOWN, CAN’T YOU? YOUR MOTHER’S TAKING A NAP!”

And if that doesn’t wake her up, Laurie thought, nothing will.

*

Late that night, as Trent was drowsing off to sleep, Laurie opened the door of his room, came in, and sat down beside him on the bed.

“You don’t like him, but that’s not all,” she said.

“Who-wha?” Trent asked, peeling a cautious eyelid.

“Lew,” she said quietly. “You know who I mean, Trent.”

“Yeah,” he said, giving up. “And you’re right. I don’t like him.”

“You’re scared of him, too, aren’t you?”

After a long, long moment, Trent said: “Yeah. A little.”

“Just a little?”

“Maybe a little more than a little,” Trent said. He winked at her, hoping for a smile, but Laurie only looked at him, and Trent gave up. She wasn’t going to be diverted, at least not tonight.

“Why? Do you think he might hurt us?”

Lew shouted at them a lot, but he had never put his hands on them. No, Laurie suddenly remembered, that wasn’t quite true. One time when Brian had walked into his study without knocking, Lew had given him a spanking. A hard one. Brian had tried not to cry, but in the end he had. And Mom had cried, too, although she hadn’t tried to stop the spanking. But she must have said something to him later on, because Laurie had heard Lew shouting at her.

Still, it had been a spanking, not child abuse, and Brian could be an insufferable cheese-dog when he put his mind to it.

Had he been putting his mind to it that night? Laurie wondered now. Or had Lew spanked her brother and made him cry over something which had only been an honest little kid’s mistake? She didn’t know, and had a sudden and unwelcome insight, the sort of thought that made her think Peter Pan had had the right idea about never wanting to grow up: she wasn’t sure she wanted to know. One thing she did know: who the real cheese-dog around here was.

She realized Trent hadn’t answered her question, and gave him a poke. “Cat got your tongue?”

“Just thinking,” he said. “It’s a toughie, you know?”

“Yes,” she said soberly. “I know.”

This time she let him think.

“Nah,” he said at last, and laced his hands together behind his head. “I don’t think so, Sprat.” She hated to be called that, but tonight she decided to let it go. She couldn’t remember Trent ever speaking to her this carefully and seriously. “I don’t think he would ... but I think he could.” He got up on one elbow and looked at her even more seriously. “But I think he’s hurting Mom, and I think it gets a little worse for her every day.”

“She’s sorry, isn’t she?” Laurie asked. Suddenly she felt like crying. Why were adults so stupid sometimes about stuff kids could see right away? It made you want to kick them. “She never wanted to go to England in the first place ... and there’s the way he shouts at her sometimes ...”

“Don’t forget the headaches,” Trent said flatly. “The ones he says she talks herself into. Yeah, she’s sorry, all right.”

“Would she ever ... you know ...”

“Divorce him?”

“Yes,” Laurie said, relieved. She wasn’t sure she could have brought the word out herself, and had she realized how much she was her mother’s daughter in that regard, she could have answered her own question.

“No,” Trent said. “Not Mom.”

“Then there’s nothing we can do,” Laurie sighed.

Trent said in a voice so soft she almost couldn’t hear it: “Oh yeah?”

*

During the next week and a half, they drilled other small holes around the house when there was no one around to see them: holes behind posters in their various rooms, behind the refrigerator in the

pantry (Brian was able to squeeze in and just had room to use the drill), in the downstairs closets. Trent even drilled one in a dining-room wall, high up in one corner where the shadows never quite left. He stood on top of the step-ladder while Laurie held it steady.

There was no metal anywhere. Just lath.

The children forgot for a little while.

*

One day about a month later, after Lew had gone back to teaching full-time, Brian came to Trent and told him there was another crack in the plaster on the third floor, and that he could see more metal behind it. Trent and Lissa came at once. Laurie was still in school, at band practice.

As on the occasion of the first crack, their mother was lying down with a headache. Lew's temper had improved once he was back at school (as Trent and Laurie had been sure it would), but he'd had a crackerjack argument with their mother the night before, about a party he wanted to have for fellow faculty members in the History Department. If there was anything the former Mrs. Bradbury hated and feared, it was playing hostess at faculty parties. Lew had insisted on this one, however, and she had finally given in. Now she was lying in the shadowy bedroom with a damp towel over her eyes and a bottle of Fiorinal on the night-table while Lew was presumably passing around invitations in the Faculty Lounge and clapping his colleagues on the back.

The new crack was on the west side of the hallway, between the study door and the stairwell.

"You sure you saw metal in there?" Trent asked. "We checked this side, Bri."

"Look for yourself," Brian said, and Trent did. There was no need of a flashlight; this crack was wider, and there was no question about the

metal at the bottom of it.

After a long look, Trent told them he had to go to the hardware store, right away.

“Why?” Lissa asked.

“I want to get some plaster. I don’t want him to see that crack.” He hesitated, then added: “And I especially don’t want him to see the metal inside it.”

Lissa frowned at him. “Why not, Trent?”

But Trent didn’t exactly know. At least, not yet.

*

They started drilling again, and this time they found metal behind all the walls on the third floor, including Lew’s study. Trent snuck in there one afternoon with the drill while Lew was at the college and their mother was out shopping for the upcoming faculty party.

The former Mrs. Bradbury looked very pale and drawn these days—even Lissa had noticed—but when any of the children asked her if she was okay, she always flashed a troubling, over-bright smile and told them never better, in the pink, rolling in clover. Laurie, who could be blunt, told her she looked too thin. Oh no, her mother responded, Lew says I was turning into a blob over in England—all those rich teas. She was just trying to get back into fighting trim, that was all.

Laurie knew better, but not even Laurie was blunt enough to call her mother a liar to her face. If all four of them had come to her at once—ganged up on her, so to speak—they might have gotten a different story. But not even Trent thought of doing that.

One of Lew’s advanced degrees was hanging on the wall over his desk in a frame. While the other children clustered outside the door, nearly vomiting with terror, Trent removed the framed degree from its

hook, laid it on the desk, and drilled a pinhole in the center of the square where it had been. Two inches in, the drill hit metal.

Trent carefully rehung the degree—making very sure it wasn't crooked—and came back out.

Lissa burst into tears of relief, and Brian quickly joined her; he looked disgusted but seemed unable to help himself. Laurie had to struggle very hard against her own tears.

They drilled holes at intervals along the stairs to the second floor and found metal behind these walls, too. It continued roughly halfway down the second-floor hallway as it proceeded toward the front of the house. There was metal behind the walls of Brian's room, but behind only one wall of Laurie's.

"It hasn't finished growing in here," Laurie said darkly.

Trent looked at her, surprised. "Huh?"

Before she could reply, Brian had a brainstorm.

"Try the floor, Trent!" he said. "See if it's there, too."

Trent thought it over, shrugged, and drilled into the floor of Laurie's room. The drill went in all the way with no resistance, but when he peeled back the rug at the foot of his own bed and tried there, he soon encountered solid steel ... or solid whatever-it-was.

Then, at Lissa's insistence, he stood on a stool and drilled up into the ceiling, eyes slitted against the plaster-dust that sifted down into his face.

"Boink," he said after a few moments. "More metal. Let's quit for the day."

Laurie was the only one who saw how deeply troubled Trent looked.

*

That night after lights-out, it was Trent who came to Laurie's room, and Laurie didn't even pretend to be sleepy. The truth was, neither of them had been sleeping very well for the last couple of weeks.

"What did you mean?" Trent whispered, sitting down beside her.

"About what?" Laurie asked, getting up on one elbow.

"You said it hadn't finished growing in your room. What did you mean?"

"Come on, Trent—you're not dumb."

"No, I'm not," he agreed without conceit. "Maybe I just want to hear you say it, Sprat."

"If you call me that, you never will."

"Okay. Laurie, Laurie, Laurie. You satisfied?"

"Yes. That stuffs growing all over the house." She paused. "No, that's not right. It's growing under the house."

"That's not right, either."

Laurie thought about it, then sighed. "Okay," she said. "It's growing in the house. It's stealing the house. Is that good enough, Mr. Smarty?"

"Stealing the house ..." Trent sat quietly beside her on the bed, looking at her poster of Chrissie Hynde and seeming to taste the phrase she had used. At last he nodded and flashed the smile she loved. "Yes—that's good enough."

"Whatever you call it, it acts like it's alive."

Trent nodded. He had already thought of this. He had no idea how metal could be alive, but he was damned if he saw any way around her conclusion, at least for the present.

“But that isn’t the worst.”

“What is?”

“It’s sneaking.” Her eyes, fixed solemnly on his, were big and frightened. “That’s the part I really don’t like. I don’t know what started it or what it means, and I don’t really care. But it’s sneaking.”

She ran her fingers into her heavy blonde hair and pushed it back from her temples. It was a fretful, unconscious gesture that reminded Trent achingly of his dad, whose hair had been that exact same shade.

“I feel like something’s going to happen, Trent, only I don’t know what, and it’s like being in a nightmare you can’t get all the way out of. Does it feel like that to you sometimes?”

“A little, yeah. But I know something’s going to happen. I might even know what.”

She bolted to a sitting position and grabbed his hands. “You know? What? What is it?”

“I can’t be sure,” Trent said, getting up. “I think I know, but I’m not ready to say what I think yet. I have to do some more looking.”

“If we drill many more holes, the house is apt to fall down!”

“I didn’t say drilling, I said looking.”

“Looking for what?”

“For something that isn’t here yet—that hasn’t grown yet. But when it does, I don’t think it will be able to hide.”

“Tell me, Trent!”

“Not yet,” he said, and planted a small, quick kiss on her cheek.

“Besides—curiosity killed the Sprat.”

“I hate you!” she cried in a low voice, and flopped back down with the sheet over her head. But she felt better for having talked with Trent, and slept better than she had for a week.

*

Trent found what he was looking for two days before the big party. As the oldest, he perhaps should have noticed that his mother had begun to look alarmingly unhealthy, her skin drawn shiny over her cheekbones, her complexion so pale it had taken on an ugly yellow underlight. He should have noticed how often she was rubbing at her temples, although she denied—almost in a panic—that she had a migraine, or had had one for over a week.

He did not notice these things, however. He was too busy looking.

In the four or five days between his after-bedtime talk with Laurie and the day he found what he was looking for, he went through every closet in the big old house at least three times; through the crawlspace above Lew’s study five or six times; through the big old cellar half a dozen times.

It was in the cellar that he finally found it.

This was not to say he hadn’t found peculiar things in other places; he most certainly had. There was a knob of stainless steel poking out of the ceiling of a second-floor closet. A curved metal armature of some kind had burst through the side of the luggage-closet on the third floor. It was a dim, polished gray ... until he touched it. When he did that, it flushed a dusky rose color, and he heard a faint but powerful humming sound deep in the wall. He snatched his hand back as if the armature had been hot (and at first, when it turned a color he associated with the burners on the electric stove, he could have sworn it was). When he did that, the curved metal thing went gray again. The humming stopped at once.

The day before, in the attic, he had observed a cobweb of thin, interlaced cables growing in a low dark corner under the eave. Trent

had been crawling around on his hands and knees, not doing anything but getting hot and dirty, when he had suddenly spied this amazing phenomenon. He froze in place, staring through a tangle of hair as the cables spun themselves out of nothing at all (or so it looked, anyway), met, wrapped around each other so tightly they seemed to merge, and then continued spreading until they reached the floor, where they drilled in and anchored themselves in dreamy little puffs of sawdust. They seemed to be creating some sort of limber bracework, and it looked as if it would be very strong, able to hold the house together through a lot of buffeting and hard knocks.

What buffeting, though?

What hard knocks?

Again, Trent thought he knew. It was hard to believe, but he thought he knew.

There was a little closet at the north end of the cellar, far beyond the workshop area and the furnace. Their real father had called this “the wine-cellar,” and although he’d put up only about two dozen bottles of plonk (this word had always made their mother giggle), they were all carefully stored in crisscrossing racks he had made himself.

Lew came in here even less frequently than he went into the workshop; he didn’t drink wine. And although their mother had often taken a glass or two with their dad, she no longer drank wine either. Trent remembered how sad her face had looked the one time Bri had asked her why she never had a glass of plonk in front of the fire anymore.

“Lew doesn’t approve of drinking,” she had told Brian. “He says it’s a crutch.”

There was a padlock on the wine-cellar door, but it was only there to make sure the door didn’t swing open and let in the heat from the furnace. The key hung right next to it, but Trent didn’t need it. He’d left the padlock undone after his first investigation, and no one had

come along to press it shut since then. So far as he knew, no one came to this end of the cellar at all anymore.

He was not much surprised by the sour whiff of spilled wine that greeted him as he approached the door; it was just another proof of what he and Laurie already knew—the changes were winding themselves quietly all through the house. He opened the door, and although what he saw frightened him, it didn't really surprise him.

Metal constructions had burst through two of the wine-cellar's walls, tearing apart the racks with their diamond-shaped compartments and pushing the bottles of Bollinger and Mondavi and Battiglia onto the floor, where they had broken.

Like the cables in the attic crawlspace, whatever was forming here—growing, to use Laurie's word—hadn't finished yet. It spun itself into being in sheens of light that hurt Trent's eyes and made him feel a little sick to his stomach.

No cables here, however, and no curved struts. What was growing in his real father's forgotten wine-cellar looked like cabinets and consoles and instrument panels. And, as he looked, vague shapes humped themselves up in the metal like the heads of excited snakes, gained focus, became dials and levers and read-outs. There were a few blinking lights. Some of these actually began to blink as he looked at them.

A low sighing sound accompanied this act of creation.

Trent took one cautious step farther into the little room; an especially bright red light, or series of them, had caught his eye. He sneezed as he stepped forward—the machines and consoles pushing across the old concrete had stirred up a great deal of dust.

The lights which had snagged his attention were numbers. They were under a glass strip on a metal construct which was spinning its way out of a console. This new thing looked like some sort of chair,

although no one sitting in it would have been very comfortable. At least, no one with a human shape, Trent thought with a little shiver.

The glass strip was in one of the arms of this twisted chair—if it was a chair. And the numbers had perhaps caught his eye because they were moving.

72:34:18

became

72:34:17

and then

72:34:16.

Trent looked at his watch, which had a sweep second hand, and used it to confirm what his eyes had already told him. The chair might or might not really be a chair, but the numbers under the glass strip were a digital clock. It was running backward. Counting down, to be perfectly accurate. And what would happen when that read-out finally went from

00:00:01

to

00:00:00

some three days from this very afternoon?

He was pretty sure he knew. Every American boy knows one of two things happen when a backward-running clock finally reads zeros across the board: an explosion or a lift-off.

Trent thought there was too much equipment, too many gadgets, for it to be an explosion.

He thought something had gotten into the house while they were in England. Some sort of spore, perhaps, that had drifted through space for a billion years before being caught in the gravitational pull of the earth, spiraling down through the atmosphere like a bit of milkweed fluff caught in a mild breeze, and finally falling into the chimney of a house in Titusville, Indiana.

Into the Bradburys' house in Titusville, Indiana.

It might have been something else entirely, of course, but the spore idea felt right to Trent, and although he was the oldest of the Bradbury kids, he was still young enough to sleep well after eating a pepperoni pizza at 9:00 P.M., and to believe completely in his own perceptions and intuitions. And in the end, it didn't really matter, did it? What mattered was what had happened.

And, of course, what was going to happen.

When Trent left the wine-cellar this time, he not only snapped the padlock's arm closed, he took the key as well.

*

Something terrible happened at Lew's faculty party. It happened at quarter of nine, only forty-five minutes or so after the first guests

arrived, and Trent and Laurie later heard Lew shouting at their mother that the only goddam consideration she had shown him was getting up to her foolishness early—if she'd waited until ten o'clock or so, there would have been fifty or more people circulating through the living room, dining room, kitchen, and back parlor.

“What the hell’s the matter with you?” Trent and Laurie heard him yelling at her, and when Trent felt Laurie’s hand creep into his like a small cold mouse, he held it tightly. “Don’t you know what people are going to say about this? Don’t you know how people in the department talk? I mean, really, Catherine—it was like something out of the Three Stooges!”

Their mother’s only reply was soft, helpless sobbing, and for just one moment Trent felt a horrible, unwilling burst of hate for her. Why had she married him in the first place? Didn’t she deserve this for being such a fool?

Ashamed of himself, he pushed the thought away, made it gone, and turned to Laurie. He was appalled to see tears pouring down her cheeks, and the mute sorrow in her eyes went to his heart like a knife-blade.

“Great party, huh?” she whispered, scrubbing at her cheeks with the heels of her palms.

“Right, Sprat,” he said, and hugged her so she could cry against his shoulder without being heard. “It’ll make my top-ten list at the end of the year, no sweat.”

*

It seemed that Catherine Evans (who had never wished more bitterly to be Catherine Bradbury again) had been lying to everyone. She had been in the grip of a screaming-blue migraine for not just a day or two days this time but for the last two weeks. During that time she had eaten next to nothing and lost fifteen pounds. She had been serving canapes to Stephen Krutchmer, the head of the History

Department, and his wife when the colors went out of everything and the world suddenly swam away from her. She had rolled bonelessly forward, spilling a whole tray of Chinese pork rolls onto the front of Mrs. Krutchmer's expensive Norma Kamali dress, which had been purchased for just this occasion.

Brian and Lissa had heard the commotion and had come creeping down the stairs in their pajamas to see what was going on, although both of them—all four children, for that matter—had been strictly forbidden by Daddy Lew to leave the upper floors of the house once the party began. "University people don't like to see children at faculty parties," Lew had explained brusquely that afternoon. "It sends all sorts of mixed signals."

When they saw their mother on the floor in a circle of kneeling, concerned faculty members (Mrs. Krutchmer was not there; she had run for the kitchen, wanting to get some cold water on the front of her dress before the sauce-stains could set) they had forgotten their stepfather's firm order and had run in, Lissa crying, Brian bellowing in excited dismay. Lissa managed to kick the head of Asian Studies in the left kidney. Brian, who was two years older and thirty pounds heavier, did even better: he knocked the fall semester's guest lecturer, a plump babe in a pink dress and curly-toed evening slippers, smack into the fireplace. She sat there, dazed, in a large puff of gray-black ashes.

"Mom! Mommy!" Brian cried, shaking the former Catherine Bradbury. "Mommy! Wake up!"

Mrs. Evans stirred and moaned.

"Get upstairs," Lew said coldly. "Both of you."

When they showed no signs of obeying, Lew put his hand on Lissa's shoulder and tightened it until she squeaked with pain. His eyes blazed at her out of a face which had gone dead pale except for red spots as bright as dimestore rouge in the center of each cheek.

“I’ll take care of this,” he said through teeth so tightly clamped they refused to entirely unlock even to speak. “You and your brother go upstairs right n—”

“Take your hand off her, you son of a bitch,” Trent said clearly.

Lew—and all the party-goers who had arrived early enough to witness this entertaining sideshow—turned toward the archway between the living room and the hallway. Trent and Laurie stood there, side by side. Trent was as pale as his stepfather, but his face was calm and set. There were people at the party—not many but a few—who had known Catherine Evans’s first husband, and they agreed later that the resemblance between father and son was extraordinary. That it was, in fact, almost as though Bill Bradbury had come back from the dead to confront his ill-tempered replacement.

“I want you to go upstairs,” Lew said. “All four of you. There’s nothing here to concern you. Nothing to concern you at all.”

Mrs. Krutchmer had come back into the room, the bosom of her Norma Kamali damp but reasonably free of stains.

“Get your hand off Lissa,” Trent said.

“And get away from our mother,” Laurie said.

Now Mrs. Evans was sitting up, her hands to her head, looking around dazedly. The headache had popped like a balloon, leaving her disoriented and weak but at last out of the agony she had endured for the last fourteen days. She knew she had done something terrible, embarrassed Lew, perhaps even disgraced him, but for the moment she was too grateful that the pain had stopped to care. The shame would come later. Now she only wanted to go upstairs—very slowly—and lie down.

“You’ll be punished for this,” Lew said, looking at his four stepchildren in the nearly perfect shocked silence of the living room. He didn’t look at them all at once but one at a time, as if marking the

nature and extent of each crime. When his gaze fell on Lissa, she began to cry. "I'm sorry for their misbehavior," he said to the room at large. "My wife is a bit lax with them, I'm afraid. What they need is a good English nanny—"

"Don't be a jackass, Lew," Mrs. Krutchmer said. Her voice was very loud but not very tuneful; she sounded a bit like a jackass in full bray herself. Brian jumped, clutched his sister, and also gave way to tears. "Your wife fainted. They were concerned, that's all."

"Quite right, too," the guest lecturer said, struggling to extract her considerable bulk from the fireplace. Her pink dress was now a splotchy gray and her face was streaked with soot. Only her shoes with their absurd but engaging curly tips seemed to have escaped, but she looked quite unperturbed by the whole thing. "Children should care about their mothers. And husbands about their wives."

She looked pointedly at Lew Evans as she said this last, but Lew missed her gaze; he was marking Trent and Laurie's progress as they assisted their mother up the stairs. Lissa and Brian trailed along behind, like an honor guard.

The party went on. The incident was more or less papered over, as unpleasant incidents at faculty parties usually are. Mrs. Evans (who had slept three hours a night at most since her husband had announced his intention of throwing a party) was asleep almost as soon as her head touched the pillow, and the children heard Lew downstairs, booming out bonhomie without her. Trent suspected that he was even a little relieved not to have to contend with his scurrying, frightened mouse of a wife anymore.

He never once broke away to come up and check on her.

Not once. Not until the party was over.

After the last guest had been shown out, he walked heavily upstairs and told her to wake up ... which she did, obedient in this as she had

been in everything else since the day when she had made the mistake of telling the minister she did and Lew that she would.

Lew poked his head into Trent's room next and measured the children with his gaze.

"I knew you'd all be in here," he said with a satisfied little nod. "Conspiring. You're going to be punished, you know. Yes indeed. Tomorrow. Tonight I want you to go right to bed and think about it. Now go to your rooms. And no creeping around, either."

Neither Lissa nor Brian did any "creeping around," certainly; they were too exhausted and emotionally wrung out to do anything but go to bed and fall immediately asleep. But Laurie came back down to Trent's room in spite of "Daddy Lew," and the two of them listened in silent dismay as their stepfather upbraided their mother for daring to faint at his party... and as their mother wept and offered not a word of argument or even demurral.

"Oh, Trent, what are we going to do?" Laurie asked, her voice muffled against his shoulder.

Trent's face was extraordinarily pale and still. "Do?" he said. "Why, we're not going to do anything, Sprat."

"We have to! Trent, we have to! We have to help her!"

"No, we don't," Trent said. A small and somehow terrible smile played around his lips. "The house is going to do it for us." He looked at his watch and calculated. "At around three-thirty-four tomorrow afternoon, the house is going to do it all."

*

There were no punishments in the morning; Lew Evans was too preoccupied with his eight o'clock seminar on Consequences of the Norman Conquest. Neither Trent nor Laurie was very surprised at this, but both were extremely grateful. He told them he would see

them in his study that night, one by one, and “mete a few fair strokes to each.” Once this threat in the form of an obscure quotation had been given, he marched out with his head up and his briefcase clasped firmly in his right hand. Their mother was still asleep when his Porsche snarled its way down the street.

The two younger kids were standing by the kitchen with their arms around each other, looking to Laurie like an illustration from a Grimm’s fairytale. Lissa was crying. Brian was keeping a stiff upper lip, at least so far, but he was pale and there were purple pouches under his eyes. “He’ll spank us,” Brian said to Trent. “And he spanks hard, too.”

“Nope,” Trent said. They looked at him hopefully but dubiously. Lew had, after all, promised spankings; even Trent was not to be spared this painful indignity.

“But, Trent—” Lissa began.

“Listen to me,” Trent said, pulling a chair out from the table and sitting on it backward in front of the two little ones. “Listen carefully, and don’t you miss a single word. It’s important, and none of us can screw up.”

They stared at him silently with their big green-blue eyes.

“As soon as school is out, I want you two to come right home... but only as far as the corner. The corner of Maple and Walnut. Have you got that?”

“Ye-ess,” Lissa said hesitantly. “But why, Trent?”

“Never mind,” Trent said. His own eyes—also green-blue—were sparkling, but Laurie thought it wasn’t a good-humored sparkle; she thought, in fact, that there was something dangerous about it. “Just be there. Stand by the mailbox. You have to be there by three o’clock, three-fifteen at the latest. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” Brian said, speaking for both of them. “We got it.”

“Laurie and I will already be there, or we’ll be there right after you get there.”

“How are we going to do that, Trent?” Laurie asked. “We don’t even get out of school until three o’clock, and I have band practice, and the bus takes—”

“We’re not going to school today,” Trent said.

“No?” Laurie was nonplussed.

Lissa was horrified. “Trent!” she said. “You can’t do that! That’s ... that’s ... hookey!”

“And about time, too,” Trent said grimly. “Now you two get ready for school. Just remember, the corner of Maple and Walnut at three o’clock, three-fifteen at the absolute latest. And whatever you do, don’t come all the way home.” He stared at Brian and Lissa so fiercely that they looked back with frightened dismay, drawing together for mutual comfort once again. Even Laurie was frightened. “Wait for us, but don’t you dare come back into this house,” he said. “Not for anything.”

*

When the little kids were gone, Laurie seized his shirt and demanded to know what was going on.

“It has something to do with what’s growing in the house, I know it does, and if you want me to play hookey and help you, you better tell me what it is, Trent Bradbury!”

“Mellow out, I’ll tell you,” Trent said. He carefully removed his shirt from Laurie’s tight grip. “And quiet down. I don’t want you to wake up Mom. She’ll make us go to school, and that’s no good.”

“Well, what is it? Tell me!”

“Come on downstairs,” Trent said. “I want to show you something.”

He led her downstairs to the wine-cellar.

*

Trent wasn't completely sure Laurie would ride along with what he had in mind—it seemed awfully ... well, final ... even to him—but she did. If it had just been a matter of enduring a spanking from “Daddy Lew,” he didn't think she would have, but Laurie had been as deeply affected by the sight of her mother lying senseless on the living-room floor as Trent had been by his stepfather's unfeeling reaction to it.

“Yeah,” Laurie said bleakly. “I think we have to.” She was looking at the blinking numbers on the arm of the chair. They now read

07:49:21.

The wine-cellar was no longer a wine-cellar at all. It stank of wine, true enough, and there were the piles of shattered green glass on the floor amid the twisted ruins of their father's wine-racks, but it now looked like a madman's version of the control-bridge on the Starship Enterprise. Dials whirled. Digital read-outs flickered, changed, flickered again. Lights blinked and flashed.

“Yeah,” Trent said. “I think so, too. That son of a bitch, shouting at her like that!”

“Trent, don't.”

“He's a jerk! A bastard! A dickhead!”

But this was just a foul-mouthed version of whistling past the graveyard, and both of them knew it. Looking at the strange agglomeration of instruments and controls made Trent feel almost sick with doubt and unease. He was reminded of a book his dad had read him when he was a child, a Mercer Mayer story where a creature called a Stamp-Eating Trollusk had popped a little girl into

an envelope and mailed her To Whom It May Concern. Wasn't that pretty much what he was proposing they do to Lew Evans?

"If we don't do something, he'll kill her," Laurie said in a low voice.

"Huh?" Trent whipped his head around so fast it hurt his neck, but Laurie wasn't looking at him. She was looking at the red numbers of the countdown. They reflected backward off the lenses of the spectacles she wore on schooldays. She seemed almost hypnotized, unaware Trent was looking at her, perhaps even unaware that he was there.

"Not on purpose," she said. "He might even be sad. For awhile, anyway. Because I think he does love her, sort of, and she loves him. You know—sort of. But he'll make her worse and worse. She'll get sick all the time, and then ... one day ..."

She broke off and looked at him, and something in her face scared Trent worse than anything in their strange, changing, sneaking house had been able to do.

"Tell me, Trent," she said. Her hand grasped his arm. It was very cold. "Tell me how we're going to do it."

*

They went up to Lew's study together. Trent was prepared to ransack the place if that was what it took, but they found the key in the top drawer, tucked neatly into an envelope with the word STUDY printed on it in Lew's small, neat, somehow hemorrhoidal printing. Trent pocketed it. They left the house together just as the shower on the second floor went on, meaning their mom was up.

They spent the day in the park. Although neither of them spoke of it, it was the longest day either of them had ever lived through. Twice they saw the beat-cop and hid in the public toilets until he was gone. This was no time to be caught playing truant and bundled off to school.

At two-thirty, Trent gave Laurie a quarter and walked her to the phone booth on the east side of the park.

“Do I have to?” she asked. “I hate to scare her, especially after last night.”

“Do you want her in the house when whatever happens, happens?” Trent asked. Laurie dropped the quarter into the telephone with no further protest.

It rang so many times that she became sure their mother had gone out. That might be good, but it might also be bad. It was certainly worrisome. If she was out it was entirely possible that she might come back before—

“Trent I don’t think she’s h—”

“Hello?” Mrs. Evans said in a sleepy voice.

“Oh, hi, Mom,” Laurie said. “I didn’t think you were there.”

“I went back to bed,” she said with an embarrassed little laugh. “I can’t seem to get enough sleep, all of a sudden. I suppose if I’m asleep I can’t think about how horrible I was last night—”

“Oh, Mom, you weren’t horrible. When a person faints, it isn’t because she wants to—”

“Laurie, why are you calling? Is everything okay?”

“Sure, Mom ... well ...”

Trent poked her in the ribs. Hard.

Laurie, who had been slumping (growing smaller, it almost seemed), straightened up in a hurry. “I hurt myself in gym. Just... you know, a little. It’s not bad.”

“What did you do? Jesus, you’re not calling from the hospital, are you?”

“Gosh, no,” Laurie said hastily. “It’s just a sprained knee. Mrs. Kitt asked if you could come and bring me home early. I don’t know if I can walk on it. It really hurts.”

“I’ll come right away. Try not to move it at all, honey. You could have torn a ligament. Is the nurse there?”

“Not right now. Don’t worry, Mom, I’ll be careful.”

“Will you be in the nurse’s office?”

“Yes,” Laurie said. Her face was as red as the side of Brian’s Radio Flyer wagon.

“I’ll be right there.”

“Thanks, Mom. Bye.”

She hung up and looked at Trent. She drew in a deep breath and then let it out in a long, trembly sigh.

“That was fun,” she said in a voice which was close to tears.

He hugged her tight. “You did great,” he said. “Lots better than I could have, Spr—Laurie. I’m not sure she would have believed me.”

“I wonder if she’ll ever believe me again?” Laurie asked bitterly.

“She will,” Trent said. “Come on.”

They went over to the west side of the park, where they could watch Walnut Street. The day had turned cold and dim. Thunderheads were forming overhead, and a chilly wind was blowing. They waited for five endless minutes and then their mother’s Subaru passed them, heading rapidly toward Greendowne Middle School, where

Trent and Laurie went ... where we go when we're not playing hookey, that is, Laurie thought.

"She's really humming," Trent said. "I hope she doesn't get into an accident, or something."

"Too late to worry about that now. Come on." Laurie had Trent's hand and was pulling him back to the telephone kiosk again. "You get to call Lew, you lucky devil."

He put in another quarter and punched the number of the History Department office, referring to a card he had taken from his wallet. He had barely slept a wink the night before, but now that things were set in motion, he found himself cool and calm... so cool, in fact, that he was almost refrigerated. He glanced at his watch. Quarter to three. Less than an hour to go. Thunder rumbled faintly in the west.

"History Department," a woman's voice said.

"Hi. This is Trent Bradbury. I need to speak with my stepfather, Lewis Evans, please."

"Professor Evans is in class," the secretary said, "but he'll be out at —"

"I know, he's got Modern British History until three-thirty. But you better get him, just the same. It's an emergency. It concerns his wife." A pointed, calculated pause, and then he added: "My mom."

There was a long pause, and Trent felt a moment of faint alarm. It was as if she were thinking of refusing or dismissing him, emergency or no emergency, and that was most definitely not in the plan.

"He's in Oglethorpe, right next door," she said finally. "I'll get him myself. I'll have him call home as soon as—"

"No, I have to hold on," Trent said.

"But—"

“Please, will you just stop goofing with me and go get him?” he asked, allowing a ragged, harried note into his voice. It wasn’t hard.

“All right,” the secretary said. It was impossible to tell if she was more disgruntled or worried. “If you could tell me the nature of the—”

“No,” Trent said.

There was an offended sniff, and then he was on hold.

“Well?” Laurie asked. She was dancing from foot to foot like someone who needs to go to the bathroom.

“I’m on hold. They’re getting him.”

“What if he doesn’t come?”

Trent shrugged. “Then we’re sunk. But he’ll come. You wait and see.” He wished he could be as confident as he sounded, but he did still believe this would work. It had to work.

“We left it until awful late.”

Trent nodded. They had left it until awful late, and Laurie knew why. The study door was solid oak, plenty strong, but neither of them knew anything about the lock. Trent wanted to make sure Lew had only the shortest time possible to test it.

“What if he sees Brian and Lissie on the corner when he comes home?”

“If he gets as hot under the collar as I think he will, he wouldn’t notice them if they were on stilts and wearing Day-Glo duncecaps,” Trent said.

“Why doesn’t he answer the darn phone?” Laurie asked, looking at her watch.

“He will,” Trent said, and then their stepfather did.

“Hello?”

“It’s Trent, Lew. Mom’s in your study. Her headache must have come back, because she fainted. I can’t wake her up. You better come home right away.”

Trent was not surprised at his stepfather’s first stated object of concern—it was, in fact, an integral part of his plan—but it still made him so angry his fingers turned white on the telephone.

“My study? My study? What the hell was she doing in there?”

In spite of his anger, Trent’s voice came out calmly. “Cleaning, I think.” And then tossed the ultimate bait to a man who cared a great deal more for work than wife: “There are papers all over the floor.”

“I’ll be right there,” Lew rapped, and then added: “If there are any windows open in there, shut them, for God’s sake. There’s a storm coming.” He hung up without saying goodbye.

“Well?” Laurie asked as Trent hung up.

“He’s on his way,” Trent said, and laughed grimly. “The son of a bitch was so stirred up he didn’t even ask what I was doing home from school. Come on.”

They ran back to the intersection of Maple and Walnut. The sky had grown very dark now, and the sound of thunder had become almost constant. As they reached the blue U.S. mailbox on the corner, the streetlights along Maple Street began to come on two by two, marching away from them up the hill.

Lissa and Brian hadn’t arrived yet.

“I want to come with you, Trent,” Laurie said, but her face proclaimed her a liar. It was very pale, and her eyes were too large, swimming with unshed tears.

“No way,” Trent said. “Wait here for Brian and Lissa.”

At their names, Laurie turned and looked down Walnut Street. She saw two kids coming, hurrying along with lunchboxes bouncing in their hands. Although they were too far away to make out faces, she was pretty sure it was them, and she told Trent.

“Good. The three of you go behind Mrs. Redland’s hedge there and wait for Lew to pass. Then you can come up the street, but don’t go in the house and don’t let them, either. Wait for me outside.”

“I’m afraid, Trent.” The tears had begun to spill down her cheeks now.

“Me too, Sprat,” he said, and kissed her swiftly on the forehead. “But it’ll all be over soon.”

Before she could say anything else, Trent went running up the street toward the Bradburys’ house on Maple Street. He glanced at his watch as he ran. It was twelve past three.

*

The house had a still, hot air that scared him. It was as if gunpowder had been spilled in every corner, and people he could not see were standing by to light unseen fuses. He imagined the clock in the wine-cellar ticking relentlessly away, now reading

00:19:06.

What if Lew was late?

No time to worry about that now.

Trent raced up to the third floor through the still, combustible air. He imagined he could feel the house stirring now, coming alive as the countdown neared its conclusion. He tried to tell himself that imagination was all it was, but part of him knew better.

He went into Lew’s study, opened two or three file-cabinets and desk drawers at random, and threw the papers he found all over the floor.

This took only a few moments, but he was just finishing when he heard the Porsche coming up the street. Its engine wasn't snarling today; Lew had wound it up to a scream.

Trent stepped out of the office and into the shadows of the third-floor hallway, where they had drilled the first holes what seemed like a century ago. He rammed his hand into his pocket for the key, and his pocket was empty except for an old, crumpled lunch-ticket.

I must have lost it running up the street. It must have bounced right out of my pocket.

He stood there, sweating and frozen, as the Porsche squealed into the driveway. Its engine cut out. The driver's door opened and slammed shut. Lew's footsteps ran for the back door. Thunder crumpled like an artillery shell in the sky, a stroke of bright lightning forked through the gloom, and, somewhere deep in the house, a powerful motor turned over, uttered a low, muffled bark, and then began to hum.

Jesus, oh dear Jesus, what do I do? What CAN I do? He's bigger than me! If I try to hit him over the head, he'll—

He had slipped his left hand into his other pocket, and his thoughts broke off as it touched the old-fashioned metal teeth of the key. At some point during the long afternoon in the park, he must have transferred it from one pocket to the other without even being aware of it.

Gasping, heart galloping in his stomach and throat as well as in his chest, Trent faded back down the hall to the luggage-closet, stepped inside, and pulled the accordion-style doors most of the way shut in front of him.

Lew was galumphing up the stairs, bawling his wife's name over and over at the top of his voice. Trent saw him appear, hair standing up in spikes (he must have been running a hand through it as he drove),

his tie askew, big drops of sweat standing out on his broad, intelligent forehead, eyes squinted down to furious little slits.

“Catherine!” he bawled, and ran down the hall into the office.

Before he could even get all the way in, Trent was out of the luggage-closet and running soundlessly back down the hall. He would have just one chance. If he missed the keyhole ... if the tumblers failed to turn at the first twist of the key ...

If either of those things happens, I’ll fight with him, he had time to think. If I can’t send him alone, I’ll make damn sure to take him with me.

He grabbed the door and banged it shut so hard that a little film of dust shot out of the cracks between the hinges. He caught one glimpse of Lew’s startled face. Then the key was in the lock. He twisted it, and the bolt shot across an instant before Lew struck the door.

“Hey!” Lew shouted. “Hey, you little bastard, what are you doing? Where’s Catherine? Let me out of here!”

The knob twisted fruitlessly back and forth. Then it stopped, and Lew rained a fusillade of blows on the door.

“Let me out of here right now Trent Bradbury before you get the worst beating of your goddamned life!”

Trent backed slowly across the hall. When his shoulders struck the far wall, he gasped. The key to the study, which he had removed from the keyhole without even thinking about it, dropped from his fingers and thumped to the faded hall-runner between his feet. Now that it was done, reaction set in. The world began to look wavery, as if he were under water, and he had to fight to keep from fainting himself. Only now, with Lew locked in, his mother sent off on a wild-goose chase, and the other kids safely tucked away behind Mrs. Redland’s overgrown yew hedge, did he realize that he had never

really expected it would work at all. If “Daddy Lew” was surprised to find himself locked in, Trent Bradbury was absolutely amazed.

The doorknob of the study twisted back and forth in short sharp half-circles.

“LET ME OUT, GODDAMMIT!”

“I’ll let you out at quarter of four, Lew,” Trent said in an uneven, trembling voice, and then a little giggle escaped him. “If you’re still here at quarter of four, that is.”

Then, from downstairs: “Trent? Trent, are you all right?”

Dear God, that was Laurie.

“Are you, Trent?”

And Lissa!

“Hey, Trent! Y’okay?”

And Brian.

Trent looked at his watch and was horrified to see it was 3:31... going on 3:32. And suppose his watch was slow?

“Get out!” he screamed at them, plunging down the hallway toward the stairs. “Get out of this house!”

The third-floor hallway seemed to stretch out before him like taffy; the faster he ran, the farther it seemed to stretch ahead of him. Lew rained blows on the door and curses on the air; thunder boomed; and from deep within the house came the ever-more-urgent sound of machines waking to life.

He reached the stairwell at last and hurried down, his upper body so far out in front of his legs that he almost fell. Then he was whirling around the newel post and hurtling down the flight of stairs between

the second floor and the first, toward where his brother and two sisters waited, looking up at him.

“Out!” he screamed, grabbing them, shoving them toward the open door and the stormy blackness outside. “Quick!”

“Trent, what’s happening?” Brian asked. “What’s happening to the house? It’s shaking!”

It was, too—a deep vibration that rose up through the floor and rattled Trent’s eyeballs in their sockets. Plaster-dust began to sift down into his hair.

“No time! Out! Fast! Laurie, help me!”

Trent swept Brian into his arms. Laurie grabbed Lissa under the arms of her dress and stumbled out the door with her.

Thunder bammed. Lightning twisted across the sky. The wind that had been gasping earlier now began to roar like a dragon.

Trent heard an earthquake building under the house. As he ran out through the door with Brian, he saw electric-blue light, so bright it left afterimages on his eyes for almost an hour (he reflected later he was lucky not to have been blinded), shoot out through the narrow cellar windows. It cut across the lawn in rays that looked almost solid. He heard the glass break. And, just as he passed through the door, he felt the house rising under his feet.

He jumped down the front steps and grabbed Laurie’s arm. They stumble-staggered down the walk to the street, which was now as black as night with the coming of the storm.

There they turned back and watched it happen.

The house on Maple Street seemed to gather itself. It no longer looked straight and solid; it seemed to jitter, like a comic-strip picture of a man on a pogo-stick. Huge cracks ran out from it, not only in the

cement walk but in the earth surrounding it. The lawn pulled apart in huge pie-shaped turves of grass. Roots strained blackly upward below the green, and the whole front yard seemed to become bubble-shaped, as if it were straining to hold the house before which it had spread so long.

Trent cast his eyes up to the third floor, where the light in Lew's study still shone. Trent thought the sound of breaking glass had come—was still coming—from up there, then dismissed the idea as imagination—how could he hear anything in all that racket? It was only a year later that Laurie told him she was quite sure she had heard their stepfather screaming from up there.

The foundation of the house first crumbled, then cracked, then sundered with a croak of exploding mortar. Brilliant cold blue fire lanced out. The children covered their eyes and staggered back. The engines screamed. The earth pulled up and up in a last agonized holding action ... and then let go. Suddenly the house was a foot above the ground, resting on a pad of bright blue fire.

It was a perfect lift-off.

Atop the center roofpeak, the weathervane spun madly.

The house rose slowly at first, then began to gather speed. It thundered upward on its flaring pad of blue fire, the front door clapping madly back and forth as it went.

“My toys!” Brian bleated, and Trent began to laugh wildly.

The house reached a height of thirty yards, seemed to poise itself for its great leap upward, then blasted into the rushing spate of night-black clouds.

It was gone.

Two shingles came floating down like large black leaves.

“Look out, Trent!” Laurie cried out a second or two later, and shoved him hard enough to knock him over. The rubber-backed WELCOME mat thwacked into the street where he had been standing.

Trent looked at Laurie. Laurie looked back.

“That would’ve smarted like big blue heck if it’d hit you on the head,” she told him, “so you just better not call me Sprat anymore, Trent.”

He looked at her solemnly for several seconds, then began to giggle. Laurie joined in. So did the little ones. Brian took one of Trent’s hands; Lissa took the other. They helped pull him to his feet, and then the four of them stood together, looking at the smoking cellar-hole in the middle of the shattered lawn. People were coming out of their houses now, but the Bradbury children ignored them. Or perhaps it would be truer to say the Bradbury children didn’t know they were there at all.

“Wow,” Brian said reverently. “Our house took off, Trent.”

“Yeah,” Trent said.

“Maybe wherever it’s going, there’ll be people who want to know about the Normans and the Sexies,” Lissa said.

Trent and Laurie put their arms around each other and began to shriek with mingled laughter and horror ... and that was when the rain began to pelt down.

Mr. Slattery from across the street joined them. He didn’t have much hair, but what he did have was plastered to his gleaming skull in tight little bunches.

“What happened?” he screamed over the thunder, which was almost constant now. “What happened here?”

Trent let go of his sister and looked at Mr. Slattery. “True Space Adventures,” he said solemnly, and that set them all off again.

Mr. Slattery cast a doubtful, frightened look at the empty cellar-hole, decided discretion was the better part of valor, and retreated to his side of the street. Although it was still pouring buckets, he did not invite the Bradbury children to join him. Nor did they care. They sat down on the curb, Trent and Laurie in the middle, Brian and Lissa on the sides.

Laurie leaned toward Trent and whispered in his ear: "We're free."

"It's better than that," Trent said. "She is."

Then he put his arms around all of them—by stretching, he could just manage—and they sat on the curb in the pouring rain and waited for their mother to come home.

STEPHEN KING

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Stephen King

Richard and I sat on my porch, looking out over the dunes to the Gulf. The smoke from his cigar drifted mellowly in the air, keeping the mosquitoes at a safe distance. The water was a cool aqua, the sky a deeper, truer blue. It was a pleasant combination.

“You are the doorway,” Richard repeated thoughtfully. “You are sure you killed the boy—you didn’t just dream it?”

“I didn’t dream it. And I didn’t kill him, either—I told you that. They did. I am the doorway.”

Richard sighed. “You buried him?”

“Yes.”

“You remember where?”

“Yes.” I reached into my breast pocket and got a cigarette. My hands were awkward with their covering of bandages. They itched abominably. “If you want to see it, you’ll have to get the dune buggy. You can’t roll this”—I indicated my wheelchair—“through the sand.” Richard’s dune buggy was a 1959 VW with pillow-sized tires. He collected driftwood in it. Ever since he retired from the real estate business in Maryland he had been living on Key Caroline and building driftwood sculptures which he sold to the winter tourists at shameless prices.

He puffed his cigar and looked out at the Gulf. “Not yet. Will you tell me once more?”

I sighed and tried to light my cigarette. He took the matches away from me and did it himself. I puffed twice, dragging deep. The itch in my fingers was maddening.

“All right” I said. “Last night at seven I was out here, looking at the Gulf and smoking, just like now, and—”

“Go further back,” he invited.

“Further?”

“Tell me about the flight.”

I shook my head. “Richard, we’ve been through it and through it. There’s nothing—”

The seamed and fissured face was as enigmatic as one of his own driftwood sculptures. “You may remember,” he said. “Now you may remember.”

“Do you think so?”

“Possibly. And when you’re through, we can look for the grave.”

“The grave,” I said. It had a hollow, horrible ring, darker than anything, darker even than all that terrible ocean Cory and I had sailed through five years ago. Dark, dark, dark.

Beneath the bandages, my new eyes stared blindly into the darkness the bandages forced on them. They itched.

Cory and I were boosted into orbit by the Saturn 16, the one all the commentators called the Empire State Building booster. It was a big beast, all right. It made the old Saturn 1-B look like a Redstone, and it took off from a bunker two hundred feet deep—it had to, to keep from taking half of Cape Kennedy with it.

We swung around the earth, verifying all our systems, and then did our inject. Headed out for Venus. We left a Senate fighting over an appropriations bill for further deep-space exploration, and a bunch of NASA people praying that we would find something, anything.

“It don’t matter what,” Don Lovinger, Project Zeus’s private whiz kid, was very fond of saying when he’d had a few. “You got all the gadgets, plus five souped-up TV cameras and a nifty little telescope with a zillion lenses and filters. Find some gold or platinum. Better yet, find some nice, dumb little blue men for us to study and exploit

and feel superior to. Anything. Even the ghost of Howdy Doody would be a start.”

Cory and I were anxious enough to oblige, if we could. Nothing had worked for the deep-space program. From Borman, Anders, and Lovell, who orbited the moon in '68 and found an empty, forbidding world that looked like dirty beach sand, to Markhan and Jacks, who touched down on Mars eleven years later to find an arid wasteland of frozen sand and a few struggling lichens, the deep-space program had been an expensive bust. And there had been casualties—Pedersen and Lederer, eternally circling the sun when all at once nothing worked on the second-to-last Apollo flight. John Davis, whose little orbiting observatory was holed by a meteoroid in a one-in-a-thousand fluke. No, the space program was hardly swinging along. The way things looked, the Venus orbit might be our last chance to say we told you so.

It was sixteen days out—we ate a lot of concentrates, played a lot of gin, and swapped a cold back and forth—and from the tech side it was a milk run. We lost an air-moisture converter on the third day out, went to backup, and that was all, except for nits and nats, until re-entry. We watched Venus grow from a star to a quarter to a milky crystal ball, swapped jokes with Huntsville Control, listened to tapes of Wagner and the Beatles, tended to automated experiments which had to do with everything from measurements of the solar wind to deep-space navigation. We did two midcourse corrections, both of them infinitesimal, and nine days into the flight Cory went outside and banged on the retractable DESA until it decided to operate. There was nothing else out of the ordinary until ...

“DESA,” Richard said. “What’s that?”

“An experiment that didn’t pan out. NASA-ese for Deep Space Antenna—we were broadcasting pi in high-frequency pulses for anyone who cared to listen.” I rubbed my fingers against my pants, but it was no good; if anything, it made it worse. “Same idea as that radio telescope in West Virginia—you know, the one that listens to the stars. Only instead of listening, we were transmitting, primarily to

the deeper space planets—Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus. If there's any intelligent life out there, it was taking a nap."

"Only Cory went out?"

"Yes. And if he brought in any interstellar plague, the telemetry didn't show it."

"Still—"

"It doesn't matter," I said crossly. "Only the here and now matters. They killed the boy last night, Richard. It wasn't a nice thing to watch—or feel. His head ... it exploded. As if someone had scooped out his brains and put a hand grenade in his skull."

"Finish the story," he said.

I laughed hollowly. "What's to tell?"

We went into an eccentric orbit around the planet. It was radical and deteriorating, three twenty by seventy-six miles. That was on the first swing. The second swing our apogee was even higher, the perigee lower. We had a max of four orbits. We made all four. We got a good look at the planet. Also over six hundred stills and God knows how many feet of film.

The cloud cover is equal parts methane, ammonia, dust, and flying shit. The whole planet looks like the Grand Canyon in a wind tunnel. Cory estimated windspeed at about 600 mph near the surface. Our probe beeped all the way down and then went out with a squawk. We saw no vegetation and no sign of life. Spectroscope indicated only traces of the valuable minerals. And that was Venus. Nothing but nothing—except it scared me. It was like circling a haunted house in the middle of deep space. I know how unscientific that sounds, but I was scared gutless until we got out of there. I think if our rockets hadn't gone off, I would have cut my throat on the way down. It's not like the moon. The moon is desolate but somehow antiseptic. That world we saw was utterly unlike anything that

anyone has ever seen. Maybe it's a good thing that cloud cover is there. It was like a skull that's been picked clean—that's the closest I can get.

On the way back we heard the Senate had voted to halve space-exploration funds. Cory said something like "looks like we're back in the weather-satellite business, Artie." But I was almost glad. Maybe we don't belong out there.

Twelve days later Cory was dead and I was crippled for life. We bought all our trouble on the way down. The chute was fouled. How's that for life's little ironies? We'd been in space for over a month, gone further than any humans had ever gone, and it all ended the way it did because some guy was in a hurry for his coffee break and let a few lines get fouled.

We came down hard. A guy that was in one of the copters said it looked like a gigantic baby falling out of the sky, with the placenta trailing after it. I lost consciousness when we hit.

I came to when they were taking me across the deck of the Portland. They hadn't even had a chance to roll up the red carpet we were supposed to've walked on. I was bleeding. Bleeding and being hustled up to the infirmary over a red carpet that didn't look anywhere near as red as I did ...

"... I was in Bethesda for two years. They gave me the Medal of Honor and a lot of money and this wheelchair. I came down here the next year. I like to watch the rockets take off."

"I know," Richard said. He paused. "Show me your hands."

"No." It came out very quickly and sharply. "I can't let them see. I've told you that."

"It's been five years," Richard said. "Why now, Arthur? Can you tell me that?"

“I don’t know. I don’t know! Maybe whatever it is has a long gestation period. Or who’s to say I even got it out there? Whatever it was might have entered me in Fort Lauderdale. Or right here on this porch, for all I know.”

Richard sighed and looked out over the water, now reddish with the late-evening sun. “I’m trying. Arthur, I don’t want to think that you are losing your mind.”

“If I have to, I’ll show you my hands,” I said. It cost me an effort to say it. “But only if I have to.”

Richard stood up and found his cane. He looked old and frail. “I’ll get the dune buggy. We’ll look for the boy.”

“Thank you, Richard.”

He walked out toward the rutted dirt track that led to his cabin—I could just see the roof of it over the Big Dune, the one that runs almost the whole length of Key Caroline. Over the water toward the Cape, the sky had gone an ugly plum color, and the sound of thunder came faintly to my ears.

*

I didn’t know the boy’s name but I saw him every now and again, walking along the beach at sunset, with his sieve under his arm. He was tanned almost black by the sun, and all he was ever clad in was a frayed pair of denim cutoffs. On the far side of Key Caroline there is a public beach, and an enterprising young man can make perhaps as much as five dollars on a good day, patiently sieving the sand for buried quarters or dimes. Every now and then I would wave to him and he would wave back, both of us noncommittal, strangers yet brothers, year-round dwellers set against a sea of money spending, Cadillac-driving, loud-mouthed tourists. I imagine he lived in the small village clustered around the post office about a half mile further down.

When he passed by that evening I had already been on the porch for an hour, immobile, watching. I had taken off the bandages earlier. The itching had been intolerable, and it was always better when they could look through their eyes.

It was a feeling like no other in the world—as if I were a portal just slightly ajar through which they were peeking at a world which they hated and feared. But the worst part was that I could see, too, in a way. Imagine your mind transported into a body of a housefly, a housefly looking into your own face with a thousand eyes. Then perhaps you can begin to see why I kept my hands bandaged even when there was no one around to see them.

It began in Miami. I had business there with a man named Cresswell, an investigator from the Navy Department. He checks up on me once a year—for a while I was as close as anyone ever gets to the classified stuff our space program has. I don't know just what it is he looks for; a shifty gleam in the eye, maybe, or maybe a scarlet letter on my forehead. God knows why. My pension is large enough to be almost embarrassing.

Cresswell and I were sitting on the terrace of his hotel room, sipping drinks and discussing the future of the U.S. space program. It was about three-fifteen. My fingers began to itch. It wasn't a bit gradual. It was switched on like electric current. I mentioned it to Cresswell.

“So you picked up some poison ivy on that scrofulous little island,” he said, grinning.

“The only foliage on Key Caroline is a little palmetto scrub,”

I said. “Maybe it's the seven-year itch.” I looked down at my hands. Perfectly ordinary hands. But itchy.

Later in the afternoon I signed the same old paper (“I do solemnly swear that I have neither received nor disclosed and divulged information which would ...”) and drove myself back to the Key. I've

got an old Ford, equipped with hand-operated brake and accelerator. I love it—it makes me feel self-sufficient.

It's a long drive back, down Route 1, and by the time I got off the big road and onto the Key Caroline exit ramp, I was nearly out of my mind. My hands itched maddeningly. If you have ever suffered through the healing of a deep cut or a surgical incision, you may have some idea of the kind of itch I mean. Live things seemed to be crawling and boring in my flesh.

The sun was almost down and I looked at my hands carefully in the glow of the dash lights. The tips of them were red now, red in tiny, perfect circlets, just above the pad where the fingerprint is, where you get calluses if you play guitar. There were also red circles of infection on the space between the first and second joint of each thumb and finger, and on the skin between the second joint and the knuckle. I pressed my right fingers to my lips and withdrew them quickly, with a sudden loathing. A feeling of dumb horror had risen in my throat, woolen and choking. The flesh where the red spots had appeared was hot, feverish, and the flesh was soft and gelid, like the flesh of an apple gone rotten.

I drove the rest of the way trying to persuade myself that I had indeed caught poison ivy somehow. But in the back of my mind there was another ugly thought. I had an aunt, back in my childhood, who lived the last ten years of her life closed off from the world in an upstairs room. My mother took her meals up, and her name was a forbidden topic. I found out later that she had Hansen's disease—leprosy.

When I got home I called Dr. Flanders on the mainland. I got his answering service instead. Dr. Flanders was on a fishing cruise, but if it was urgent, Dr. Ballanger—

“When will Dr. Flanders be back?”

“Tomorrow afternoon at the latest. Would that—”

“Sure.”

I hung up slowly, then dialed Richard. I let it ring a dozen times before hanging up. After that I sat indecisive for a while. The itching had deepened. It seemed to emanate from the flesh itself.

I rolled my wheelchair over to the bookcase and pulled down the battered medical encyclopedia that I'd had for years. The book was maddeningly vague. It could have been anything, or nothing.

I leaned back and closed my eyes. I could hear the old ship's clock ticking on the shelf across the room. There was the high, thin drone of a jet on its way to Miami. There was the soft whisper of my own breath.

I was still looking at the book.

The realization crept on me, then sank home with a frightening rush. My eyes were closed, but I was still looking at the book. What I was seeing was smeary and monstrous, the distorted, fourth-dimensional counterpart of a book, yet unmistakable for all that.

And I was not the only one watching.

I snapped my eyes open, feeling the constriction of my heart. The sensation subsided a little, but not entirely. I was looking at the book, seeing the print and diagrams with my own eyes, perfectly normal everyday experience, and I was also seeing it from a different, lower angle and seeing it with other eyes. Seeing not a book but an alien thing, something of monstrous shape and ominous intent.

I raised my hands slowly to my face, catching an eerie vision of my living room turned into a horror house.

I screamed.

There were eyes peering up at me through splits in the flesh of my fingers. And even as I watched the flesh was dilating, retreating, as

they pushed their mindless way up to the surface.

But that was not what made me scream. I had looked into my own face and seen a monster.

The dune buggy nosed over the hill and Richard brought it to a halt next to the porch. The motor gunned and roared choppily. I rolled my wheelchair down the inclined plane to the right of the regular steps and Richard helped me in.

“All right, Arthur,” he said. “It’s your party. Where to?”

I pointed down toward the water, where the Big Dune finally begins to peter out. Richard nodded. The rear wheels spun sand and we were off. I usually found time to rib Richard about his driving, but I didn’t bother tonight. There was too much else to think about—and to feel: they didn’t want the dark, and I could feel them straining to see through the bandages, willing me to take them off.

The dune buggy bounced and roared through the sand toward the water, seeming almost to take flight from the tops of the small dunes. To the left the sun was going down in bloody glory. Straight ahead and across the water, the thunderclouds were beating their way toward us. Lightning forked at the water.

“Off to your right,” I said. “By that lean-to.”

Richard brought the dune buggy to a sand-spraying halt beside the rotted remains of the lean-to, reached into the back, and brought out a spade. I winced when I saw it. “Where?” Richard asked expressionlessly.

“Right there.” I pointed to the place.

He got out and walked slowly through the sand to the spot, hesitated for a second, then plunged the shovel into the sand. It seemed that he dug for a very long time. The sand he was throwing back over his shoulder looked damp and moist. The thunderheads were darker,

higher, and the water looked angry and implacable under their shadow and the reflected glow of the sunset.

I knew long before he stopped digging that he was not going to find the boy. They had moved him. I hadn't bandaged my hands last night, so they could see—and act. If they had been able to use me to kill the boy, they could use me to move him, even while I slept.

“There's no boy, Arthur.” He threw the dirty shovel into the dune buggy and sat tiredly on the seat. The coming storm cast marching, crescent-shaped shadows along the sand. The rising breeze rattled sand against the buggy's rusted body. My fingers itched.

“They used me to move him,” I said dully. “They're getting the upper hand, Richard. They're forcing their doorway open, a little at a time. A hundred times a day I find myself standing in front of some perfectly familiar object—a spatula, a picture, even a can of beans—with no idea how I got there, holding my hands out, showing it to them, seeing it as they do, as an obscenity, something twisted and grotesque—”

“Arthur,” he said. “Arthur, don't. Don't.” In the failing light his face was wan with compassion. “Standing in front of something, you said. Moving the boy's body, you said. But you can't walk, Arthur. You're dead from the waist down.”

I touched the dashboard of the dune buggy. “This is dead, too. But when you enter it, you can make it go. You could make it kill. It couldn't stop you even if it wanted to.” I could hear my voice rising hysterically. “I am the doorway, can't you understand that? They killed the boy, Richard! They moved the body!”

“I think you'd better see a medical man,” he said quietly. “Let's go back. Let's—”

“Check! Check on the boy, then! Find out—”

“You said you didn't even know his name.”

“He must have been from the village. It’s a small village. Ask—”

“I talked to Maud Harrington on the phone when I got the dune buggy. If anyone in the state has a longer nose, I’ve not come across her. I asked if she’d heard of anyone’s boy not coming home last night. She said she hadn’t.”

“But he’s a local! He has to be!”

He reached for the ignition switch, but I stopped him. He turned to look at me and I began to unwrap my hands.

From the Gulf, thunder muttered and growled.

I didn’t go to the doctor and I didn’t call Richard back. I spent three weeks with my hands bandaged every time I went out. Three weeks just blindly hoping it would go away. It wasn’t a rational act; I can admit that. If I had been a whole man who didn’t need a wheelchair for legs or who had spent a normal life in a normal occupation, I might have gone to Doc Flanders or to Richard. I still might have, if it hadn’t been for the memory of my aunt, shunned, virtually a prisoner, being eaten alive by her own failing flesh. So I kept a desperate silence and prayed that I would wake up some morning and find it had been an evil dream.

And little by little, I felt them. Them. An anonymous intelligence. I never really wondered what they looked like or where they had come from. It was moot. I was their doorway, and their window on the world. I got enough feedback from them to feel their revulsion and horror, to know that our world was very different from theirs. Enough feedback to feel their blind hate. But still they watched. Their flesh was embedded in my own. I began to realize that they were using me, actually manipulating me.

When the boy passed, raising one hand in his usual noncommittal salute, I had just about decided to get in touch with Cresswell at his Navy Department number. Richard had been right about one thing—I was certain that whatever had gotten hold of me had done it in deep

space or in that weird orbit around Venus. The Navy would study me, but they would not freakify me. I wouldn't have to wake up anymore into the creaking darkness and stifle a scream as I felt them watching, watching, watching.

My hands went out toward the boy and I realized that I had not bandaged them. I could see the eyes in the dying light, watching silently. They were large, dilated, golden-irised. I had poked one of them against the tip of a pencil once, and had felt excruciating agony slam up my arm. The eye seemed to glare at me with a chained hatred that was worse than physical pain. I did not poke again.

And now they were watching the boy. I felt my mind side-slip. A moment later my control was gone. The door was open. I lurched across the sand toward him, legs scissoring nervelessly, so much driven deadwood. My own eyes seemed to close and I saw only with those alien eyes—saw a monstrous alabaster sea-scape overtopped with a sky like a great purple way, saw a leaning, eroded shack that might have been the carcass of some unknown, flesh-devouring creature, saw an abominated creature that moved and respired and carried a device of wood and wire under its arm, a device constructed of geometrically impossible right angles.

I wonder what he thought, that wretched, unnamed boy with his sieve under his arm and his pockets bulging with an odd conglomerate of sandy tourist coins, what he thought when he saw me lurching at him like a blind conductor stretching out his hands over a lunatic orchestra, what he thought as the last of the light fell across my hands, red and split and shining with their burden of eyes, what he thought when the hands made that sudden, flailing gesture in the air, just before his head burst.

I know what I thought.

I thought I had peeked over the rim of the universe and into the fires of hell itself.

The wind pulled at the bandages and made them into tiny, whipping streamers as I unwrapped them. The clouds had blottered the red remnants of the sunset, and the dunes were dark and shadow-cast. The clouds raced and boiled above us.

“You must promise me one thing, Richard,” I said over the rising wind. “You must run if it seems I might try ... to hurt you. Do you understand that?”

“Yes.” His open-throated shirt whipped and rippled with the wind. His face was set, his own eyes little more than sockets in early dark.

The last of the bandages fell away.

I looked at Richard and they looked at Richard. I saw a face I had known for five years and come to love. They saw a distorted, living monolith.

“You see them,” I said hoarsely. “Now you see them.”

He took an involuntary step backward. His face became stained with a sudden unbelieving terror. Lightning slashed out of the sky. Thunder walked in the clouds and the water had gone black as the river Styx.

“Arthur—”

How hideous he was! How could I have lived near him, spoken with him? He was not a creature, but mute pestilence. He was—

“Run! Run, Richard!”

And he did run. He ran in huge, bounding leaps. He became a scaffold against the looming sky. My hands flew up, flew over my head in a screaming, orlesque gesture, the fingers reaching to the only familiar thing in this nightmare world—reaching to the clouds.

And the clouds answered.

There was a huge, blue-white streak of lightning that seemed like the end of the world. It struck Richard, it enveloped him. The last thing I remember is the electric stench of ozone and burnt flesh.

When I awoke I was sitting calmly on my porch, looking out toward the Big Dune. The storm had passed and the air was pleasantly cool. There was a tiny sliver of moon. The sand was virginal—no sign of Richard or of the dune buggy.

I looked down at my hands. The eyes were open but glazed. They had exhausted themselves. They dozed.

I knew well enough what had to be done. Before the door could be wedged open any further, it had to be locked. Forever. Already I could notice the first signs of structural change in the hands themselves. The fingers were beginning to shorten ... and to change.

There was a small hearth in the living room, and in season I had been in the habit of lighting a fire against the damp Florida cold. I lit one now, moving with haste. I had no idea when they might wake up to what I was doing.

When it was burning well I went out back to the kerosene drum and soaked both hands. They came awake immediately, screaming with agony. I almost didn't make it back to the living room, and to the fire.

But I did make it.

That was all seven years ago.

I'm still here, still watching the rockets take off. There have been more of them lately. This is a space-minded administration. There has even been talk of another series of manned Venus probes.

I found out the boy's name, not that it matters. He was from the village, just as I thought. But his mother had expected him to stay with a friend on the mainland that night, and the alarm was not

raised until the following Monday. Richard—well, everyone thought Richard was an odd duck, anyway. They suspect he may have gone back to Maryland or taken up with some woman.

As for me, I'm tolerated, although I have quite a reputation for eccentricity myself. After all, how many ex-astronauts regularly write their elected Washington officials with the idea that space-exploration money could be better spent elsewhere?

I get along just fine with these hooks. There was terrible pain for the first year or so, but the human body can adjust to almost anything. I shave with them and even tie my own shoe-laces. And as you can see, my typing is nice and even. I don't expect to have any trouble putting the shotgun into my mouth or pulling the trigger. It started again three weeks ago, you see.

There is a perfect circle of twelve golden eyes on my chest.

I KNOW WHAT YOU NEED



I KNOW WHAT YOU NEED

Stephen King

“I know what you need.”

Elizabeth looked up from her sociology text, startled, and saw a rather nondescript young man in a green fatigue jacket. For a moment she thought he looked familiar, as if she had known him before; the feeling was close to *deja vu*. Then it was gone. He was about her height, skinny, and ... twitchy. That was the word. He wasn't moving, but he seemed to be twitching inside his skin, just out of sight. His hair was black and unkempt. He wore thick horn-rimmed glasses that magnified his dark brown eyes, and the lenses looked dirty. No, she was quite sure she had never seen him before.

“You know,” she said, “I doubt that.”

“You need a strawberry double-dip cone. Right?”

She blinked at him, frankly startled. Somewhere in the back of her mind she had been thinking about breaking for an ice cream. She was studying for finals in one of the third-floor carrels of the Student Union, and there was still a woefully long way to go.

“Right?” he persisted, and smiled. It transformed his face from something over-intense and nearly ugly into something else that was oddly appealing. The word “cute” occurred to her, and that wasn't a good word to afflict a boy with, but this one was when he smiled. She smiled back before she could road block it behind her lips. This she didn't need, to have to waste time brushing off some weirdo who had decided to pick the worst time of the year to try to make an impression. She still had sixteen chapters of Introduction to Sociology to wade through.

“No thanks,” she said.

“Come on, if you hit them any harder you'll give yourself a headache. You've been at it two hours without a break.”

“How would you know that?”

“I’ve been watching you,” he said promptly, but this time his gamin grin was lost on her. She already had a headache.

“Well, you can stop,” she said, more sharply than she had intended. “I don’t like people staring at me.”

“I’m sorry.” She felt a little sorry for him, the way she sometimes felt sorry for stray dogs. He seemed to float in the green fatigue jacket and ... yes, he had on mismatched socks. One black, one brown. She felt herself getting ready to smile again and held it back.

“I’ve got these finals,” she said gently.

“Sure,” he said. “Okay.”

She looked after him for a moment pensively. Then she lowered her gaze to her book, but an afterimage of the encounter remained: strawberry double-dip.

When she got back to the dorm it was 11:15 P.M. and Alice was stretched out on her bed, listening to Neil Diamond and reading *The Story of O*.

“I didn’t know they assigned that in Eh-17,” Elizabeth said.

Alice sat up. “Broadening my horizons, darling. Spreading my intellectual wings. Raising my ... Liz?”

“Hmmm?”

“Did you hear what I said?”

“No, sorry, I—”

“You look like somebody conked you one, kid.”

“I met a guy tonight. Sort of a funny guy, at that.”

“Oh? He must be something if he can separate the great Rogan from her beloved texts.”

“His name is Edward Jackson Hamner, Junior, no less. Short. Skinny. Looks like he washed his hair last around Washington’s birthday. Oh, and mismatched socks. One black, one brown.”

“I thought you were more the fraternity type.”

“It’s nothing like that, Alice. I was studying at the Union on the third floor—the Think Tank—and he invited me down to the Grinder for an ice-cream cone. I told him no and he sort of slunk off. But once he started me thinking about ice cream, I couldn’t stop. I’d just decided to give up and take a break and there he was, holding a big, drippy strawberry double-dip in each hand.”

“I tremble to hear the denouement.”

Elizabeth snorted. “Well, I couldn’t really say no. So he sat down, and it turns out he had sociology with Professor Branner last year.”

“Will wonders never cease, lawd a mercy. Goshen to Christmas—”

“Listen, this is really amazing. You know the way I’ve been sweating that course?”

“Yes. You talk about it in your sleep, practically.”

“I’ve got a seventy-eight average. I’ve got to have an eighty to keep my scholarship, and that means I need at least an eighty-four on the final. Well, this Ed Hamner says Branner uses almost the same final every year. And Ed’s eidetic.”

“You mean he’s got a whatzit ... photographic memory?”

“Yes. Look at this.” She opened her sociology book and took out three sheets of notebook paper covered with writing.

Alice took them. “This looks like multiple-choice stuff.”

“It is. Ed says it’s Branner’s last year’s final word for word.”

Alice said flatly, “I don’t believe it.”

“But it covers all the material!”

“Still don’t believe it.” She handed the sheets back. “Just because this spook—”

“He isn’t a spook. Don’t call him that.”

“Okay. This little guy hasn’t got you bamboozled into just memorizing this and not studying at all, has he?”

“Of course not,” she said uneasily.

“And even if this is like the exam, do you think it’s exactly ethical?”

Anger surprised her and ran away with her tongue before she could hold it. “That’s great for you, sure. Dean’s List every semester and your folks paying your way. You aren’t ... Hey, I’m sorry. There was no call for that.”

Alice shrugged and opened 0 again, her face carefully neutral. “No, you’re right. Not my business. But why don’t you study the book, too ... just to be safe?”

“Of course I will.”

But mostly she studied the exam notes provided by Edward Jackson Hamner, Jr.

When she came out of the lecture hall after the exam he was sitting in the lobby, floating in his green army fatigue coat. He smiled tentatively at her and stood up. “How’d it go?”

Impulsively, she kissed his cheek. She could not remember such a blessed feeling of relief. “I think I aced it.”

“Really? That’s great. Like a burger?”

“Love one,” she said absently. Her mind was still on the exam. It was the one Ed had given her, almost word for word, and she had sailed through.

Over hamburgers, she asked him how his own finals were going.

“Don’t have any. I’m in Honors, and you don’t take them unless you want to. I was doing okay, so I didn’t.”

“Then why are you still here?”

“I had to see how you did, didn’t I?”

“Ed, you didn’t. That’s sweet, but—” The naked look in his eyes troubled her. She had seen it before. She was a pretty girl.

“Yes,” he said softly. “Yes, I did.”

“Ed, I’m grateful. I think you saved my scholarship. I really do. But I have a boyfriend, you know.”

“Serious?” he asked, with a poor attempt to speak lightly.

“Very,” she said, matching his tone. “Almost engaged.”

“Does he know he’s lucky? Does he know how lucky?”

“I’m lucky, too,” she said, thinking of Tony Lombard.

“Beth,” he said suddenly.

“What?” she asked, startled.

“Nobody calls you that, do they?”

“Why ... no. No, they don’t.”

“Not even this guy?”

“No—” Tony called her Liz. Sometimes Lizzie, which was even worse.

He leaned forward. “But Beth is what you like best, isn’t it?”

She laughed to cover her confusion. “Whatever in the world—”

“Never mind.” He grinned his gamin grin. “I’ll call you Beth. That’s better. Now eat your hamburger.”

Then her junior year was over, and she was saying goodbye to Alice. They were a little stiff together, and Elizabeth was sorry. She supposed it was her own fault; she had crowed a little loudly about her sociology final when grades were posted. She had scored a ninety-seven—highest in the division.

Well, she told herself as she waited at the airport for her flight to be called, it wasn’t any more unethical than the cramming she had been resigned to in that third-floor carrel. Cramming wasn’t real studying at all; just rote memorization that faded away to nothing as soon as the exam was over.

She fingered the envelope that poked out of her purse. Notice of her scholarship-loan package for her senior year—two thousand dollars. She and Tony would be working together in Boothbay, Maine, this summer, and the money she would earn there would put her over the top. And thanks to Ed Hamner, it was going to be a beautiful summer. Clear sailing all the way.

But it was the most miserable summer of her life.

June was rainy, the gas shortage depressed the tourist trade, and her tips at the Boothbay Inn were mediocre. Even worse, Tony was pressing her on the subject of marriage. He could get a job on or near campus, he said, and with her Student Aid grant, she could get

her degree in style. She was surprised to find that the idea scared rather than pleased her.

Something was wrong.

She didn't know what, but something was missing, out of whack, out of kilter. One night late in July she frightened herself by going on a hysterical crying jag in her apartment. The only good thing about it was that her roommate, a mousy little girl named Sandra Ackerman, was out on a date.

The nightmare came in early August. She was lying in the bottom of an open grave, unable to move. Rain fell from a white sky onto her upturned face. Then Tony was standing over her, wearing his yellow high-impact construction helmet.

"Marry me, Liz," he said, looking down at her expressionlessly. "Marry me or else."

She tried to speak, to agree; she would do anything if only he would take her out of this dreadful muddy hole. But she was paralyzed.

"All right," he said. "It's or else, then."

He went away. She struggled to break out of her paralysis and couldn't.

Then she heard the bulldozer.

A moment later she saw it, a high yellow monster, pushing a mound of wet earth in front of the blade. Tony's merciless face looked down from the open cab.

He was going to bury her alive.

Trapped in her motionless, voiceless body, she could only watch in dumb horror. Trickle of dirt began to run down the sides of the hole

A familiar voice cried, "Go! Leave her now! Go!"

Tony stumbled down from the bulldozer and ran.

Huge relief swept her. She would have cried had she been able. And her savior appeared, standing at the foot of the open grave like a sexton. It was Ed Hamner, floating in his green fatigue jacket, his hair awry, his horn-rims slipped down to the small bulge at the end of his nose. He held his hand out to her.

"Get up," he said gently. "I know what you need. Get up, Beth."

And she could get up. She sobbed with relief. She tried to thank him; her words spilled out on top of each other. And Ed only smiled gently and nodded. She took his hand and looked down to see her footing. And when she looked up again, she was holding the paw of a huge, slavering timber wolf with red hurricane-lantern eyes and thick, spiked teeth open to bite.

She woke up sitting bolt upright in bed, her nightgown drenched with sweat. Her body was shaking uncontrollably. And even after a warm shower and a glass of milk, she could not reconcile herself to the dark. She slept with the light on.

A week later Tony was dead.

She opened the door in her robe, expecting to see Tony, but it was Danny Kilmer, one of the fellows he worked with. Danny was a fun guy; she and Tony had doubled with him and his girl a couple of times. But standing in the doorway of her second-floor apartment, Danny looked not only serious but ill.

"Danny?" she said. "What—"

"Liz," he said. "Liz, you've got to hold onto yourself. You've ... ah, God!" He pounded the jamb of the door with one big-knuckled, dirty hand, and she saw he was crying.

“Danny, is it Tony? Is something—”

“Tony’s dead,” Danny said. “He was—” But he was talking to air. She had fainted.

The next week passed in a kind of dream. The story pieced itself together from the woefully brief newspaper account and from what Danny told her over a beer in the Harbor Inn.

They had been repairing drainage culverts on Route 16. Part of the road was torn up, and Tony was flagging traffic. A kid driving a red Fiat had been coming down the hill. Tony had flagged him, but the kid never even slowed. Tony had been standing next to a dump truck, and there was no place to jump back. The kid in the Fiat had sustained head lacerations and a broken arm; he was hysterical and also cold sober. The police found several holes in his brake lines, as if they had overheated and then melted through. His driving record was A-1; he had simply been unable to stop. Her Tony had been a victim of that rarest of automobile mishaps: an honest accident.

Her shock and depression were increased by guilt. The fates had taken out of her hands the decision on what to do about Tony. And a sick, secret part of her was glad it was so. Because she hadn’t wanted to marry Tony ... not since the night of her dream.

She broke down the day before she went home.

She was sitting on a rock outcropping by herself, and after an hour or so the tears came. They surprised her with their fury. She cried until her stomach hurt and her head ached, and when the tears passed she felt not better but at least drained and empty.

And that was when Ed Hamner said, “Beth?”

She jerked around, her mouth filled with the copper taste of fear, half expecting to see the snarling wolf of her dream. But it was only Ed Hamner, looking sunburned and strangely defenseless without his fatigue jacket and blue jeans. He was wearing red shorts that

stopped just ahead of his bony knees, a white T-shirt that billowed on his thin chest like a loose sail in the ocean breeze, and rubber thongs. He wasn't smiling and the fierce sun glitter on his glasses made it impossible to see his eyes.

"Ed?" she said tentatively, half convinced that this was some grief-induced hallucination. "Is that really—"

"Yes, it's me."

"How—"

"I've been working at the Lakewood Theater in Skowhegan. I ran into your roommate ... Alice, is that her name?"

"Yes."

"She told me what happened. I came right away. Poor Beth." He moved his head, only a degree or so, but the sun glare slid off his glasses and she saw nothing wolfish, nothing predatory, but only a calm, warm sympathy.

She began to weep again, and staggered a little with the unexpected force of it. Then he was holding her and then it was all right.

They had dinner at the Silent Woman in Waterville, which was twenty-five miles away; maybe exactly the distance she needed. They went in Ed's car, a new Corvette, and he drove well—neither showily nor fussily, as she guessed he might. She didn't want to talk and she didn't want to be cheered up. He seemed to know it, and played quiet music on the radio.

And he ordered without consulting her—seafood. She thought she wasn't hungry, but when the food came she fell to ravenously.

When she looked up again her plate was empty and she laughed nervously. Ed was smoking a cigarette and watching her.

“The grieving damsel ate a hearty meal,” she said. “You must think I’m awful.”

“No,” he said. “You’ve been through a lot and you need to get your strength back. It’s like being sick, isn’t it?”

“Yes. Just like that.”

He took her hand across the table, squeezed it briefly, then let it go. “But now it’s recuperation time, Beth.”

“Is it? Is it really?”

“Yes,” he said. “So tell me. What are your plans?”

“I’m going home tomorrow. After that, I don’t know.”

“You’re going back to school, aren’t you?”

“I just don’t know. After this, it seems so ... so trivial. A lot of the purpose seems to have gone out of it. And all the fun.”

“It’ll come back. That’s hard for you to believe now, but it’s true. Try it for six weeks and see. You’ve got nothing better to do.” The last seemed a question.

“That’s true, I guess. But ... Can I have a cigarette?”

“Sure. They’re menthol, though. Sorry.”

She took one. “How did you know I didn’t like menthol cigarettes?”

He shrugged. “You just don’t look like one of those, I guess.”

She smiled. “You’re funny, do you know that?”

He smiled neutrally.

“No, really. For you of all people to turn up ... I thought I didn’t want to see anyone. But I’m really glad it was you, Ed.”

“Sometimes it’s nice to be with someone you’re not involved with.”

“That’s it, I guess.” She paused. “Who are you, Ed, besides my fairy godfather? Who are you really?” It was suddenly important to her that she know.

He shrugged. “Nobody much. Just one of the sort of funny-looking guys you see creeping around campus with a load of books under one arm—”

“Ed, you’re not funny-looking.”

“Sure I am,” he said, and smiled. “Never grew all the way out of my high-school acne, never got rushed by a big frat, never made any kind of splash in the social whirl. Just a dorm rat making grades, that’s all. When the big corporations interview on campus next spring, I’ll probably sign on with one of them and Ed Hamner will disappear forever.”

“That would be a great shame,” she said softly.

He smiled, and it was a very peculiar smile. Almost bitter.

“What about your folks?” she asked. “Where you live, what you like to do—”

“Another time,” he said. “I want to get you back. You’ve got a long plane ride tomorrow, and a lot of hassles.”

The evening left her relaxed for the first time since Tony’s death, without that feeling that somewhere inside a mainspring was being wound and wound to the breaking point. She thought sleep would come easily, but it did not.

Little questions nagged.

Alice told me ... poor Beth.

But Alice was summering in Kittery, eighty miles from Skowhegan. She must have been at Lakewood for a play.

The Corvette, this year's model. Expensive. A backstage job at Lakewood hadn't paid for that. Were his parents rich?

He had ordered just what she would have ordered herself. Maybe the only thing on the menu she would have eaten enough of to discover that she was hungry.

The menthol cigarettes, the way he had kissed her good night, exactly as she had wanted to be kissed. And—

You've got a long plane ride tomorrow.

He knew she was going home because she had told him. But how had he known she was going by plane? Or that it was a long ride?

It bothered her. It bothered her because she was halfway to being in love with Ed Hamner.

I know what you need.

Like the voice of a submarine captain tolling off fathoms, the words he had greeted her with followed her down to sleep.

He didn't come to the tiny Augusta airport to see her off, and waiting for the plane, she was surprised by her own disappointment. She was thinking about how quietly you could grow to depend on a person, almost like a junkie with a habit. The hype fools himself that he can take this stuff or leave it, when really—

"Elizabeth Rogan," the PA blared. "Please pick up the white courtesy phone."

She hurried to it. And Ed's voice said, "Beth?"

“Ed! It’s good to hear you. I thought maybe ...”

“That I’d meet you?” He laughed. “You don’t need me for that. You’re a big strong girl. Beautiful, too. You can handle this. Will I see you at school?”

“I ... yes, I think so.”

“Good.” There was a moment of silence. Then he said, “Because I love you. I have from the first time I saw you.”

Her tongue was locked. She couldn’t speak. A thousand thoughts whirled through her mind.

He laughed again, gently. “No, don’t say anything. Not now. I’ll see you. There’ll be time then. All the time in the world. Good trip, Beth. Goodbye.”

And he was gone, leaving her with a white phone in her hand and her own chaotic thoughts and questions.

September.

Elizabeth picked up the old pattern of school and classes like a woman who has been interrupted at knitting. She was rooming with Alice again, of course; they had been roomies since freshman year, when they had been thrown together by the housing-department computer. They had always gotten along well, despite differing interests and personalities. Alice was the studious one, a chemistry major with a 3.6 average. Elizabeth was more social, less bookish, with a split major in education and math.

They still got on well, but a faint coolness seemed to have grown up between them over the summer. Elizabeth chalked it up to the difference of opinion over the sociology final, and didn’t mention it.

The events of the summer began to seem dreamlike. In a funny way it sometimes seemed that Tony might have been a boy she had

known in high school. It still hurt to think about him, and she avoided the subject with Alice, but the hurt was an old-bruise throb and not the bright pain of an open wound.

What hurt more was Ed Hamner's failure to call.

A week passed, then two, then it was October. She got a student directory from the Union and looked up his name. It was no help; after his name were only the words "Mill St." And Mill was a very long street indeed. And so she waited, and when she was called for dates—which was often—she turned them down. Alice raised her eyebrows but said nothing; she was buried alive in a six-week biochem project and spent most of her evenings at the library. Elizabeth noticed the long white envelopes that her roommate was receiving once or twice a week in the mail—since she was usually back from class first but thought nothing of them. The private detective agency was discreet; it did not print its return address on its envelopes.

When the intercom buzzed, Alice was studying. "You get it, Liz. Probably for you anyway."

Elizabeth went to the intercom. "Yes?"

"Gentleman door-caller, Liz."

Oh, Lord.

"Who is it?" she asked, annoyed, and ran through her tattered stack of excuses. Migraine headache. She hadn't used that one this week.

The desk girl said, amused, "His name is Edward Jackson Hamner. Junior, no less." Her voice lowered. "His socks don't match."

Elizabeth's hand flew to the collar of her robe. "Oh, God. Tell him I'll be right down. No, tell him it will be just a minute. No, a couple of minutes, okay?"

“Sure,” the voice said dubiously. “Don’t have a hemorrhage.”

Elizabeth took a pair of slacks out of her closet. Took out a short denim skirt. Felt the curlers in her hair and groaned. Began to yank them out.

Alice watched all this calmly, without speaking, but she looked speculatively at the door for a long time after Elizabeth had left.

He looked just the same; he hadn’t changed at all. He was wearing his green fatigue jacket, and it still looked at least two sizes too big. One of the bows of his horn-rimmed glasses had been mended with electrician’s tape. His jeans looked new and stiff, miles from the soft and faded “in” look that Tony had achieved effortlessly. He was wearing one green sock, one brown sock.

And she knew she loved him.

“Why didn’t you call before?” she asked, going to him.

He stuck his hands in the pockets of his jacket and grinned shyly. “I thought I’d give you some time to date around. Meet some guys. Figure out what you want.”

“I think I know that.”

“Good. Would you like to go to a movie?”

“Anything,” she said. “Anything at all.”

As the days passed it occurred to her that she had never met anyone, male or female, that seemed to understand her moods and needs so completely or so wordlessly. Their tastes coincided. While Tony had enjoyed violent movies of the Godfather type, Ed seemed more into comedy or nonviolent dramas. He took her to the circus one night when she was feeling low and they had a hilariously wonderful time. Study dates were real study dates, not just an excuse to grope on the third floor of the Union. He took her to

dances and seemed especially good at the old ones, which she loved. They won a fifties Stroll trophy at a Homecoming Nostalgia Dance. More important, he seemed to understand when she wanted to be passionate. He didn't force her or hurry her; she never got the feeling that she had with some of the other boys she had gone out with—that there was an inner timetable for sex, beginning with a kiss good night on Date 1 and ending with a night in some friend's borrowed apartment on Date 10. The Mill Street apartment was Ed's exclusively, a third-floor walk-up. They went there often, and Elizabeth went without the feeling that she was walking into some minor-league Don Juan's passion pit. He didn't push. He honestly seemed to want what she wanted, when she wanted it. And things progressed.

When school reconvened following the semester break, Alice seemed strangely preoccupied. Several times that afternoon before Ed came to pick her up—they were going out to dinner—Elizabeth looked up to see her roommate frowning down at a large manila envelope on her desk. Once Elizabeth almost asked about it, then decided not to. Some new project probably.

*

It was snowing hard when Ed brought her back to the dorm.

"Tomorrow?" he asked. "My place?"

"Sure. I'll make some popcorn."

"Great," he said, and kissed her. "I love you, Beth."

"Love you, too."

"Would you like to stay over?" Ed asked evenly. "Tomorrow night?"

"All right, Ed." She looked into his eyes. "Whatever you want."

"Good," he said quietly. "Sleep well, kid."

“You, too.”

She expected that Alice would be asleep and entered the room quietly, but Alice was up and sitting at her desk.

“Alice, are you okay?”

“I have to talk to you, Liz. About Ed.”

“What about him?”

Alice said carefully, “I think that when I finish talking to you we’re not going to be friends anymore. For me, that’s giving up a lot. So I want you to listen carefully.”

“Then maybe you better not say anything.”

“I have to try.”

Elizabeth felt her initial curiosity kindle into anger. “Have you been snooping around Ed?”

Alice only looked at her.

“Were you jealous of us?”

“No. If I’d been jealous of you and your dates, I would have moved out two years ago.”

Elizabeth looked at her, perplexed. She knew what Alice said was the truth. And she suddenly felt afraid.

“Two things made me wonder about Ed Hamner,” Alice said. “First, you wrote me about Tony’s death and said how lucky it was that I’d seen Ed at the Lakewood Theater ... how he came right over to Boothbay and really helped you out. But I never saw him, Liz. I was never near the Lakewood Theater last summer.”

“But ...”

“But how did he know Tony was dead? I have no idea. I only know he didn’t get it from me. The other thing was that eidetic-memory business. My God, Liz, he can’t even remember which socks he’s got on!”

“That’s a different thing altogether,” Liz said stiffly. “It—”

“Ed Hamner was in Las Vegas last summer,” Alice said softly. “He came back in mid-July and took a motel room in Pemaquid. That’s just across the Boothbay Harbor town line. Almost as if he were waiting for you to need him.”

“That’s crazy! And how would you know Ed was in Las Vegas?”

“I ran into Shirley D’Antonio just before school started. She worked in the Pines Restaurant, which is just across from the playhouse. She said she never saw anybody who looked like Ed Hamner. So I’ve known he’s been lying to you about several things. And so I went to my father and laid it out and he gave me the go-ahead.”

“To do what?” Elizabeth asked, bewildered.

“To hire a private detective agency.”

Elizabeth was on her feet. “No more, Alice. That’s it.” She would catch the bus into town, spend tonight at Ed’s apartment. She had only been waiting for him to ask her, anyway.

“At least know,” Alice said. “Then make your own decision.”

“I don’t have to know anything except he’s kind and good and—”

“Love is blind, huh?” Alice said, and smiled bitterly. “Well, maybe I happen to love you a little, Liz. Have you ever thought of that?”

Elizabeth turned and looked at her for a long moment. “If you do, you’ve got a funny way of showing it,” she said. “Go on, then. Maybe you’re right. Maybe I owe you that much. Go on.”

“You knew him a long time ago,” Alice said quietly.

“I ... what?”

“P.S. 119, Bridgeport, Connecticut.”

Elizabeth was struck dumb. She and her parents had lived in Bridgeport for six years, moving to their present home the year after she had finished the second grade. She had gone to P.S. 119, but—

“Alice, are you sure?”

“Do you remember him?”

“No, of course not!” But she did remember the feeling she’d had the first time she had seen Ed—the feeling of *deja vu*.

“The pretty ones never remember the ugly ducklings, I guess. Maybe he had a crush on you. You were in the first grade with him, Liz. Maybe he sat in the back of the room and just ... watched you. Or on the playground. Just a little nothing kid who already wore glasses and probably braces and you couldn’t even remember him, but I’ll bet he remembers you.”

Elizabeth said, “What else?”

“The agency traced him from school fingerprints. After that it was just a matter of finding people and talking to them. The operative assigned to the case said he couldn’t understand some of what he was getting. Neither do I. Some of it’s scary.”

“It better be,” Elizabeth said grimly.

“Ed Hamner, Sr., was a compulsive gambler. He worked for a top-line advertising agency in New York and then moved to Bridgeport sort of on the run. The operative says that almost every big-money poker game and high-priced book in the city was holding his markers.”

Elizabeth closed her eyes. “These people really saw you got a full measure of dirt for your dollar, didn’t they?”

“Maybe. Anyway, Ed’s father got in another jam in Bridgeport. It was gambling again, but this time he got mixed up with a big-time loan shark. He got a broken leg and a broken arm somehow. The operative says he doubts it was an accident.”

“Anything else?” Elizabeth asked. “Child beating? Embezzlement?”

“He landed a job with a two-bit Los Angeles ad agency in 1961. That was a little too close to Las Vegas. He started to spend his weekends there, gambling heavily ... and losing. Then he started taking Ed Junior with him. And he started to win.”

“You’re making all of this up. You must be.”

Alice tapped the report in front of her. “It’s all here, Liz. Some of it wouldn’t stand up in court, but the operative says none of the people he talked with would have a reason to lie. Ed’s father called Ed his ‘good luck charm.’ At first, nobody objected to the boy even though it was illegal for him to be in the casinos. His father was a prize fish. But then the father started sticking just to roulette, playing only odd-even and red-black. By the end of the year the boy was off-limits in every casino on the strip. And his father took up a new kind of gambling.”

“What?”

“The stock market. When the Hamners moved to L.A. in the middle of 1961, they were living in a ninety-dollar-a-month cheese box and Mr. Hamner was driving a ‘52 Chevrolet. At the end of 1962, just sixteen months later, he had quit his job and they were living in their own home in San Jose. Mr. Hamner was driving a brand-new Thunderbird and Mrs. Hamner had a Volkswagen. You see, it’s against the law for a small boy to be in the Nevada casinos, but no one could take the stock-market page away from him.”

“Are you implying that Ed ... that he could ... Alice, you’re crazy!”

“I’m not implying anything. Unless maybe just that he knew what his daddy needed.”

I know what you need.

It was almost as if the words had been spoken into her ear, and she shuddered.

“Mrs. Hamner spent the next six years in and out of various mental institutions. Supposedly for nervous disorders, but the operative talked to an orderly who said she was pretty close to psychotic. She claimed her son was the devil’s henchman. She stabbed him with a pair of scissors in 1964. Tried to kill him. She ... Liz? Liz, what is it?”

“The scar,” she muttered. “We went swimming at the University pool on an open night about a month ago. He’s got a deep, dimpled scar on his shoulder ... here.” She put her hand just above her left breast. “He said ...” A wave of nausea tried to climb up her throat and she had to wait for it to recede before she could go on. “He said he fell on a picket fence when he was a little boy.”

“Shall I go on?”

“Finish, why not? What can it hurt now?”

“His mother was released from a very plush mental institution in the San Joaquin Valley in 1968. The three of them went on a vacation. They stopped at a picnic spot on Route 101. The boy was collecting firewood when she drove the car right over the edge of the dropoff above the ocean with both her and her husband in it. It might have been an attempt to run Ed down. By then he was nearly eighteen. His father left him a million-dollar stock portfolio. Ed came east a year and a half later and enrolled here. And that’s the end.”

“No more skeletons in the closet?”

“Liz, aren’t there enough?”

She got up. “No wonder he never wants to mention his family. But you had to dig up the corpse, didn’t you?”

“You’re blind,” Alice said. Elizabeth was putting on her coat. “I suppose you’re going to him.”

“Right.”

“Because you love him.”

“Right.”

Alice crossed the room and grabbed her arm. “Will you get that sulky, petulant look off your face for a second and think! Ed Hamner is able to do things the rest of us only dream about. He got his father a stake at roulette and made him rich playing the stock market. He seems to be able to will winning. Maybe he’s some kind of low-grade psychic. Maybe he’s got precognition. I don’t know. There are people who seem to have a dose of that. Liz, hasn’t it ever occurred to you that he’s forced you to love him?”

Liz turned to her slowly. “I’ve never heard anything so ridiculous in my life.”

“Is it? He gave you that sociology test the same way he gave his father the right side of the roulette board! He was never enrolled in any sociology course! I checked. He did it because it was the only way he could make you take him seriously!”

“Stop it!” Liz cried. She clapped her hands over her ears.

“He knew the test, and he knew when Tony was killed, and he knew you were going home on a plane! He even knew just the right psychological moment to step back into your life last October.”

Elizabeth pulled away from her and opened the door.

“Please,” Alice said. “Please, Liz, listen. I don’t know how he can do those things. I doubt if even he knows for sure. He might not mean to do you any harm, but he already is. He’s made you love him by knowing every secret thing you want and need, and that’s not love at all. That’s rape.”

Elizabeth slammed the door and ran down the stairs.

She caught the last bus of the evening into town. It was snowing more heavily than ever, and the bus lumbered through the drifts that had blown across the road like a crippled beetle. Elizabeth sat in the back, one of only six or seven passengers, a thousand thoughts in her mind.

Menthol cigarettes. The stock exchange. The way he had known her mother’s nickname was Deedee. A little boy sitting at the back of a first-grade classroom, making sheep’s eyes at a vivacious little girl too young to understand that—

I know what you need.

No. No. No. I do love him!

Did she? Or was she simply delighted at being with someone who always ordered the right thing, took her to the right movie, and did not want to go anywhere or do anything she didn’t? Was he just a kind of psychic mirror, showing her only what she wanted to see? The presents he gave were always the right presents. When the weather had turned suddenly cold and she had been longing for a hair dryer, who gave her one? Ed Hamner, of course. Just happened to see one on sale in Day’s, he had said. She, of course, had been delighted.

That’s not love at all. That’s rape.

The wind clawed at her face as she stepped out on the corner of Main and Mill, and she winced against it as the bus drew away with a

smooth diesel growl. Its taillights twinkled briefly in the snowy night for a moment and were gone.

She had never felt so lonely in her life.

He wasn't home.

She stood outside his door after five minutes of knocking, nonplussed. It occurred to her that she had no idea what Ed did or whom he saw when he wasn't with her. The subject had never come up.

Maybe he's raising the price of another hair dryer in a poker game.

With sudden decision she stood on her toes and felt along the top of the doorjamb for the spare key she knew he kept there. Her fingers stumbled over it and it fell to the hall floor with a clink.

She picked it up and used it in the lock.

The apartment looked different with Ed gone—artificial, like a stage set. It had often amused her that someone who cared so little about his personal appearance should have such a neat, picture-book domicile. Almost as if he had decorated it for her and not himself. But of course that was crazy. Wasn't it?

It occurred to her again, as if for the first time, how much she liked the chair she sat in when they studied or watched TV. It was just right, the way Baby Bear's chair had been for Goldilocks. Not too hard, not too soft. Just right. Like everything else she associated with Ed.

There were two doors opening off the living room. One went to the kitchenette, the other to his bedroom.

The wind whistled outside, making the old apartment building creak and settle.

In the bedroom, she stared at the brass bed. It looked neither too hard nor too soft, but just right. An insidious voice smirked: It's almost too perfect, isn't it?

She went to the bookcase and ran her eye aimlessly over the titles. One jumped at her eyes and she pulled it out: Dance Crazes of the Fifties. The book opened cleanly to a point some three-quarters through. A section titled "The Stroll" had been circled heavily in red grease pencil and in the margin the word BETH had been written in large, almost accusatory letters.

I ought to go now, she told herself. I can still save something. If he came back now I could never look him in the face again and Alice would win. Then she'd really get her money's worth.

But she couldn't stop, and knew it. Things had gone too far.

She went to the closet and turned the knob, but it didn't give. Locked.

On the off chance, she stood on tiptoe again and felt along the top of the door. And her fingers felt a key. She took it down and somewhere inside a voice said very clearly: Don't do this. She thought of Bluebeard's wife and what she had found when she opened the wrong door. But it was indeed too late; if she didn't proceed now she would always wonder. She opened the closet.

And had the strangest feeling that this was where the real Ed Hamner, Jr., had been hiding all the time.

The closet was a mess—a jumbled rickrack of clothes, books, an unstrung tennis racket, a pair of tattered tennis shoes, old prelims and reports tossed helter-skelter, a spilled pouch of Borkum Riff pipe tobacco. His green fatigue jacket had been flung in the far corner.

She picked up one of the books and blinked at the title. The Golden Bough. Another. Ancient Rites, Modern Mysteries. Another. Haitian Voodoo. And a last one, bound in old, cracked leather, the title

almost rubbed off the binding by much handling, smelling vaguely like rotted fish: Necronomicon. She opened it at random, gasped, and flung it away, the obscenity still hanging before her eyes.

More to regain her composure than anything else, she reached for the green fatigue jacket, not admitting to herself that she meant to go through its pockets. But as she lifted it she saw something else. A small tin box ...

Curiously, she picked it up and turned it over in her hands, hearing things rattle inside. It was the kind of box a young boy might choose to keep his treasures in. Stamped in raised letters on the tin bottom were the words "Bridgeport Candy Co." She opened it.

The doll was on top. The Elizabeth doll.

She looked at it and began to shudder.

The doll was dressed in a scrap of red nylon, part of a scarf she had lost two or three months back. At a movie with Ed. The arms were pipe cleaners that had been draped in stuff that looked like blue moss. Graveyard moss, perhaps. There was hair on the doll's head, but that was wrong. It was fine white flax, taped to the doll's pink gum-eraser head. Her own hair was sandy blond and coarser than this. This was more the way her hair had been—

When she was a little girl

She swallowed and there was a clicking in her throat. Hadn't they all been issued scissors in the first grade, tiny scissors with rounded blade, just right for a child's hand? Had that long-ago little boy crept up behind her, perhaps at nap time, and—

Elizabeth put the doll aside and looked in the box again. There was a blue poker chip with a strange six-sided pattern drawn on it in red ink. A tattered newspaper obituary—Mr. and Mrs. Edward Hamner. The two of them smiled meaninglessly out of the accompanying photo, and she saw that the same six-sided pattern had been drawn

across their faces, this time in black ink, like a pall. Two more dolls, one male, one female. The similarity to the faces in the obituary photograph was hideous, unmistakable.

And something else.

She fumbled it out, and her fingers shook so badly she almost dropped it. A tiny sound escaped her.

It was a model car, the sort small boys buy in drugstores and hobby shops and then assemble with airplane glue. This one was a Fiat. It had been painted red. And a piece of what looked like one of Tony's shirts had been taped to the front.

She turned the model car upside down. Someone had hammered the underside to fragments.

"So you found it, you ungrateful bitch."

She screamed and dropped the car and the box. His foul treasures sprayed across the floor.

He was standing in the doorway, looking at her. She had never seen such a look of hate on a human face.

She said, "You killed Tony."

He grinned unpleasantly. "Do you think you could prove it?"

"It doesn't matter," she said, surprised at the steadiness of her own voice. "I know. And I never want to see you again. Ever. And if you do ... anything ... to anyone else, I'll know. And I'll fix you. Somehow."

His face twisted. "That's the thanks I get. I gave you everything you ever wanted. Things no other man could have. Admit it. I made you perfectly happy."

"You killed Tony!" She screamed it at him.

He took another step into the room. "Yes, and I did it for you. And what are you, Beth? You don't know what love is. I loved you from the first time I saw you, over seventeen years ago. Could Tony say that? It's never been hard for you. You're pretty. You never had to think about wanting or needing or about being lonely. You never had to find ... other ways to get the things you had to have. There was always a Tony to give them to you. All you ever had to do was smile and say please." His voice rose a note. "I could never get what I wanted that way. Don't you think I tried? It didn't work with my father. He just wanted more and more. He never even kissed me good night or gave me a hug until I made him rich. And my mother was the same way. I gave her her marriage back, but was that enough for her? She hated me! She wouldn't come near me! She said I was unnatural! I gave her nice things but ... Beth, don't do that! Don't ... doon't—

She stepped on the Elizabeth doll and crushed it, turning her heel on it. Something inside her flared in agony, and then was gone. She wasn't afraid of him now. He was just a small, shrunken boy in a young man's body. And his socks didn't match.

"I don't think you can do anything to me now, Ed," she told him. "Not now. Am I wrong?"

He turned from her. "Go on," he said weakly. "Get out. But leave my box. At least do that."

"I'll leave the box. But not the things in it." She walked past him. His shoulders twitched, as if he might turn and try to grab her, but then they slumped.

As she reached the second-floor landing, he came to the top of the stairs and called shrilly after her: "Go on then! But you'll never be satisfied with any man after me! And when your looks go and men stop trying to give you anything you want, you'll wish for me! You'll think of what you threw away!"

She went down the stairs and out into the snow. Its coldness felt good against her face. It was a two-mile walk back to the campus, but she didn't care. She wanted the walk, wanted the cold. She wanted it to make her clean.

In a queer, twisted way she felt sorry for him—a little boy with a huge power crammed inside a dwarfed spirit. A little boy who tried to make humans behave like toy soldiers and then stamped on them in a fit of temper when they wouldn't or when they found out.

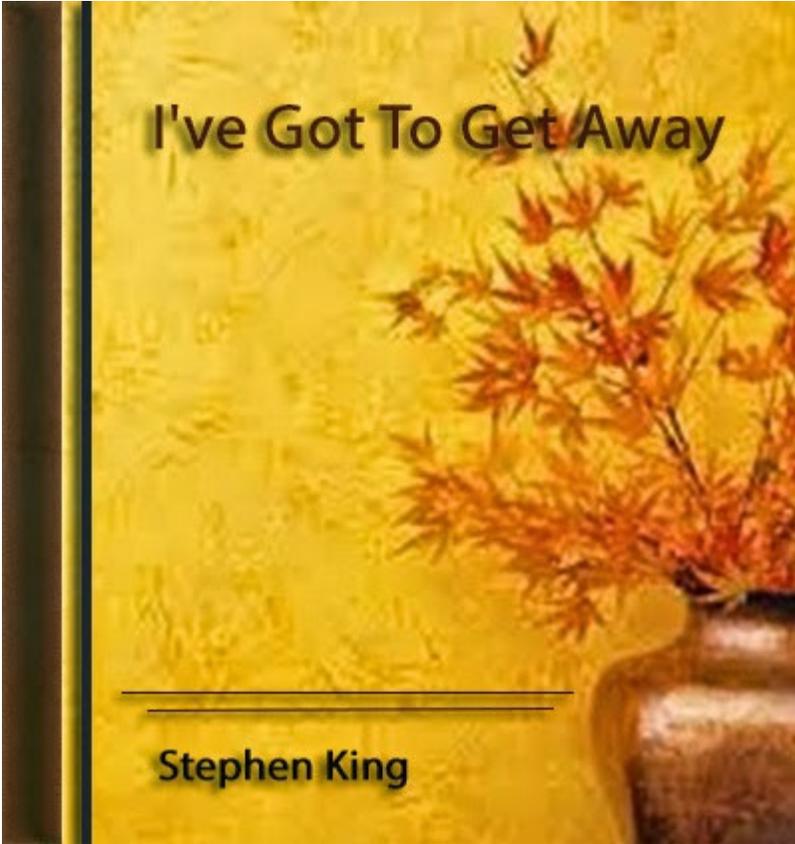
And what was she? Blessed with all the things he was not, through no fault of his or effort of her own? She remembered the way she had reacted to Alice, trying blindly and jealously to hold onto something that was easy rather than good, not caring, not caring.

When your looks go and men stop trying to give you anything you want, you'll wish for me! ... I know what you need.

But was she so small that she actually needed so little?

Please, dear God, no.

On the bridge between the campus and town she paused and threw Ed Hamner's scraps of magic over the side, piece by piece. The red-painted model Fiat went last, falling end over end into the driven snow until it was lost from sight. Then she walked on.



I've Got To Get Away

Stephen King

I'VE GOT TO GET AWAY

Stephen King

“What am I doing here?” Suddenly I wondered. I was terribly frightened. I could remember nothing, but here I was, working in an atomic factory assembly line. All I knew was that I was Denny Phillips. It was as if I had just awakened from a slumber. The place was guarded and the guards had guns. They looked like they meant business. There were others working and they looked like zombies. They looked like they were prisoners.

But it didn't matter. I had to find out who I was ... what I was was doing.

I had to get away!

I started across the floor. One of the guards yelled, “Get back there!”

I ran across the room, bowled over a guard and ran out the door. I heard gun blasts and knew they were shooting at me. But the driving thought persisted:

I've got to get away!

There was another set of guards blocking the other door. It looked like I was trapped, until I saw a boom swing down. I grabbed it and was pulled over three hundred feet to the next landing. But it was no good. There was a guard there. He shot at me. I felt all weak and dizzy ... I fell into a great dark pit ...

One of the guards took off his hat and scratched his head.

“I dunno Joe, I just dunno. Progress is a great thing ... but that x-238A ... Denny Phillips, name ... they' re great robots ... but they go haywire, now and then, and it seems like they was looking for something ... almost human. Oh well.”

A truck drove away, and the sign on its side said: ACME ROBOT REPAIR”.

Two weeks later, Denny Phillips was back on the job ... blank look in his eyes. But suddenly...

His eyes become clear ... and, the overwhelming thought comes to him: I'VE GOT TO GET AWAY!!

IN A HALF WORLD OF TERROR
(aka I WAS A TEENAGE GRAVE ROBBER)

Stephen King

CHAPTER ONE

It was like a nightmare. Like some unreal dream that you wake up from the next morning. Only this nightmare was happening. Ahead of me I could see Rankin's flashlight; a large yellow eye in the sultry summer darkness. I tripped over a gravestone and almost went sprawling. Rankin whirled on me with a hissed oath.

"Do you want to wake up the caretaker, you fool?"

I muttered a reply and we crept forward. Finally, Rankin stopped and shone the flashlight's beam on a freshly chiseled gravestone. On it, it read:

DANILE WHEATHERBY

1899-19622

He has joined his beloved wife in a better land.

I felt a shovel thrust into my hands and suddenly I was sure that I couldn't go through with it. But I remembered the bursar shaking his head and saying, "I'm afraid we can't give you any more time, Dan. You'll have to leave today. If I could help in any way, I would, believe me..."

I dug into the still soft earth and lifted it over my shoulder. Perhaps fifteen minutes later my shovel came in contact with wood. The two of us quickly excavated the hole until the coffin stood revealed under Rankin's flashlight. We jumped down and heaved the coffin up.

Numbed, I watched Rankin swing the spade at the locks and seals. After a few blows it gave and we lifted the lid. The body of Daniel Wheatherby looked up at us with glazed eyes. I felt horror gently wash over me. I had always thought that the eyes closed when one died.

“Don’t just stand there,” Rankin whispered, “it’s almost four. We’ve got to get out of here!”

We wrapped the body in a sheet and lowered the coffin back into the earth. We shoveled rapidly and carefully replaced the sod. The dirt we had missed was scattered.

By the time we picked up the white-sheeted body, the first traces of dawn were beginning to lighten the sky in the east. We went through the hedge that skirted the cemetery and entered the woods that fronted it on the west. Rankin expertly picked his way through it for a quarter of a mile until we came to the car, parked where we had left it on an overgrown and unused wagon track that had once been a road. The body was put into the trunk. Shortly thereafter, we joined the stream of commuters hurrying for the 6. 00 train.

I looked at my hands as if I had never seen them before. The dirt under my fingernails had been piled up on top of a man’s final resting place not twenty-four hours ago. It felt unclean.

Rankin’s attention was directed entirely on his driving. I looked at him and realized that he didn’t mind the repulsive act that we had just performed. To him it was just another job. We turned off the main road and began to climb the twisting, narrow dirt road. And then we came out into the open and I could see it, the huge rambling Victorian mansion that sat on the summit of the steep grade. Rankin drove around back and wordlessly up to the steep rock face of a bluff that rose another forty feet upward, slightly to the right of the house.

There was a hideous grinding noise and a portion of the hill large enough to carve an entrance for the car slid open. Rankin drove in and killed the engine. We were in a small, cube-like room that served as a hidden garage. Just then, a door at the far end slid open and a tall, rigid man approached us.

Steffen Weinbaum’s face was much like a skull; his eyes were deep-set and the skin was stretched so tautly over his cheekbones that his flesh was almost transparent.

“Where is it?” His voice was deep, ominous.

Wordlessly, Rankin got out and I followed his lead. Rankin opened the trunk and we pulled the sheet-swaddled figure out.

Weinbaum nodded slowly.

“Good, very good. Bring him into the lab.”

CHAPTER TWO

When I was thirteen, my parents were killed in an automobile crash. It left me an orphan and should have landed me in an orphan's home. But my father's will disclosed the fact that he had left me a substantial sum of money and I was self-reliant. The welfare people never came around and I was left in the somewhat bizarre role as the sole tenant of my own house at thirteen. I paid the mortgage out of the bank account and tried to stretch a dollar as far as possible.

By the time I was eighteen and was out of school, the money was low, but I wanted to go to college. I sold the house for \$10,000.00 through a real estate buyer. In early September, the roof fell in. I received a very nice letter from Erwin, Erwin and Bradstreet, attorneys at law. To put it in layman's language, it said that the department store at which my father had been employed had just got around to a general audit of their books. It seemed that there was \$15,000.00 missing and that they had proof that my father had stolen it. The rest of the letter merely stated that if I didn't pay up the \$15,000.00 we'd got to court and they would try to get double the amount.

It shook me up and a few questions that should have stood out in my mind just didn't register as a result. Why didn't they uncover the error earlier? Why were they offering to settle out of court?

I went down to the office of Erwin, Erwin, & Bradstreet and talked the matter over. To make a long story short, I paid the sum there were asking, I had no more money.

The next day I looked up the firm of Erwin, Erwin & Bradstreet in the phone book. It wasn't listed. I went down to their office and found a For Rent sign on the door. It was then that I realized that I had been conned like gullible kid—which, I reflected miserably was what I was.

I bluffed my way through the first for months of college but finally they discovered that I hadn't been properly registered.

That same day I met Rankin at a bar. It was my first experience in a tavern. I had a forged driver's license and I bought enough whiskey to get drunk. I figured that it would take about two straight whiskeys since I had never had anything but a bottle of beer now and then prior to that night.

One felt good, two made my trouble seem rather inconsequential. I was nursing my third when Rankin entered the bar.

He sat on the stool next to me and looked attentively at me.

"You got troubles?" I asked rudely.

Rankin smiled. "Yes, I'm out to find a helper."

"Oh, yeah?" I asked, becoming interested. "You mean you want to hire somebody?"

"Yes."

"Well, I'm your man."

He started to say something and then changed his mind.

"Let's go over to a booth and talk it over, shall we?"

We walked over to a booth and I realized that I was listing slightly. Rankin pulled the curtain.

"That's better. Now, you want a job?"

I nodded.

"Do you care what it is?"

"No. Just how much does it pay?"

"Five hundred a job."

I lost a little bit of the rosy fog that encased me. Something was wrong here. I didn't like the way he used the word "job".

"Who do I have to kill?" I asked with a humorless smile.

"You don't. But before I can tell you what it is, you'll have to talk with Mister Weinbaum."

"Who's he?"

"A—scientist."

More fog evaporated. I got up.

"Uh-uh. No making a human guinea pig out of yours truly. Get yourself another boy."

"Don't be silly," he said, "No harm will come to you."

Against my better judgement, I said, "Okay, let's go."

CHAPTER THREE

Weinbaum approached the subject of my duties after a tour of the house, including the laboratory. He wore a white smock and there was something about him that made me crawl inside. He sat down in the living room and motioned me into a seat. Rankin had disappeared. Weinbaum stared at me with fixed eyes and once again I felt a blast of icy coldness sweep over me.

“I’ll put it to you bluntly,” he said, “my experiments are too complicated to explain in any detail, but they concern human flesh. Dead human flesh.”

I was becoming intensely aware that his eyes burnt with flickering fires. He looked like a spider ready to engulf a fly, and this whole house was his web. The sun was striking fire to the west and deep pools of shadows were spreading across the room, hiding his face, but leaving the glittering eyes as they shifted in the creeping darkness.

He was still speaking. “Often, people bequeath their bodies to scientific institutes for study. Unfortunately, I’m only one man, so I have to resort to other methods.”

Horror leapt grinning from the shadows and across my mind there flitted the black picture of two men digging by the light of an uncertain moon. A shovel struck wood—the noise chilled my soul. I rose quickly.

“I think I can find my own way out, Mr. Weinbaum.”

He laughed softly. “Did Rankin tell you how much this job pays?”

“I’m not interested.”

“Too bad. I was hoping you could see it my way. It wouldn’t take a year before you would make enough money to return to college.”

I started, and got the uncanny feeling that this man was searching my soul.

“How much do you know about me? How did you find out?”

“I have my ways.” He chuckled again. “Will you reconsider?”

I hesitated.

“Shall we put it on a trial basis?” he asked softly. “I’m quite sure that we can both reach a mutual satisfaction.”

I got the eerie feeling that I was talking to the devil himself, that somehow I had been tricked into selling my soul.

“Be here at 8. 00 sharp, the night after next,” he said.

That was how it started.

As Rankin and I laid the sheeted body of Daniel Whetherby on the lab table, lights flashed on behind sheeted oblongs that looked like glass tanks.

“Weinbaum—” I had dropped the title, Mister, without thinking, “I think—”

“Did you say something?” he asked, his eyes boring into mine. The laboratory seemed far away. There were only the two of us, sliding through a half-world peopled with horrors beyond the imagination.

Rankin entered in a white smock coat and broke the spell by saying, “All ready, professor.”

At the door, Rankin stopped me. “Friday, at eight.”

A shudder, cold and terrible raced up my spine as I looked back. Weinbaum had produced a scalpel and the body was unsheeted. They looked at me strangely and I hurried out.

I took the car and quickly drove down the narrow dirt road. I didn't look back. The air was fresh and warm with a promise of budding summer. The sky was blue with fluffy white clouds fleeting along in the warm summer breeze. The night before seemed like a nightmare, a vague dream, that, as all nightmares, is unreal and transparent when the bright light of day shines upon it. But as I drove past the wrought iron gates of the Crestwood Cemetery I realized that this was no dream. Four hours ago my shovel had removed the dirt that covered the grave of Daniel Wheatherby.

For the first time a new thought occurred to me. What was the body of Daniel Wheatherby being used for at that moment? I shoved the thought into a deep corner of my mind and let out onto the go-pedal. The care screamed ahead I put my thoughts into driving, glad to put the terrible thing I had done out of my mind, for a short time, anyway.

CHAPTER FOUR

The California countryside blurred by as I tried for the maximum speed. The tyres sang on the curve and, as I came out of it, several things happened in rapid succession.

I saw a panel truck crazily parked right on the broken white line, a girl of about eighteen running right toward my car, an older man running after her. I slammed on the brakes and they exploded like bombs. I jockeyed the wheel and the California sky was suddenly under me. Then everything was right-side up and I realized that I had flipped right over and up. For a moment I was dazed, then a scream, shrill and high, piercing, slit my head.

I opened the door and sprinted toward the road. The man had the girl and was yanking her toward the panel truck. He was stronger than her and winning, but she was taking an inch of skin for every foot he made.

He saw me.

“You stay out of this, buddy. I’m her legal guardian.”

I halted and shook the cobwebs out of my brain. It was exactly what he had been waiting for. He let go with a haymaker that got me on the corner of the chin and knocked me sprawling. He grabbed the girl and practically threw her into the cab.

By the time that I was on me feet he was around to the driver’s side and peeling out. I took a flying leap and made the roof just as he took off. I was almost thrown off, but I clawed through about five layers of paint to stay on. Then I reached through the open window and got him by the neck. He cursed and grabbed my hand. He yanked, the truck spun crazily off the ledge of a steep embankment.

The last thing I remember is the nose of the truck pointing straight down. Then my enemy saved my life by viciously yanking my arm. I

tumbled off just as the truck plunged over the cliff.

I landed hard, but the rock I landed on was harder. Everything slid away.

Something cool touched my brow as I came to. The first thing I saw was the flashing red light on top of the official looking car parked by the embankment. I sat bolt upright and soft hands pushed me down. Nice hands, the hands of the girl who had landed me into this mess.

Then there was a Highway Patrolman over me and an official voice said, "The ambulance is coming. How do you feel?"

"Bruised," I said and sat up again. "But tell the ambulance to go away. I'm all right."

I tried to sound flippant. The last thing I needed after last night's 'job' was the police.

"How about telling me about it?" the policeman said, producing a notebook. Before I answered, I walked over to the embankment. My stomach flipped over backwards. The panel truck was nose-deep in California dirt and my sparring partner was turning that good California soil into a reddish mud with his own blood. He lay grotesquely, sprawled half in, half out of the cab. The photographers were getting their pictures. He was dead.

I turned back. The patrolman looked at me as if he expected me to throw up, but, after my new job, my stomach was admirably strong.

"I was driving out of the Belwood district," I said, "I came around that curve..."

I told the rest of the story with the girl's help. Just as I finished the ambulance came to a halt. Despite my protestations and those of my still-unnamed girl friend, we were hustled into the back.

Two hours later we had a clean bill of health from the patrolman and the doctors and we were requested to be witnesses at the inquest set for the next week.

I saw my car at the curb. It was a little worse for wear, but the flats had been replaced. There was a witnessed bill on the dash for a wrecker, tires, and clean-up squad! It came to about \$250. 00—half of the last night's pay-check.

"You look preoccupied," the girl said.

I turned to her. "Um, yeah. Well, we almost got killed together this morning, how about telling me your name and having lunch together?"

"Okay," she said. "The name's Vicki Pickford. Yours?"

"Danny," I said unemotionally as we pulled away from the curb. I switched the subject rapidly. "What was going on this morning? Did I hear that guy say that he was your legal guardian?"

"Yes" she replied.

I laughed. "The name is Danny Gerad. You'll get that out of the afternoon papers."

She smiled gravely. "All right. He was my guardian. He was also a drunkard and an all-around crumb."

Her cheeks flamed red. The smile was gone. "I hated him and I'm glad he's dead."

She gave me a sharp glance and for a moment I saw fear shine wetly in her eyes; then she recovered her self-control. We parked and ate lunch.

Forty minutes later I paid the check out of my newly acquired cash and walked back out to the car.

“Where to?” I asked.

“Bonaventure Motel,” she said. “That’s where I’m staying.”

She saw curiosity jump into my eyes and sighed, “All right, I was running away. My Uncle David caught up with me and tried to drag me back to the house. When I told him I wouldn’t go, he dragged me out to the truck. We were going around that curve when I wrenched the wheel out of his hands. Then you came along.”

She closed up like a clam and I didn’t try to get any more out of her. There was something wrong about her story. I didn’t press her. I drove her into the parking lot and killed the engine.

“When can I see you again?” I asked. “A movie tomorrow?”

“Sure,” she replied.

“I’ll pick you up at 7. 30,” I said and drove out, thoughtfully pondering the events that had befallen me in the last twenty-four hours.

CHAPTER FIVE

When I entered the apartment the phone was ringing. I picked it up and Vicki, accident and the bright workaday world of suburban California faded into the half-world of phantom-people shadows. The voice that whispered coldly out of the receiver was Weinbaum's

"Troubles?" He spoke softly, but there was an ominous tone in his voice.

"I had an accident," I replied.

"I read about it in the paper..." Weinbaum's voice trailed off. Silence hung between us for a moment and then I said, "Does this mean you're canning me?"

I hoped that he would say yes; I didn't have the guts to resign.

"No," he said softly, "I just wanted to make sure that you didn't reveal anything about the—work—you're doing for me."

"Well, I didn't" I told him curtly.

"The night after this," he reminded me, "At eight."

There was a click and then the dial tone. I shivered and hung up the receiver. I had the oddest feeling that I had just broken connection with the grave.

The next morning at 7. 30 sharp, I picked up Vicki at the Bonaventure Motel. She was all decked out in an outfit that made her look stunning. I made a low whistle; she flushed prettily. We didn't talk about the accident.

The movie was good and we held hands part of the time, ate popcorn part of the time and kissed once or twice. All in all, a pleasant evening.

The second feature was just drawing to the climax when an usher came down the aisle.

He was stopping at every row and looked peeved. Finally, he stopped at ours. He swept the flashlight down the row and asked "Mr. Gerad? Daniel Gerad?"

"Yes" I asked, feeling guilt and fear run through me. "There's a gentleman on the phone, sir. He says it's a matter of life or death."

Vicki gave me a startled look and I followed the usher hurriedly. That let out the police. I mentally took stock of my only remaining relatives. Aunt Polly, Grandma Phibbs and my great-uncle Charlie. They were all healthy as far as I knew.

You could have knocked me over with a feather when I picked up the telephone and heard Rankin's voice.

He spoke rapidly and a raw note of fear was in his voice. "Get out here, right now! We need—"

There were sounds of a a scuffle, a muffled scream, then a click and the empty dial tone.

I hung, up and hurried back for Vicki. "Come on," I said.

She followed without questioning me. At first I wanted to drive her back to the motel but the muffled scream made me decide that this was an emergency. I didn't like either Rankin or Weinbaum, but I knew I would have to help them.

We took off.

"What is it?" Vicki asked anxiously as I stamped on the go-pedal and let the car unwind.

"Look," I said, "something tells me that you've got your secrets about your guardian. I've got some of my own. Please, don't ask." She didn't say another word.

I took possession of the passing lane. The speedometer climbed from seventy-five to eighty-five, kept rising and trembled on the verge of ninety. I pulled into the turnoff on two wheels and the car bounced, clung and exploded up the road.

Grim and gaunt against the overcast sky, I could see the house. I pulled the car to a stop and was out in a second.

“Wait here,” I cried over my shoulder to Vicki.

There was a light on in the laboratory and I flung the door open. It was empty but ransacked. The place was a mess of broken test tubes, smashed apparatus, and, yes, bloodstains that trailed through the half-open door that led to the darkened garage. Then I noticed the green liquid that was flowing over the floor in sticky rivulets. For the first time I noticed that one of the several sheeted tanks had been broken. I walked over to the other three. The lights inside them were off and the sheets that draped them let by no hint of what might have been under them—or, for that matter, what was under them.

I had no time to see. I didn't like the looks of blood, still fresh and uncoagulated, that led out of the front door into the garage. I swung open the door and entered the garage. It was dark and I didn't know where the light switch was. I cursed myself for not bringing the flashlight that was in the glove compartment. I advanced a few steps and realized that there was a cold draft blowing against my face. I advanced toward it.

The light from the lab threw a golden shaft of light along the garage floor, but it was next to nothing, in the Styngan blackness of the garage. All my childish fears of the dark returned. Once again I entered the realms of terror that only a child can know. I realized that the shadow that leered at me from out of the dark might not be dispelled by bright light.

Suddenly, my right foot went down. I realized that the draft was coming from a stairway I had almost fallen down. For a moment I

debated, then turned and hurried back through the lab and out to the car.

CHAPTER SIX

Vicki pounced on me as soon as I opened the door. “Danny, what are you doing here?”

Her tone of voice made me look at her. In the sickly yellow glow of the light her face was terrified.

“I’m working here,” I said shortly.

“At first I didn’t realize where we were,” she said softly. I was only here once before.

“You’ve been here?” I exclaimed. “When? “Why?”

“One night,” she said quietly “I brought Uncle David his lunch. He forgot it.”

The name rang a bell. She saw me grasping for it. “My guardian,” she said. “Perhaps I’d better tell you the whole story. Probably, you know that people don’t get appointed guardians when they drink. Well, Uncle David didn’t always do those things. When my mother and father were killed in a train-wreck four years ago, my Uncle David was the kindest person you could imagine. The court appointed him my guardian until I came of age, with my complete support.”

For a moment she was quiet, living in memories and the expression that flitted rapidly through her eyes was not pretty. Then she went on.

“Two years ago the company he was working for as a night watchman folded up and my uncle was out of a job. He was out of work for almost half a year. We were getting desperate, with

only unemployment checks to feed us and college looming up for me. Then he got a job. It was a good paying one and it brought in

fabulous sums. I used to joke with him about the banks be robbed. One night he looked at me and said, 'Not banks. '''

I felt fear and guilt tap me on the shoulder with cold fingers. Vicki went on.

“He started to get mean. He started bringing home whisky and getting drunk. The times I asked him about his job he evaded me. One night he told me point-blank to mind my own business.”

“I watched him decay before my very eyes. Then one night he let a name slip—Weinbaum, Steffen Weinbaum. A couple of weeks later he forgot his midnight lunch. I looked up the name in the telephone book and took it out to him. He flew into the most terrible rage I have ever seen.”

“In the weeks that followed he was away more and more at this terrible house. One night, when he came home he beat me. I decided to run away. To me, the Uncle David I knew was dead. He caught me—and you came along.” She fell silent.

I was shaken right down to my boots. I had a very good idea what Vicki's uncle did for a living. The time Rankin had signed me up coincided with the time Vicki's guardian would have been cracking up. I almost drove away then, despite the wild shambles the lab was in, despite the secret stairway, despite the blood trail on the floor. But then a faraway, thin scream reached us. I thumbed the glove compartment button, and reached in, fumbled around and got the flashlight.

Vicki's hand went to my arm “No, Danny. Please, Don't. I know that there's something terrible going on here. Drive away from it!”

The scream sounded again, this time fainter, and I made up my mind. I grabbed the flashlight. Vicki saw my intention. “All right, I'm coming with you.”

“Uh-uh,” I said. “You stay here. I’ve got a feeling that there’s something... loose out there. You stay here.”

She unwillingly sat back. I shut the door and ran back to the lab. I didn’t pause, but went back into the garage. The flashlight illuminated the dark hole where the wall had slid away to reveal the staircase. My blood pounding thickly in my temples, I ventured down into it. I counted the steps, shining the flashlight at the featureless walls, at the impenetrable darkness below. “Twenty, twenty-one, twenty-two, twenty-three—”

At thirty, the stairway suddenly became a short passage. I started cautiously along it, wishing that I had a revolver, or even a knife to make me feel a little less naked and vulnerable.

Suddenly a scream, terrible and thick with fear soon sounded in the darkness ahead of me. It was the sound of terror, the sound of a man confronted with something out of the deepest pits of horror. I broke into a run. As I ran I realized that the draft was blowing coldly against my face. I reasoned that the tunnel must come out in the outdoors. I stumbled over something.

It was Rankin, lying in a pool of his own blood, his eyes staring in glazed horror at the ceiling. The back of his head was bashed in.

Ahead of me I heard a pistol shot, a curse, and another scream. I ran on and almost fell on my face as I stumbled over more stairs. I climbed and saw stairs framed vaguely in an opening screened with underbrush above me. I pushed it aside and came upon a startling tableau: a tall figure silhouetted against the sky that could only be Weinbaum, a revolver hanging in his hand, looking down at the shadowed ground. Even the starlight was blotted out as the hanging clouds that had parted briefly, closed together again.

He heard me and wheeled quickly, his eyes glazing like red lanterns in the dark.

“Oh, it you Gerad.”

“Rankin’s dead.” I told him.

“I know.” he said, “You could have prevented it if you had come a little quicker”

“Now just hold on,” I said, becoming angry. “I hurried—”

I was cut off by a sound that has hounded me through nightmares ever since, a hideous mewing sound, like that of some gigantic rat in pain. I saw calculation, fear, and finally decision flicker across Weinbaum’s face in a matter of seconds. I fell back in terror.

“What is it?” I choked.

He casually shone the light down into the pit, for all his affected casualness, I noticed that his eyes were averted by something.

The thing mewed again and I felt another spasm of fear. I craned to see what horror lay in that pit, the horror that made even Weinbaum scream in abject terror. And just before I saw, a horrible wall of terror rose and fell from the vague outline of the house.

Weinbaum jerked his flashlight from the pit and shone it in my face.

“Who was that? Whom did you bring up here?”

But I had my own flashlight trained as I ran through the passage way, Weinbaum close behind. I had recognized the scream. I had heard it before, when a frightened girl almost ran into my car as she fled her maniac of a guardian.

Vicki!

CHAPTER SEVEN

I heard Weinbaum gasp as we entered the lab. The place was swimming in the green, liquid. The other two cases were broken!. I didn't pause, but ran past the shattered, empty cases and out the door. Weinbaum did not follow me.

The car was empty, the door on the passengers side open. I shone my light over the ground. Here and there were footprints of a girl wearing high heels, a girl who had to be Vicki. The rest of the tracks were blotted out by a monstrous something—I hesitate to call it a track. It was more as if something huge had dragged itself into the woods. Its hugeness was testified, too, as I noticed the broken saplings and crushed underbrush.

I ran back into the lab where Weinbaum was sitting, face pale and drawn, regarding the three shattered empty tanks. The revolver was on the table and I grabbed it and made for the door.

“Where do you think you're going with that?” he demanded, rising.

“Out to hunt for Vicki,” I snarled. “And if she's hurt or—” I didn't finish.

I hurried out into the velvet darkness of the night. Gun in hand, flashlight in the other, I plunged into the woods, following the trail blazed by something that I didn't want to think about. The vital question that burned in my mind was whether it had Vicki or was still trailing her. If it had her...

My question was answered by a piercing scream not too far away from me.

Faster now, I ran and suddenly burst into a clearing.

Perhaps it is because I want to forget, or perhaps it is only because the night was dark and beginning to become foggy, but I can only

remember how Vicki caught sight of my flashlight, ran to me, buried her head against my shoulder and sobbed.

A huge shadow moved toward me, mewing horribly, driving me almost mad with terror. Stumblingly, we fled from the horror in the dark, back toward the comforting lights of the lab, away from the unseen terror that lurked in the dark. My fear-crazed brain was putting two and two together and coming up with five.

The three cases had contained three something from the darkest pits of a twisted mind. One had broken loose. Rankin and Weinbaum had been after it. It had killed Rankin, but Weinbaum had trapped it in the concealed pit. The second one was floundering in the woods now and I suddenly remembered that whatever-it-was, was huge and that it had a hard time lifting itself along. Then I realized that it had trapped Vicki in a gully. It had started down—easy enough! But getting up? I was almost positive that it couldn't.

Two were out of commission. But where was the third? My question was answered very suddenly but a scream from the lab. And... mewing.

CHAPTER EIGHT

We ran up to the lab door and threw it open. It was empty. The screams and the terrible mewing sounds came from the garage. I ran through, and ever since have been glad that Vicki stayed in the lab and was spared the sight that had wakened me from a thousand awful nightmares.

The lab was darkened and all that I could make out was a huge shadow moving sluggishly. And the screams! Screams of terror, the screams of a man faced with a monster from the pits of hell. It mewed horribly and seemed to pant in delight.

My hand moved around for a light switch. There, I found it! Light flooded the room, illuminating a tableau of horror that was the result of the grave thing I had performed, I and the dead uncle.

A huge, white maggot twisted on the garage floor, holding Weinbaum with long suckers, raising him towards its dripping, pink mouth from which horrid mewing sounds came. Veins, red and pulsating, showed under its slimy flesh and millions of squirming tiny maggots—in the blood vessels, in the skin, even forming a huge eye that stared out at me. A huge maggot, made up of hundreds of millions of maggots, the feasters on the dead flesh that Weinbaum had used so freely.

In a half-world of terror I fired the revolver again and again. It mewed and twitched.

Weinbaum screamed something as he was dragged inexorably toward the waiting mouth. Incredibly, I made it out over the hideous sound that the creature was making.

“Fire it! In the name of heaven, fire it!”

Then I saw the sticky pools of green liquid which had trickled over the floor from the laboratory. I fumbled for my lighter, got it and

frantically thumbed it. Suddenly I remembered that I had forgotten to put a flint in. I reached for matches, got one and fired the others. I threw the pack just as Weinbaum screamed his last. I saw his body through the translucent skin of the creature, still twitching as thousands of maggots leeches onto it. Retching, I threw the now flaring matches into the green ooze. It was flammable, just as I had thought. It burst into bright flames. The creature was twisted into a horrid ball of pulsing, putrid flesh.

I turned and stumbled out to where Vicki stood, shaking and white faced.

“Come on!” I said, “Let’s get out of here! The whole place is going to go up!”

We ran out to the car and drove away rapidly.

CHAPTER NINE

There isn't too much left to say. I'm sure that you have all read about the fire that swept the residential Belwood District of California, leveling fifteen square miles of woods and residential homes. I couldn't feel too badly about that fire. I realize that hundreds might have been killed by the gigantic maggot-things that Weinbaum and Rankin were breeding. I drove out there after the fire. The whole place was smoldering ruins. There was no discernable remains of the horror that we had battled that final night, and, after some searching, I found a metal cabinet. Inside there were three ledgers.

Once of them was Weinbaum's diary. It clears up a lot. It revealed that they were experimenting on dead flesh, exposing it to gamma rays. One day they observed a strange thing. The few maggots that had crawled over the flesh were growing, becoming a group. Eventually they grew together, forming three separate large maggots. Perhaps the radioactive bomb had speed up the evolution.

I don't know.

Furthermore, I don't want to know.

In a way, I suppose, I assisted in Rankin's death; the flesh of the body whose grave I had robbed had fed perhaps the very creature that had killed him.

I live with that thought. But I believe that there can be forgiveness. I'm working for it. Or, rather, we're working for it.

Vicki and I. Together.

THE END

**IN THE
DEATHROOM**
BASED ON A STORY BY STEPHEN KING



IN THE DEATHROOM

Stephen King

It was a deathroom. Fletcher knew it for what it was as soon as the door opened. The floor was gray industrial tile. The walls were discolored white stone, marked here and there with darker patches that might have been blood—certainly blood had been spilled in this room. The overhead lights were cupped in wire cages. Halfway across the room stood a long wooden table with three people seated behind it. Before the table was an empty chair, waiting for Fletcher. Beside the chair stood a small wheeled trolley. The object on it had been draped with a piece of cloth, as a sculptor might cover his work-in-progress between sessions.

Fletcher was half-led, half-dragged toward the chair which had been placed for him. He reeled in the guard's grip and let himself reel. If he looked more dazed than he really was, more shocked and unthinking, that was fine. He thought his chances of ever leaving this basement room in the Ministry of Information were perhaps one or two in thirty, and perhaps that was optimistic. Whatever they were, he had no intention of thinning them further by looking even halfway alert. His swelled eye, puffy nose, and broken lower lip might help in this regard; so might the crust of blood, like a dark red goatee, around his mouth. One thing Fletcher knew for sure: if he did leave, the others—the guard and the three sitting in tribunal behind the table—would be dead. He was a newspaper reporter and had never killed anything much larger than a hornet, but if he had to kill to escape this room, he would. He thought of his sister, on her retreat. He thought of his sister swimming in a river with a Spanish name. He thought of the light on the water at noon, moving river light too bright to look at. They reached the chair in front of the table. The guard pushed him into it so hard that Fletcher almost tipped himself over.

“Careful now, that's not the way, no accidents,” said one of the men behind the table. It was Escobar. He spoke to the guard in Spanish. To Escobar's left sat the other man. To Escobar's right sat a woman of about sixty. The woman and the other man were thin. Escobar was fat and as greasy as a cheap candle. He looked like a movie Mexican. You expected him to say, “Batches? Batches? We don't

need no steenkin batches.” Yet this was the Chief Minister of Information. Sometimes he gave the English-language portion of the weather on the city television station. When he did this he invariably got fan mail. In a suit he didn’t look greasy, just roly-poly. Fletcher knew all this. He had done three or four stories on Escobar. He was colorful. He was also, according to rumor, an enthusiastic torturer. A Central American Himmler, Fletcher thought, and was amazed to discover that one’s sense of humor—rudimentary, granted—could function this far into a state of terror.

“Handcuffs?” the guard asked, also in Spanish, and held up a pair of the plastic kind. Fletcher tried to keep his look of dazed incomprehension. If they cuffed him, it was over. He could forget about one chance in thirty, or one in three hundred.

Escobar turned briefly to the woman on his right. Her face was very dark, her hair black with startling white streaks. It flowed back and up from her forehead as if blown by a gale-force wind. The look of her hair reminded Fletcher of Elsa Lanchester in *Bride of Frankenstein*. He gripped this similarity with a fierceness that was close to panic, the way he gripped the thought of bright light on the river, or his sister laughing with her friends as they walked to the water. He wanted images, not ideas. Images were luxury items now. And ideas were no good in a place like this. In a place like this all you got were the wrong ideas.

The woman gave Escobar a small nod. Fletcher had seen her around the building, always garbed in shapeless dresses like the one she wore now. She had been with Escobar often enough for Fletcher to assume she was his secretary, personal assistant, perhaps even his biographer—Christ knew that men like Escobar had egos large enough to warrant such accessories. Now Fletcher wondered if he’d had it backward all along, if she was his boss.

In any case, the nod seemed to satisfy Escobar. When he turned back to Fletcher, Escobar was smiling. And when he spoke, it was in English. “Don’t be silly, put them away. Mr. Fletcher is only here to help us in a few matters. He will soon be returning to his own

country”—Escobar sighed deeply to show how deeply he regretted this. “... but in the meantime he is an honored guest.”

We don't need no steenkin handcuffs, Fletcher thought.

The woman who looked like the Bride of Frankenstein with a very deep tan leaned toward Escobar and whispered briefly behind her hand. Escobar nodded, smiling.

“Of course, Ramon, if our guest should try anything foolish or make any aggressive moves, you would have to shoot him a little.” He roared laughter—roly-poly TV laughter—and then repeated what he had said in Spanish, so that Ramon would understand as well as Fletcher. Ramon nodded seriously, replaced his handcuffs on his belt, and stepped back to the periphery of Fletcher's vision.

Escobar returned his attention to Fletcher. From one pocket of his parrot-and-foliage-studded guayabera he removed a red-and-white package: Marlboros, the preferred cigarette of third-world peoples everywhere. “Smoke, Mr. Fletcher?”

Fletcher reached toward the pack, which Escobar had placed on the edge of the table, then withdrew his hand. He had quit smoking three years ago, and supposed he might take the habit up again if he actually did get out of this—drinking high-tension liquor as well, quite likely—but at this moment he had no craving or need for a cigarette. He had wanted them to see his fingers shaking, that was all.

“Perhaps later. Right now a cigarette might—”

Might what? It didn't matter to Escobar; he just nodded understandingly and left the red-and-white pack where it was, on the edge of the table. Fletcher had a sudden, agonizing vision in which he saw himself stopping at a newsstand on Forty-third Street and buying a pack of Marlboros. A free man buying the happy poison on a New York street. He told himself that if he got out of this, he would do that. He would do it as some people went on pilgrimages to Rome or Jerusalem after their cancer was cured or their sight was restored.

“The men who did that to you”—Escobar indicated Fletcher’s face with a wave of one not-particularly-clean hand—“have been disciplined. Yet not too harshly, and I myself stop short of apology, you will notice. Those men are patriots, as are we here. As you are yourself, Mr. Fletcher, yes?”

“I suppose.” It was his job to appear ingratiating and frightened, a man who would say anything in order to get out of here. It was Escobar’s job to be soothing, to convince the man in the chair that his swelled eye, split lip, and loosened teeth meant nothing; all that was just a misunderstanding which would soon be straightened out, and when it was he would be free to go. They were still busy trying to deceive each other, even here in the deathroom.

Escobar switched his attention to Ramon the guard and spoke in rapid Spanish. Fletcher’s Spanish wasn’t good enough to pick up everything, but you couldn’t spend almost five years in this shithole capital city without picking up a fair vocabulary; Spanish wasn’t the world’s most difficult language, as both Escobar and his friend the Bride of Frankenstein undoubtedly knew.

Escobar asked if Fletcher’s things had been packed and if he had been checked out of the Hotel Magnificent: Si. Escobar wanted to know if there was a car waiting outside the Ministry of Information to take Mr. Fletcher to the airport when the interrogation was done. Si, around the corner on the Street Fifth of May.

Escobar turned back and said, “Do you understand what I ask him?” From Escobar, understand came out unnerstand, and Fletcher thought again of Escobar’s TV appearances. Low bressure? What low bressure? We don’t need no steenkin low bressure.

“I ask have you been checked out of your room—although after all this time it probably seems more like an apartment to you, yes?—and if there’s a car to take you to the airport when we finish our conversation.” Except conversation hadn’t been the word he used.

“Ye-es?” Sounding as if he could not believe his own good fortune. Or so Fletcher hoped.

“You’ll be on the first Delta flight back to Miami,” the Bride of Frankenstein said. She spoke without a trace of Spanish accent. “Your passport will be given back to you once the plane has touched down on American soil. You will not be harmed or held here, Mr. Fletcher—not if you cooperate with our inquiries—but you are being deported, let’s be clear on that. Kicked out. Given what you Americans call the bum’s rush.”

She was much smoother than Escobar. Fletcher found it amusing that he had thought her Escobar’s assistant. And you call yourself a reporter, he thought. Of course if he was just a reporter, the Times’s man in Central America, he would not be here in the basement of the Ministry of Information, where the stains on the wall looked suspiciously like blood. He had ceased being a reporter some sixteen months ago, around the time he’d first met Nunez.

“I understand,” Fletcher said.

Escobar had taken a cigarette. He lighted it with a gold-plated Zippo. There was a fake ruby in the side of the Zippo. He said, “Are you prepared to help us in our inquiries, Mr. Fletcher?”

“Do I have any choice?”

“You always have a choice,” Escobar said, “but I think you have worn out your carpet in our country, yes? Is that what you say, worn out your carpet?”

“Close enough,” Fletcher said. He thought: What you must guard against is your desire to believe them. It is natural to want to believe, and probably natural to want to tell the truth—especially after you’ve been grabbed outside your favorite cafe and briskly beaten by men who smell of refried beans—but giving them what they want won’t help you. That’s the thing to hold onto, the only idea that’s any good in a room like this. What they say means nothing. What matters is

the thing on that trolley, the thing under that piece of cloth. What matters is the guy who hasn't said anything yet. And the stains on the walls, of course.

Escobar leaned forward, looking serious.

“Do you deny that for the last fourteen months you have given certain information to a man named Tomas Herrera, who has in turn funneled it to a certain Communist insurgent named Pedro Nunez?”

“No,” Fletcher said. “I don't deny it.” To adequately keep up his side of this charade—the charade summarized by the difference between the words conversation and interrogation—he should now justify, attempt to explain. As if anyone in the history of the world had ever won a political argument in a room like this. But he didn't have it in him to do so. “Although it was a little longer than that. Almost a year and a half in all, I think.”

“Have a cigarette, Mr. Fletcher.” Escobar opened a drawer and took out a thin folder.

“Not just yet. Thank you.”

“Okay.” From Escobar it of course came out ho-kay. When he did the TV weather, the boys in the control room would sometimes superimpose a photograph of a woman in a bikini on the weather map. When he saw this, Escobar would laugh and wave his hands and pat his chest. People liked it. It was comical. It was like the sound of ho-kay. It was like the sound of steenkin batches.

Escobar opened the folder with his own cigarette planted squarely in the middle of his mouth with the smoke running up into his eyes. It was the way you saw the old men smoking on the street corners down here, the ones who still wore straw hats, sandals, and baggy white pants. Now Escobar was smiling, keeping his lips shut so his Marlboro wouldn't fall out of his mouth and onto the table but smiling just the same. He took a glossy black-and-white photograph out of

the thin folder and slid it across to Fletcher. "Here is your friend Tomas. Not too pretty, is he?"

It was a high-contrast full-face shot. It made Fletcher think of photographs by that semi-famous news photographer of the forties and fifties, the one who called himself Weegee. It was a portrait of a dead man. The eyes were open. The flashbulb had reflected in them, giving them a kind of life. There was no blood, only one mark and no blood, but still one knew at once that the man was dead. His hair was combed, one could still see the toothmarks the comb had left, and there were those little lights in his eyes, but they were reflected lights. One knew at once the man was dead.

The mark was on the left temple, a comet shape that looked like a powder burn, but there was no bullet hole, no blood, and the skull wasn't pushed out of shape. Even a low-caliber pistol like a .22, fired close enough to the skin to leave a powder burn, would have pushed the skull out of shape.

Escobar took the picture back, put it in the folder, closed the folder, and shrugged as if to say You see? You see what happens? When he shrugged, the ash fell off his cigarette onto the table. He brushed it off onto the gray lino floor with the side of one fat hand.

"We dint actually want to bother you," Escobar said. "Why would we? This a small country. We are small people in a small country. The New York Times a big paper in a big country. We have our pride, of course, but we also have our ..." Escobar tapped his temple with one finger. "You see?"

Fletcher nodded. He kept seeing Tomas. Even with the picture back in the folder he could see Tomas, the marks the comb had left in Tomas's dark hair. He had eaten food Tomas's wife had cooked, had sat on the floor and watched cartoons with Tomas's youngest child, a little girl of perhaps five. Tom and Jerry cartoons, with what little dialogue there was in Spanish.

“We don’t want to bother you,” Escobar was saying as the cigarette smoke rose and broke apart on his face and curled around his ears, “but for a long time we was watching. You dint see us—maybe because you are so big and we are just little—but we was watching. We know that you know what Tomas knows, and so we go to him. We try to get him to tell what he knows so we don’t have to bother you, but he won’t. Finally we ask Heinz here to try and make him tell. Heinz, show Mr. Fletcher how you try to make Tomas tell, when Tomas was sitting right where Mr. Fletcher was sitting now.”

“I can do that,” said Heinz. He spoke English in a nasal New York accent. He was bald, except for a fringe of hair around his ears. He wore little glasses. Escobar looked like a movie Mexican, the woman looked like Elsa Lanchester in *Bride of Frankenstein*, Heinz looked like an actor in a TV commercial, the one who explained why Excedrin was best for your headache. He walked around the table to the trolley, gave Fletcher a look both roguish and conspiratorial, and flicked away the cloth over the top.

There was a machine underneath, something with dials and lights that were now all dark. Fletcher at first thought it was a lie detector—that made a certain amount of sense—but in front of the rudimentary control panel, connected to the side of the machine by a fat black cord, was an object with a rubber grip. It looked like a stylus or some sort of fountain pen. There was no nib, though. The thing just tapered to a blunt steel point.

Below the machine was a shelf. On the shelf was a car battery marked DELCO. There were rubber cups over the battery terminals. Wires rose from the rubber cups to the back of the machine. No, not a lie detector. Except maybe to these people it was.

Heinz spoke briskly, with the pleasure of a man who likes to explain what he does. “It’s quite simple, really, a modification of the device neurologists use to administer electric shocks to people suffering unipolar neurosis. Only this administers a far more powerful jolt. The pain is really secondary, I find. Most people don’t even remember the pain. What makes them so eager to talk is an aversion to the

process. This might almost be called an atavism. Someday I hope to write a paper.”

Heinz picked up the stylus by its insulated rubber grip and held it in front of his eyes.

“This can be touched to the extremities ... the torso ... the genitals, of course ... but it can also be inserted in places where—forgive the crudity—the sun never shines. A man whose shit has been electrified never forgets it, Mr. Fletcher.”

“Did you do that to Tomas?”

“No,” Heinz said, and replaced the stylus carefully in front of the shock-generator. “He got a jolt at half-power on the hand, just to acquaint him with what he was up against, and when he still declined to discuss El Condor—”

“Never mind that,” the Bride of Frankenstein said.

“Beg pardon. When he still wouldn’t tell us what we wanted to know, I applied the wand to his temple and administered another measured jolt. Carefully measured, I assure you, half-power, not a bit more. He had a seizure and died. I believe it may have been epilepsy. Did he have a history of epilepsy, do you know, Mr. Fletcher?”

Fletcher shook his head.

“Nevertheless, I believe that’s what it was. The autopsy revealed nothing wrong with his heart.” Heinz folded his long-fingered hands in front of him and looked at Escobar.

Escobar removed his cigarette from the center of his mouth, looked at it, dropped it to the gray tile floor, stepped on it. Then he looked at Fletcher and smiled. “Very sad, of course. Now I ask you some questions, Mr. Fletcher. Many of them—I tell you this frankly—are the questions Tomas Herrera refused to answer. I hope you will not refuse, Mr. Fletcher. I like you. You sit there in dignity, do not cry or

beg or urinate the pants. I like you. I know you only do what you believe. It is patriotism. So I tell you, my friend, it's good if you answer my questions quickly and truthfully. You don't want Heinz to use his machine."

"I've said I'd help you," Fletcher said. Death was closer than the overhead lights in their cunning wire cages. Pain, unfortunately, was closer yet. And how close was Nunez, El Condor? Closer than these three guessed, but not close enough to help him. If Escobar and the Bride of Frankenstein had waited another two days, perhaps even another twenty-four hours ... but they had not, and he was here in the deathroom. Now he would see what he was made of.

"You said it and you had better mean it," the woman said, speaking very clearly. "We're not fucking around, gringo."

"I know you're not," Fletcher said in a sighing, trembling voice.

"You want that cigarette now, I think," said Escobar, and when Fletcher shook his head, Escobar took one himself, lit it, then seemed to meditate. At last he looked up. This cigarette was planted in the middle of his face like the last one. "Nunez comes soon?" he asked. "Like Zorro in that movie?"

Fletcher nodded.

"How soon?"

"I don't know." Fletcher was very aware of Heinz standing next to his infernal machine with his long-fingered hands folded in front of him, looking ready to talk about pain-relievers at the drop of a cue. He was equally aware of Ramon standing to his right, at the edge of his peripheral vision. He could not see, but guessed that Ramon's hand would be on the butt of his pistol. And here came the next question.

"When he comes, will he strike at the garrison in the hills of El Candido, the garrison at St. Therese, or will he come right into the city?"

“The garrison at St. Therese,” Fletcher said.

He will come to the city, Tomas had said while his wife and daughter now watched cartoons, sitting on the floor side by side and eating popcorn from a white bowl with a blue stripe around the rim. Fletcher remembered the blue stripe. He could see it clearly. Fletcher remembered everything. He will come at the heart. No fucking around. He will strike for the heart, like a man who would kill a vampire.

“He will not want the TV station?” Escobar asked. “Or the government radio station?”

First the radio station on Civil Hill, Tomas had said while the cartoons played. By then it was the Road Runner, always gone in a puff of dust just ahead of whatever Acme Road Runner-catching device the Coyote was using, just beep-beep and gone.

“No,” Fletcher said. “I’ve been told El Condor says ‘Let them babble.’”

“Does he have rockets? Air-to-ground rockets? Copter-killers?”

“Yes.” It was true.

“Many?”

“Not many.” This was not true. Nunez had better than sixty. There were only a dozen helicopters in the country’s whole shitpot air force—bad Russian helicopters that never flew for long.

The Bride of Frankenstein tapped Escobar on the shoulder. Escobar leaned toward her. She whispered without covering her mouth. She had no need to cover her mouth because her lips barely moved. This was a skill Fletcher associated with prisons. He had never been to prison but he had seen movies. When Escobar whispered back, he raised a fat hand to cover his own mouth.

Fletcher watched them and waited, knowing that the woman was telling Escobar he was lying. Soon Heinz would have more data for his paper, Certain Preliminary Observations on the Administration and Consequences of Electrifying the Shit of Reluctant Interrogation Subjects. Fletcher discovered that terror had created two new people inside him, at least two, sub-Fletchers with their own useless but quite powerful views on how this was going to go. One was sadly hopeful, the other just sad. The sadly hopeful one was Mr. Maybe They Will, as in maybe they really will let me go, maybe there really is a car parked on the Street Fifth of May, just around the corner, maybe they really mean to kick me out of the country, maybe I really will be landing in Miami tomorrow morning, scared but alive, with this already beginning to seem like a bad dream.

The other one, the one who was merely sad, was Mr. Even If I Do. Fletcher might be able to surprise them by making a sudden move—he had been beaten and they were arrogant, so yes, he might be able to surprise them.

But Ramon will shoot me even if I do.

And if he went for Ramon? Managed to get his gun? Unlikely but not impossible; the man was fat, fatter than Escobar by at least thirty pounds, and he wheezed when he breathed.

Escobar and Heinz will be all over me before I can shoot even if I do.

The woman too, maybe; she talked without moving her lips; she might know judo or karate or tae kwon do, as well. And if he shot them all and managed to escape this room?

There'll be more guards everywhere even if I do—they'll hear the shots and come running.

Of course rooms like this tended to be soundproofed, for obvious reasons, but even if he got up the stairs and out the door and onto the street, that was only the beginning. And Mr. Even If I Do would be running with him the whole way, for however long his run lasted.

The thing was, neither Mr. Maybe They Will or Mr. Even If I Do could help him; they were only distractions, lies his increasingly frantic mind tried to tell itself. Men like him did not talk themselves out of rooms like this. He might as well try inventing a third sub-Fletcher, Mr. Maybe I Can, and go for it. He had nothing to lose. He only had to make sure they didn't know he knew that.

Escobar and the Bride of Frankenstein drew apart. Escobar put his cigarette back in his mouth and smiled sadly at Fletcher. "Amigo, you are lying."

"No," he said. "Why would I lie? Don't you think I want to get out of here?"

"We have no idea why you would lie," said the woman with the narrow blade of a face. "We have no idea why you would choose to aid Nunez in the first place. Some have suggested American naivete, and I have no doubt that played its part, but that cannot be all. It doesn't matter. I believe a demonstration is in order. Heinz?"

Smiling, Heinz turned to his machine and flicked a switch. There was a hum, the kind that comes from an old-fashioned radio when it's warming up, and three green lights came on.

"No," Fletcher said, trying to get to his feet, thinking that he did panic very well, and why not? He was panicked, or almost panicked. Certainly the idea of Heinz touching him anywhere with that stainless steel dildo for pygmies was terrifying. But there was another part of him, very cold and calculating, that knew he would have to take at least one shock. He wasn't aware of anything so coherent as a plan, but he had to take at least one shock. Mr. Maybe I Can insisted that this was so.

Escobar nodded to Ramon.

"You can't do this, I'm an American citizen and I work for The New York Times, people know where I am."

A heavy hand pressed down on his left shoulder, pushing him back into the chair. At the same moment, the barrel of a pistol went deep into his right ear. The pain was so sudden that bright dots appeared before Fletcher's eyes, dancing frantically. He screamed, and the sound seemed muffled. Because one ear was plugged, of course—one ear was plugged.

"Hold out your hand, Mr. Fletcher," Escobar said, and he was smiling around his cigarette again.

"Right hand," Heinz said. He held the stylus by its black rubber grip like a pencil, and his machine was humming.

Fletcher gripped the arm of the chair with his right hand. He was no longer sure if he was acting or not—the line between acting and panic was gone.

"Do it," the woman said. Her hands were folded on the table; she leaned forward over them. There was a point of light in each of her pupils, turning her dark eyes into nailheads. "Do it or I can't account for the consequences."

Fletcher began to loosen his fingers on the chair arm, but before he could get the hand up, Heinz darted forward and poked the tip of the blunt stylus against the back of Fletcher's left hand. That had probably been his target all along—certainly it was closer to where Heinz stood.

There was a snapping sound, very thin, like a twig, and Fletcher's left hand closed into a fist so tight his nails cut into his palm. A kind of dancing sickness raced up from his wrist to his forearm to his flopping elbow and finally to his shoulder, the side of his neck, and to his gums. He could even feel the shock in his teeth on that side, or in the fillings. A grunt escaped him. He bit his tongue and shot sideways in the chair. The gun was gone from his ear and Ramon caught him. If he hadn't, Fletcher would have fallen on the gray tile floor.

The stylus was withdrawn. Where it had touched, between the second and third knuckles of the third finger of his left hand, there was a small hot spot. It was the only real pain, although his arm still tingled and the muscles still jumped. Yet it was horrible, being shocked like that. Fletcher felt he would seriously consider shooting his own mother to avoid another touch of the little steel dildo. An atavism, Heinz had called it. Someday he hoped to write a paper.

Heinz's face loomed down, lips pulled back and teeth revealed in an idiotic grin, eyes alight. "How do you describe it?" he cried. "Now, while the experience is still fresh, how do you describe it?"

"Like dying," Fletcher said in a voice that didn't sound like his own.

Heinz looked transported. "Yes! And you see, he has wet himself! Not much, just a little, but yes ... and Mr. Fletcher—"

"Stand aside," the Bride of Frankenstein said. "Don't be an ass. Let us take care of our business."

"And that was only one-quarter power," Heinz said in a tone of awed confidentiality, and then he stood aside and refolded his hands in front of him.

"Mr. Fletcher, you been bad," Escobar said reproachfully. He took the stub of his cigarette from his mouth, examined it, threw it on the floor.

The cigarette, Fletcher thought. The cigarette, yes. The shock had seriously insulted his arm—the muscles were still twitching and he could see blood in his cupped palm—but it seemed to have revitalized his brain, refreshed it. Of course that was what shock treatments were supposed to do.

"No ... I want to help ..."

But Escobar was shaking his head. "We know Nunez will come to the city. We know on the way he will take the radio station if he can ... and he probably can."

“For awhile,” said the Bride of Frankenstein. “Only for awhile.”

Escobar was nodding. “Only for awhile. A matter of days, perhaps hours. Is of no concern. What matters is we give you a bit of rope, see if you make a noose ... and you do.”

Fletcher sat up straight in the chair again. Ramon had retreated a step or two. Fletcher looked at the back of his left hand and saw a small smudge there, like the one on the side of Tomas’s dead face in the photograph. And there was Heinz who had killed Fletcher’s friend, standing beside his machine with his hands folded in front of him, smiling and perhaps thinking about the paper he would write, words and graphs and little pictures labeled Fig. 1 and Fig. 2 and, for all Fletcher knew, Fig. 994.

“Mr. Fletcher?”

Fletcher looked at Escobar and straightened the fingers of his left hand. The muscles of that arm were still twitching, but the twitch was subsiding. He thought that when the time came, he would be able to use the arm. And if Ramon shot him, so what? Let Heinz see if his machine could raise the dead.

“Do we have your attention, Mr. Fletcher?”

Fletcher nodded.

“Why do you want to protect this man Nunez?” Escobar asked. “Why do you want to suffer to protect this man? He takes the cocaine. If he wins his revolution he will proclaim himself President for Life and sell the cocaine to your country. He will go to mass on Sunday and fuck his coke-whores the rest of the week. In the end who wins? Maybe the Communists. Maybe United Fruit. Not the people.” Escobar spoke low. His eyes were soft. “Help us, Mr. Fletcher. Of your own free will. Don’t make us make you help us. Don’t make us pull on your string.” He looked up at Fletcher from beneath his single bushy eyebrow. He looked up with his soft cocker spaniel eyes. “You can still be on that plane to Miami. On the way you like a drink, yes?”

“Yes,” Fletcher said. “I’ll help you.”

“Ah, good.” Escobar smiled, then looked at the woman.

“Does he have rockets?” she asked.

“Yes.”

“Many?”

“At least sixty.”

“Russian?”

“Some are. Others came in crates with Israeli markings, but the writing on the missiles themselves looks Japanese.”

She nodded, seeming satisfied. Escobar beamed.

“Where are they?”

“Everywhere. You can’t just swoop down and grab them. There might still be a dozen at Ortiz.” Fletcher knew that wasn’t so.

“And Nunez?” she asked. “Is El Condor at Ortiz?”

She knew better. “He’s in the jungle. Last I knew, he was in Belen Province.” This was a lie. Nunez had been in Cristobal, a suburb of the capital city, when Fletcher last saw him. He was probably still there. But if Escobar and the woman had known that, there would have been no need of this interrogation. And why would they believe Nunez would trust Fletcher with his whereabouts, anyway? In a country like this, where Escobar and Heinz and the Bride of Frankenstein were only three of your enemies, why would you trust a Yankee newspaper reporter with your address? Loco! Why was the Yankee newspaperman involved at all? But they had stopped wondering about that, at least for now.

“Who does he talk to in the city?” the woman asked. “Not who he fucks, who he talks to.”

This was the point where he had to move, if he was going to. The truth was no longer safe and they might know a lie.

“There’s a man ...” he started, then paused. “Could I have that cigarette now?”

“Mr. Fletcher! But of course!” Escobar was for a moment the concerned dinner-party host. Fletcher did not think this was playacting. Escobar picked up the red-and-white pack—the kind of pack any free man or woman could buy at any newsstand like the one Fletcher remembered on Forty-third Street—and shook out a cigarette. Fletcher took it, knowing he might be dead before it burned all the way down to the filter, no longer a part of this earth. He felt nothing, only the fading twitch of the muscles in his left arm and a funny baked taste in his fillings on that side of his mouth.

He put the cigarette between his lips. Escobar leaned further forward and snapped back the cover of his gold-plated lighter. He flicked the wheel. The lighter produced a flame. Fletcher was aware of Heinz’s infernal machine humming like an old radio, the kind with tubes in the back. He was aware of the woman he had come to think of, without a trace of humor, as the Bride of Frankenstein, looking at him the way the Coyote in the cartoons looked at the Road Runner. He was aware of his heart beating, of the remembered circular feel of the cigarette in his mouth—“a tube of singular delight,” some playwright or other had called it—and of the beat of his heart, incredibly slow. Last month he’d been called upon to make an after-luncheon speech at the Club Internacional, where all the foreign press geeks hung out, and his heart had beat faster then.

Here it was, and so what? Even the blind found their way through this; even his sister had, there by the river.

Fletcher bent to the flame. The end of the Marlboro caught fire and glowed red. Fletcher drew deep, and it was easy to start coughing;

after three years without a cigarette, it would have been harder not to cough. He sat back in the chair and added a harsh, gagging growl to the cough. He began to shake all over, throwing his elbows out, jerking his head to the left, drumming his feet. Best of all, he recalled an old childhood talent and rolled his eyes up to the whites. During none of this did he let go of the cigarette.

Fletcher had never seen an actual epileptic fit, although he vaguely remembered Patty Duke throwing one in *The Miracle Worker*. He had no way of knowing if he was doing what epileptics actually did, but he hoped that the unexpected death of Tomas Herrera would help them to overlook any false notes in his own act.

“Shit, not again!” Heinz cried in a shrill near-scream; in a movie it might have been funny.

“Grab him, Ramon!” Escobar yelled in Spanish. He tried to stand up and struck the table so hard with his meaty thighs that it rose up and thumped back down. The woman didn’t move, and Fletcher thought: She suspects. I don’t think she even knows it yet, but she’s smarter than Escobar, smarter by a mile, and she suspects.

Was this true? With his eyes rolled up he could see only a ghost of her, not enough to really know if it was or not ... but he knew. What did it matter? Things had been set in motion, and now they would play out. They would play out very fast.

“Ramon!” Escobar shouted. “Don’t let him fall on the floor, you idiot! Don’t let him swallow his t—”

Ramon bent over and grabbed Fletcher’s shaking shoulders, perhaps wanting to get Fletcher’s head back, perhaps wanting to make sure Fletcher’s tongue was still safely unswallowed (a person couldn’t swallow his own tongue, not unless it was cut off; Ramon clearly did not watch *ER*). Whatever he wanted didn’t matter. When his face was where Fletcher could get at it, Fletcher struck the burning end of the Marlboro in Ramon’s eye.

Ramon shrieked and jerked backward. His right hand rose toward his face, where the still-burning cigarette hung askew in the socket of his eye, but his left hand remained on Fletcher's shoulder. It was now tightened down to a clamp, and when he stepped back, Ramon pulled Fletcher's chair over. Fletcher spilled out of it, rolled over, and got to his feet.

Heinz was screaming something, words, maybe, but to Fletcher he sounded like a girl of about ten screaming at the sight of a singing idol—one of the Hansons, perhaps. Escobar wasn't making any noise at all and that was bad.

Fletcher didn't look back at the table. He didn't have to look to know that Escobar was coming for him. Instead he shot both hands forward, grabbed the butt of Ramon's revolver, and pulled it from its holster. Fletcher didn't think Ramon ever knew it was gone. He was screaming a flood of Spanish and pawing at his face. He struck the cigarette but instead of coming free it broke off, the burning end still stuck in his eye.

Fletcher turned. Escobar was there, already around the end of the long table, coming for him with his fat hands out. Escobar no longer looked like a fellow who sometimes did the TV weather and talked about high bressure.

"Get that Yankee son of a bitch!" the woman spat.

Fletcher kicked the overturned chair into Escobar's path and Escobar tripped on it. As he went down, Fletcher stuck the gun out, still held in both hands, and shot it into the top of Escobar's head. Escobar's hair jumped. Gouts of blood burst from his nose and mouth and from the underside of his chin, where the bullet came out. Escobar fell flat on his bleeding face. His feet drummed on the gray tile floor. The smell of shit rose from his dying body.

The woman was no longer in her chair, but she had no intention of approaching Fletcher. She ran for the door, fleet as a deer in her dark shapeless dress. Ramon, still bellowing, was between Fletcher

and the woman. And he was reaching for Fletcher, wanting to grab him by the neck, throttle him.

Fletcher shot him twice, once in the chest and once in the face. The face-shot tore off most of Ramon's nose and right cheek, but the big man in the brown uniform came on just the same, roaring, the cigarette still dangling from his eye, his big sausage fingers, a silver ring on one of them, opening and closing.

Ramon stumbled over Escobar just as Escobar had stumbled over the chair. Fletcher had a moment to think of a famous cartoon that shows fish in a line, each with his mouth open to eat the next one down in size. The Food Chain, that drawing was called.

Ramon, facedown and with two bullets in him, reached out and clamped a hand on Fletcher's ankle. Fletcher tore free, staggered, and fired a fourth shot into the ceiling when he did. Dust sifted down. There was a strong smell of gunsmoke in the room now. Fletcher looked at the door. The woman was still there, yanking at the doorknob with one hand and fumbling at the turn-lock with the other hand, but she couldn't open the door. If she'd been able to, she'd have already done it. She'd be all the way down the hall by now, and screaming bloody murder up the stairs.

"Hey," Fletcher said. He felt like an ordinary guy who goes to his Thursday-night bowling league and rolls a 300 game. "Hey, you bitch, look at me."

She turned and put her palms flat against the door, as if she were holding it up. There was still a little nailhead of light in each of her eyes. She began to tell him he mustn't hurt her. She started in Spanish, hesitated, then began to say the same thing in English. "You mustn't hurt me in any way, Mr. Fletcher, I am the only one who can guarantee your safe conduct from here, and I swear I will on my solemn oath, but you must not hurt me."

From behind them, Heinz was keening like a child in love or terror. Now that Fletcher was close to the woman—the woman standing

against the door of the deathroom with her hands pressed flat against its metal surface—he could smell some bittersweet perfume. Her eyes were shaped like almonds. Her hair streamed back above the top of her head. We're not just fucking around, she had told him, and Fletcher thought: Neither am I.

The woman saw the news of her death in his eyes and began to talk faster, pressing her butt and back and palms harder and harder against the metal door as she talked. It was as if she believed she could somehow melt herself through the door and come out whole on the other side if she just pushed hard enough. She had papers, she said, papers in his name, and she would give him these papers. She also had money, a great deal of money, also gold; there was a Swiss bank account which he could access by computer from her home. It occurred to Fletcher that in the end there might only be one way to tell the thugs from the patriots: when they saw their own death rising in your eyes like water, patriots made speeches. The thugs, on the other hand, gave you the number of their Swiss bank account and offered to put you on-line.

“Shut up,” Fletcher said. Unless this room was very well insulated indeed, a dozen ordinary troops from upstairs were probably on their way now. He had no means of standing them off, but this one was not going to get away.

She shut up, still standing against the door, pressing it with her palms. Still with the nailheads in her eyes. How old was she? Fletcher wondered. Sixty-five? And how many had she killed in this room, or rooms like it? How many had she ordered killed?

“Listen to me,” Fletcher said. “Are you listening?”

What she was undoubtedly listening for were the sounds of approaching rescue. In your dreams, Fletcher thought.

“The weatherman there said that El Condor uses cocaine, that he's a Communist butt-boy, a whore for United Fruit, who knows what else. Maybe he's some of those things, maybe none. I don't know or care.

What I know about, what I care about, was he was never in charge of the ordinaries patrolling the Caya River in the summer of 1994. Nunez was in New York then. At NYU. So he wasn't part of the bunch that found the nuns on retreat from La Caya. They put three of the nuns' heads up on sticks, there by the water's edge. The one in the middle was my sister."

Fletcher shot her twice and then Ramon's gun clicked empty. Two was enough. The woman went sliding down the door, her bright eyes never leaving Fletcher's. You were the one who was supposed to die, those eyes said. I don't understand this, you were the one who was supposed to die. Her hand clawed at her throat once, twice, then was still. Her eyes remained on his a moment longer, the bright eyes of an ancient mariner with a whale of a tale to tell, and then her head fell forward.

Fletcher turned around and began walking toward Heinz with Ramon's gun held out. As he walked he realized that his right shoe was gone. He looked at Ramon, who was still lying facedown in a spreading pool of blood. Ramon still had hold of Fletcher's loafer. He was like a dying weasel that refuses to let go of a chicken. Fletcher stopped long enough to put it on.

Heinz turned as if to run, and Fletcher wagged the gun at him. The gun was empty but Heinz didn't seem to know that. And maybe he remembered there was nowhere to run anyway, not here in the deathroom. He stopped moving and only stared at the oncoming gun and the oncoming man behind it. Heinz was crying. "One step back," Fletcher said, and, still crying, Heinz took one step back.

Fletcher stopped in front of Heinz's machine. What was the word Heinz had used? Atavism, wasn't it?

The machine on the trolley looked much too simple for a man of Heinz's intelligence—three dials, one switch marked ON and OFF (now in the OFF position), and a rheostat which had been turned so the white line on it pointed to roughly eleven o'clock. The needles on the dials all lay flat on their zeroes.

Fletcher picked up the stylus and held it out to Heinz. Heinz made a wet sound, shook his head, and took another step backward. His face would lift and pull together in a kind of grief-struck sneer, then loosen again. His forehead was wet with sweat, his cheeks with tears. This second backward step took him almost beneath one of the caged lights, and his shadow puddled around his feet.

“Take it or I’ll kill you,” Fletcher said. “And if you take another step backward I’ll kill you.” He had no time for this and it felt wrong in any case, but Fletcher could not stop himself. He kept seeing that picture of Tomas, the open eyes, the little scorched mark like a powder burn.

Sobbing, Heinz took the blunt fountain-pen-shaped object, careful to hold it only by the rubber insulated sleeve.

“Put it in your mouth,” Fletcher said. “Suck on it like it was a lollipop.”

“No!” Heinz cried in a weepy voice. He shook his head and water flew off his face. His face was still going through its contortions: cramp and release, cramp and release. There was a green bubble of snot at the entrance to one of his nostrils; it expanded and contracted with Heinz’s rapid breathing but didn’t break. Fletcher had never seen anything quite like it. “No, you can’t make me!”

But Heinz knew Fletcher could. The Bride of Frankenstein might not have believed it, and Escobar likely hadn’t had time to believe it, but Heinz knew he had no more right of refusal. He was in Tomas Herrera’s position, in Fletcher’s position. In one way that was revenge enough, but in another way it wasn’t. Knowing was an idea. Ideas were no good in here. In here seeing was believing.

“Put it in your mouth or I’ll shoot you in the head,” Fletcher said, and shoved the empty gun at Heinz’s face. Heinz recoiled with a wail of terror. And now Fletcher heard his own voice drop, become confidential, become sincere. In a way it reminded him of Escobar’s voice. We are havin an area of low bressure, he thought. We are havin the steenkin rain-showers. “I’m not going to shock you if you just do it and hurry up. But I need you to know what it feels like.”

Heinz stared at Fletcher. His eyes were blue and red-rimmed, swimming with tears. He didn't believe Fletcher, of course, what Fletcher was saying made no sense, but Heinz very clearly wanted to believe it anyway, because, sense or nonsense, Fletcher was holding out the possibility of life. He just needed to be pushed a single step further.

Fletcher smiled. "Do it for your research."

Heinz was convinced—not completely, but enough to believe Fletcher could be Mr. Maybe He Will after all. He put the steel rod into his mouth. His bulging eyes stared at Fletcher. Below them and above the jutting stylus—which looked not like a lollipop but an old-fashioned fever thermometer—that green bubble of snot swelled and retreated, swelled and retreated. Still pointing the gun at Heinz, Fletcher flicked the switch on the control panel from OFF to ON and gave the rheostat a hard turn. The white line on the knob went from eleven in the morning to five in the afternoon.

Heinz might have had time to spit the stylus out, but shock caused him to clamp his lips down on the stainless steel barrel instead. The snapping sound was louder this time, like a small branch instead of a twig. Heinz's lips pressed down even tighter. The green mucus bubble in his nostril popped. So did one of his eyes. Heinz's entire body seemed to vibrate inside his clothes. His hands were bent at the wrists, the long fingers splayed. His cheeks went from white to pale gray to a darkish purple. Smoke began to pour out of his nose. His other eye popped out on his cheek. Above the dislocated eyes there were now two raw sockets that stared at Fletcher with surprise. One of Heinz's cheeks either tore open or melted. A quantity of smoke and a strong odor of burned meat came out through the hole, and Fletcher observed small flames, orange and blue. Heinz's mouth was on fire. His tongue was burning like a rug.

Fletcher's fingers were still on the rheostat. He turned it all the way back to the left, then flicked the switch to OFF. The needles, which had swung all the way to the +50 marks on their little dials, immediately fell dead again. The moment the electricity left him,

Heinz crashed to the gray tile floor, trailing smoke from his mouth as he went. The stylus fell free, and Fletcher saw there were little pieces of Heinz's lips on it. Fletcher's gorge gave a salty, burping lurch, and he closed his throat against it. He didn't have time to vomit over what he had done to Heinz; he might consider vomiting at a later time. Still, he lingered a moment longer, leaning over to look at Heinz's smoking mouth and dislocated eyes. "How do you describe it?" he asked the corpse. "Now, while the experience is still fresh? What, nothing to say?"

Fletcher turned and hurried across the room, detouring around Ramon, who was still alive and moaning. He sounded like a man having a bad dream.

He remembered that the door was locked. Ramon had locked it; the key would be on the ring hanging at Ramon's belt. Fletcher went back to the guard, knelt beside him, and tore the ring off his belt. When he did, Ramon groped out and seized Fletcher by the ankle again. Fletcher was still holding the gun. He rapped the butt down on the top of Ramon's head. For a moment the hand on his ankle gripped even tighter, and then it let go.

Fletcher started to get up and then thought, Bullets. He must have more. The gun's empty. His next thought was that he didn't need no steenkin bullets, Ramon's gun had done all that it could for him. Shooting outside this room would bring the ordinaries like flies.

Even so, Fletcher felt along Ramon's belt, opening the little leather snap pouches until he found a speed-loader. He used it to fill up the gun. He didn't know if he could actually bring himself to shoot ordinaries who were only men like Tomas, men with families to feed, but he could shoot officers and he could save at least one bullet for himself. He would very likely not be able to get out of the building—that would be like rolling a second 300 game in a row—but he would never be brought back to this room again, and set in the chair next to Heinz's machine.

He pushed the Bride of Frankenstein away from the door with his foot. Her eyes glared dully at the ceiling. Fletcher was coming more and more to understand that he had survived and these others had not. They were cooling off. On their skin, galaxies of bacteria had already begun to die. These were bad thoughts to be having in the basement of the Ministry of Information, bad thoughts to be in the head of a man who had become—perhaps only for a little while, more likely forever—a desaparecido. Still, he couldn't help having them.

The third key opened the door. Fletcher stuck his head out into the hall—cinder-block walls, green on the bottom half and a dirty cream-white on the top half, like the walls of an old school corridor. Faded red lino on the floor. No one was in the hall. About thirty feet down to the left, a small brown dog lay asleep against the wall. His feet were twitching. Fletcher didn't know if the dog was dreaming about chasing or being chased, but he didn't think he would be asleep at all if the gunshots—or Heinz's screaming—had been very loud out here. If I ever get back, he thought, I'll write that soundproofing is the great triumph of dictatorship. I'll tell the world. Of course I probably won't get back, those stairs down to the right are probably as close to Forty-third Street as I'm ever going to get, but—

But there was Mr. Maybe I Can.

Fletcher stepped into the hall and pulled the door of the deathroom shut behind him. The little brown dog lifted its head, looked at Fletcher, puffed its lips out in a woof that was mostly a whisper, then lowered its head again and appeared to go back to sleep.

Fletcher dropped to his knees, put his hands (one still holding Ramon's gun) on the floor, bent, and kissed the lino. As he did it he thought of his sister—how she had looked going off to college eight years before her death by the river. She had been wearing a tartan skirt on the day she'd gone off to college, and the red in it hadn't been the exact same red of the faded lino, but it was close. Close enough for government work, as they said.

Fletcher got up. He started down the hall toward the stairs, the first-floor hallway, the street, the city, Highway 4, the patrols, the roadblocks, the border, the checkpoints, the water. The Chinese said a journey of a thousand miles started with a single step.

I'll see how far I get, Fletcher thought as he reached the foot of the stairs. I might just surprise myself. But he was already surprised, just to be alive. Smiling a little, holding Ramon's gun out before him, Fletcher started up the stairs.

*

A month later, a man walked up to Carlo Arcuzzi's newsstand kiosk on Forty-third Street. Carlo had a nasty moment when he was almost sure the man meant to stick a gun in his face and rob him. It was only eight o'clock and still light, lots of people about, but did any of those things stop a man who was pazzo? And this man looked plenty pazzo—so thin his white shirt and gray pants seemed to float on him, and his eyes lay at the bottom of great round sockets. He looked like a man who had just been released from a concentration camp or (by some huge mistake) a loony bin. When his hand went into his pants pocket, Carlo Arcuzzi thought, Now comes the gun.

But instead of a gun came a battered old Lord Buxton, and from the wallet came a ten-dollar bill. Then, in a perfectly sane tone of voice, the man in the white shirt and gray pants asked for a pack of Marlboros. Carlo got them, put a package of matches on top of them, and pushed them across the counter of his kiosk. While the man opened the Marlboros, Carlo made change.

"No," the man said when he saw the change. He had put one of the cigarettes in his mouth.

"No? What you mean no?"

"I mean keep the change," the man said. He offered the pack to Carlo. "Do you smoke? Have one of these, if you like."

Carlo looked mistrustfully at the man in the white shirt and gray pants. "I don't smoke. It's a bad habit."

"Very bad," the man agreed, then lit his cigarette and inhaled with apparent pleasure. He stood smoking and watching the people on the other side of the street. There were girls on the other side of the street. Men would look at girls in their summer clothes, that was human nature. Carlo didn't think this customer was crazy anymore, although he had left the change of a ten-dollar bill sitting on the narrow counter of the kiosk.

The thin man smoked the cigarette all the way down to the filter. He turned toward Carlo, staggering a little, as if he was not used to smoking and the cigarette had made him dizzy.

"A nice night," the man said.

Carlo nodded. It was. It was a nice night. "We're lucky to be alive," Carlo said.

The man nodded. "All of us. All of the time."

He walked to the curb, where there was a litter basket. He dropped the pack of cigarettes, full save one, into the litter basket. "All of us," he said. "All of the time." He walked away. Carlo watched him go and thought that maybe he was pazzo after all. Or maybe not. Crazy was a hard state to define.

*

This is a slightly Kafka-esque story about an interrogation room in the South American version of Hell. In such stories, the fellow being interrogated usually ends up spilling everything and then being killed (or losing his mind). I wanted to write one with a happier ending, however unreal that might be. And here it is.

NIGHTMARES & DREAMSCAPES
IT GROWS ON YOU



IT GROWS ON YOU

Stephen King

New England autumn and the thin soil now shows in patches through the ragweed and goldenrod, waiting for snow still four weeks distant. The culverts are clogged with leaves, the sky has gone a perpetual gray, and cornstalks stand in leaning rows like soldiers who have found some fantastic way to die on their feet. Pumpkins, sagging inward now with softrot, are piled against crepuscular sheds, smelling like the breath of old women. There is no heat and no cold at this time of year, only pallid air which is never still, beating through the bare fields under white skies where birds fly south in chevron shapes. That wind blows dust up from the soft shoulders of back roads in dancing dervishes, parts the played-out fields as a comb parts hair, and sniffs its way into junked cars up on blocks in back yards.

The Newall house out on Town Road #3 overlooks that part of Castle Rock known as the Bend. It is somehow impossible to sense anything good about this house. It has a deathly look which can be only partially explained by its lack of paint. The front lawn is a mass of dried hummocks which the frost will soon heave into even more grotesque postures. Thin smoke rises from Brownie's Store at the foot of the hill. Once the Bend was a fairly important part of Castle Rock, but that time passed around the time Korea got over. On the old bandstand across the road from Brownie's two small children roll a red firetruck between them. Their faces are tired and washed out, the faces of old men, almost. Their hands actually seem to cut the air as they roll the truck between them, pausing only to swipe at their endlessly running noses every now and again.

In the store Harley McKissick is presiding, corpulent and red-faced, while old John Clutterbuck and Lenny Partridge sit by the stove with their feet up. Paul Corliss is leaning against the counter. The store has a smell that is ancient—a smell of salami and flypaper and coffee and tobacco; of sweat and dark brown Coca-Cola; of pepper and cloves and O'Dell Hair Tonic, which looks like semen and turns hair into sculpture. A flyspecked poster advertising a beanhole bean supper held in 1986 still leans in the window next to one advertising

an appearance of “Country” Ken Corriveau at the 1984 Castle County Fair. The light and heat of almost ten summers has fallen on this latter poster, and now Ken Corriveau (who has been out of the country-music business for at least half of those ten years and now sells Fords over in Chamberlain) looks simultaneously faded and toasted. At the back of the store is a huge glass freezer that came out of New York in 1933, and everywhere hangs the vague but tremendous smell of coffee-beans.

The old men watch the children and speak in low, desultory tones. John Clutterbuck, whose grandson, Andy, is busy drinking himself to death this fall, has been talking about the town landfill. The landfill stinks like a bugger in the summertime, he says. No one disputes this—it’s true—but no one is very interested in the subject, either, because it’s not summer, it’s autumn, and the huge range-oil stove is throwing off a stuporous glow of heat. The Winston thermometer behind the counter says 82. Clutterbuck’s forehead has a huge dent above his left eyebrow where he struck his head in a car accident in 1963. Small children sometimes ask to touch it. Old Clut has won a great deal of money from summer people who don’t believe the dent in his head will hold the contents of a medium-sized water tumbler.

“Paulson,” Harley McKissick says quietly.

An old Chevrolet has pulled in behind Lenny Partridge’s oil-burner. On the side is a cardboard sign held with heavy masking tape. GARY PAULSON CHAIR’S CANED ANTIQUE’S BOUGHT & SOLD, the sign reads, with the telephone number to call beneath the words. Gary Paulson gets out of his car slowly, an old man in faded green pants with a huge satchel seat. He drags a knurled cane out after him, holding to the doorframe tightly until he has the cane planted just the way he likes it. The cane has the white plastic handgrip from a child’s bike affixed over its dark tip like a condom. It makes small circles in the lifeless dust as Paulson begins his careful trip from his car to the door of Brownie’s.

The children on the bandstand look up at him, then follow his glance (fearfully, it seems) to the leaning, crepitating bulk of the Newall

house on the ridge above them. Then they go back to their firetruck.

*

Joe Newall bought in Castle Rock in 1904 and owned in Castle Rock until 1929, but his fortune was made in the nearby mill town of Gates Falls. He was a scrawny man with an angry, hectic face and eyes with yellow corneas. He bought a great parcel of open land out in the Bend—this was when it was quite a thriving village, complete with a profitable little combined wood-milling operation and furniture factory—from The First National Bank of Oxford. The bank got it from Phil Budreau in a foreclosure assisted by County Sheriff Nickerson Campbell. Phil Budreau, well-liked but considered something of a fool by his neighbors, slunk away to Kittery and spent the next twelve years or so tinkering with cars and motorcycles. Then he went off to France to fight the Heinies, fell out of an airplane while on a reconnaissance mission (or so the story has it), and was killed.

The Budreau patch lay silent and fallow for most of those years, while Joe Newall lived in a rented house in Gates Falls and saw to the making of his fortune. He was known more for his employee-severance policies than for the way he'd turned around a mill which had been tottering on the brink of ruination when he'd bought it for a song back in '02. The millworkers called him Firing Joe, because if you missed a single shift you were sent down the road, no excuses accepted or even listened to.

He married Cora Leonard, niece of Carl Stowe, in 1914. The marriage had great merit—in Joe Newall's eyes, certainly—because Cora was Carl's only living relative, and she would no doubt come into a nice little bundle when Carl passed on (as long as Joe remained on good terms with him, that was, and he had no intentions of being on anything less with the old fellow, who had been Damned Shrewd in his day but was considered to have become Rather Soft in his declining years). There were other mills in the area that could be bought for a song and then turned around ... if, that was, a man had a little capital to use as a lever. Joe soon had his lever; his wife's rich uncle died within a year of the wedding.

So the marriage had merit—oh yes, no doubt about it. Cora herself did not have merit, however. She was a grainbag of a woman, incredibly wide across the hips, incredibly full in the butt, yet almost as flat-chested as a boy and possessed of an absurd little pipestem neck upon which her oversized head nodded like a strange pale sunflower. Her cheeks hung like dough, her lips like strips of liver; her face was as silent as a full moon on a winter night. She sweated huge dark patches around the armholes of her dresses even in February, and she carried a dank smell of perspiration with her always.

Joe began a house for his wife on the Budreau patch in 1915, and a year later it seemed finished. It was painted white and enclosed twelve rooms that sprouted from many strange angles. Joe Newall was not popular in Castle Rock, partly because he made his money out of town, partly because Budreau, his predecessor, had been such an all-around nice fellow (though a fool, they always reminded each other, as if foolishness and niceness went together and it would be death to forget it), but mostly because his damned house was built with out-of-town labor. Shortly before the gutters and downspouts were hung, an obscene drawing accompanied by a one-syllable Anglo-Saxon word was scrawled on the fanlighted front door in soft yellow chalk.

By 1920 Joe Newall was a rich man. His three Gates Falls mills were going like a house afire, stuffed with the profits of a world war and comfortable with the orders of the newly arisen or (arising) middle class. He began to build a new wing on his house. Most folks in the village pronounced it unnecessary—after all, there were just the two of them up there—and almost all opined it added nothing but ugly to a house most of them already considered ugly beyond almost all measure. This new wing towered one story above the main house and looked blindly down the ridge, which had in those days been covered with straggling pines.

The news that just the two of them were soon to become just the three of them trickled in from Gates Falls, the source most likely

being Doris Gingercroft, who was Dr. Robertson's nurse in those days. So the added wing was in the nature of a celebration, it seemed. After six years of wedded bliss and four years of living in the Bend, during which she had been seen only at a distance as she crossed her dooryard, or occasionally picking flowers—crocuses, wild roses, Queen Anne's lace, lady's slipper, paintbrush—in the field beyond the buildings, after all that time, Cora Leonard Newall had Kindled.

She never shopped at Brownie's. Cora did her marketing at the Kitty Korner Store over in Gates Center every Thursday afternoon.

In January of 1921, Cora gave birth to a monster with no arms and, it was said, a tiny clutch of perfect fingers sticking out of one eyesocket. It died less than six hours after mindless contractions had pushed its red and senseless face into the light. Joe Newall added a cupola to the wing seventeen months later, in the late spring of 1922 (in western Maine there is no early spring; only late spring and winter before it). He continued to buy out of town and would have nothing to do with Bill "Brownie" McKissick's store. He also never crossed the threshold of the Bend Methodist Church. The deformed infant which had slid from his wife's womb was buried in the Newall plot in Gates rather than in Homeland. The inscription on the tiny headstone read

SARAH TAMSON TABITHA FRANCINE NEWALL

JANUARY 14, 1921

GOD GRANT SHE LIE STILL.

In the store they talked about Joe Newall and Joe's wife and Joe's house as Brownie's kid Harley, still not old enough to shave (but with his senescence buried inside just the same, hibernating, waiting, perhaps dreaming) but old enough to stack vegetables and haul pecks of potatoes out to the roadside stand whenever called upon to do so, stood by and listened. Mostly it was the house of which they spoke; it was considered to be an affront to the sensibilities and an offense to the eye. "But it grows on you," Clayton Clutterbuck (father of John) sometimes remarked. There was never any answer to this. It was a statement with absolutely no meaning ... yet at the same time it was a patent fact. If you were standing in the yard at Brownie's, maybe just looking at the berries for the best box when berry-season was on, you sooner or later found your eyes turning up to the house on the ridge the way a weathervane turns to the nor'east before a March blizzard. Sooner or later you had to look, and as time went by, it got to be sooner for most people. Because, as Clayt Clutterbuck said, the Newall place grew on you.

In 1924, Cora fell down the stairs between the cupola and the new wing, breaking her neck and her back. A rumor went through town (it probably originated at a Ladies Aid Bake Sale) that she had been stark naked at the time. She was interred next to her ill-formed, short-lived daughter.

Joe Newall—who, most folks now agreed, undoubtedly contained a touch of the kike—continued to make money hand over fist. He built two sheds and a barn up on the ridge, all of them connected to the main house by way of the new wing. The barn was completed in 1927, and its purpose became clear almost at once—Joe had apparently decided to become a gentleman farmer. He bought

sixteen cows from a fellow in Mechanic Falls. He bought a shiny new milking machine from the same fellow. It looked like a metal octopus to those who glanced into the back of the delivery truck and saw it when the driver stopped at Brownie's for a cold bottle of ale before going on up the hill.

With the cows and the milking machine installed, Joe hired a halfwit from Motton to take care of his investment. How this supposedly hard-fisted and tough-minded mill-owner could have done such a thing perplexed everyone who turned his mind to the question—that Newall was slipping seemed to be the only answer—but he did, and of course the cows all died.

The county health officer showed up to look at the cows, and Joe showed him a signed statement from a veterinarian (a Gates Falls veterinarian, folks said ever after, raising their brows significantly as they said it) certifying that the cows had died of bovine meningitis.

"That means bad luck in English," Joe said.

"Is that supposed to be a joke?"

"Take it the way you want to take it," said Joe. "That's all right."

"Make that idiot shut up, why don't you?" the county health officer said. He was looking down the driveway at the halfwit, who was leaning against the Newall R.F.D. box and howling. Tears ran down his pudgy, dirty cheeks. Every now and then he would draw back and slap himself a good one, like he knew the whole thing was his fault.

"He's all right, too."

"Nothing up here seems all right to me," said the county health man, "least of all sixteen cows layin dead on their backs with their legs stickin up like fence-posts. I can see em from here."

"Good," said Joe Newall, "because it's as close as you'll get."

The county health officer threw the Gates Falls vet's paper down and stamped one of his boots on it. He looked at Joe Newall, his face flushed so bright that the burst squiggles of veins on the sides of his nose stood out purple. "I want to see those cows. Haul one away, if it comes to that."

"No."

"You don't own the world, Newall—I'll get a court order."

"Let's see if you can."

The health officer drove away. Joe watched him. Down at the end of the driveway the halfwit, clad in dung-splattered bib overalls from the Sears and Roebuck mail-order catalogue, went on leaning against the Newall R.F.D. box and howling. He stayed there all that hot August day, howling at the top of his lungs with his flat mongoloid face turned up to the yellow sky. "Bellerin like a calf in the moonlight" was how young Gary Paulson put it.

The county health officer was Clem Upshaw, from Sirois Hill. He might have dropped the matter once his thermostat went down a little, but Brownie McKissick, who had supported him for the office he held (and who let him charge a fair amount of beer), urged him not to. Harley McKissick's dad was not the kind of man who usually resorted to cat's paws—or had to—but he'd wanted to make a point concerning private property with Joe Newall. He wanted Joe to understand that private property is a great thing, yes, an American thing, but private property is still stitched to the town, and in Castle Rock people still believed the community came first, even with rich folks that could build a little more house on their house whenever the whim took them. So Clem Upshaw went on down to Lackery, which was the county seat in those days, and got the order.

While he was getting it, a large van drove up past the howling moron and to the barn. When Clem Upshaw returned with his order, only one cow remained, gazing at him with black eyes which had grown dull and distant beneath their covering of hay chaff. Clem determined

that this cow at least had died of bovine meningitis, and then he went away. When he was gone, the remover's van returned for the last cow.

In 1928 Joe began another wing. That was when the men who gathered at Brownie's decided the man was crazy. Smart, yes, but crazy. Benny Ellis claimed that Joe had gouged out his daughter's one eye and kept it in a jar of what Benny called "fubbleddehyde" on the kitchen table, along with the amputated fingers which had been poking out of the other socket when the baby was born. Benny was a great reader of the horror pulps, magazines that showed naked ladies being carried off by giant ants and similar bad dreams on their covers, and his story about Joe Newall's jar was clearly inspired by his reading matter. As a result, there were soon people all over Castle Rock—not just the Bend—who claimed every word of it was true. Some claimed Joe kept even less mentionable things in the jar.

The second wing was finished in August of 1929 and two nights later a fast-moving jalopy with great sodium circles for eyes screamed juddering into Joe Newall's driveway and the stinking, flyblown corpse of a large skunk was thrown at the new wing. The animal splattered above one of the windows, throwing a fan of blood across the panes in a pattern almost like a Chinese ideogram.

In September of that year a fire swept the carding room of Newall's flagship mill in Gates Falls, causing fifty thousand dollars' worth of damage. In October the stock market crashed. In November Joe Newall hanged himself from a rafter in one of the unfinished rooms—probably a bedroom, it was meant to be—of the newest wing. The smell of sap in the fresh wood was still strong. He was found by Cleveland Torbutt, the assistant manager of Gates Mills and Joe's partner (or so it was rumored) in a number of Wall Street ventures that were now not worth the puke of a tubercular cocker spaniel. The body was cut down by the county coroner, who happened to be Clem Upshaw's brother Noble.

Joe was buried next to his wife and child on the last day of November. It was a hard, brilliant day and the only person from

Castle Rock to attend the service was Alvin Coy, who drove the Hay & Peabody funeral hack. Alvin reported that one of the spectators was a young, shapely woman in a raccoon coat and a black cloche hat. Sitting in Brownie's and eating a pickle straight out of the barrel, Alvin would smile mordantly and tell his cronies that she was a jazz baby if he had ever seen one. She bore not one whit of resemblance to Cora Leonard Newall's side of the family, and she hadn't closed her eyes during the prayer.

*

Gary Paulson enters the store with exquisite slowness, closing the door carefully behind him.

"Afternoon," Harley McKissick says neutrally.

"Heard you won a turkey down to the Grange last night," says Old Clut as he prepares to light his pipe.

"Yuh," Gary says. He's eighty-four and, like the others, can remember when the Bend was a damned sight livelier than it is now. He lost two sons in two wars—the two before that mess in Viet Nam—and that was a hard thing. His third, a good boy, died in a collision with a pulpwood truck up around Presque Isle—back in 1973, that was. Somehow that one was easier to take, God knows why. Gary sometimes drools from the corners of his lips these days, and makes frequent smacking sounds as he tries to suck the drool back into his mouth before it can get away and start running down his chin. He doesn't know a whole hell of a lot lately, but he knows getting old is a lousy way to spend the last years of your life.

"Coffee?" Harley asks.

"Guess not."

Lenny Partridge, who will probably never recover from the broken ribs he suffered in a strange road-accident two autumns ago, pulls his feet back so the older man can pass by him and lower himself

carefully into the chair in the corner (Gary caned the seat of this chair himself, back in '82). Paulson smacks his lips, sucks back spit, and folds his lumpy hands over the head of his cane. He looks tired and haggard.

“It is going to rain a pretty bitch,” he says finally. “I’m aching that bad.”

“It’s a bad fall,” Paul Corliss says.

There is silence. The heat from the stove fills the store that will go out of business when Harley dies or maybe even before he dies if his youngest daughter has her way, it fills the store and coats the bones of the old men, tries to, anyway, and sniffs up against the dirty glass with its ancient posters looking out at the yard where there were gas-pumps until Mobil took them out in 1977. They are old men who have, for the most part, seen their children go away to more profitable places. The store does no business to speak of now, except for a few locals and the occasional through-going summer tourists who think old men like these, old men who sit by the stove in their thermal undershirts even in July, are quaint. Old Clut has always claimed that new people are going to come to this part of the Rock, but the last couple of years things have been worse than ever—it seems the whole goddam town is dying.

“Who is building the new wing on that Christly Newall house?” Gary asks finally.

They look around at him. For a moment the kitchen match Old Clut has just scratched hangs mystically over his pipe, burning down the wood, turning it black. The sulfur node at the end turns gray and curls up. At last, Old Clut dips the match into the bowl and puffs.

“New wing?” Harley asks.

“Yuh.”

A blue membrane of smoke from Old Clut's pipe drifts up over the stove and spreads there like a delicate fisherman's net. Lenny Partridge tilts his chin up to stretch the wattles of his neck taut and then runs his hand slowly down his throat, producing a dry rasp.

"No one that I know of," Harley says, somehow indicating by his tone of voice that this includes anyone of any consequence, at least in this part of the world.

"They ain't had a buyer on that place since nineteen n eighty-one," Old Clut says. When Old Clut says they, he means both Southern Maine Weaving and The Bank of Southern Maine, but he means more: he means The Massachusetts Wops. Southern Maine Weaving came into ownership of Joe's three mills—and Joe's house on the ridge—about a year after Joe took his own life, but as far as the men gathered around the stove in Brownie's are concerned, that name's just a smokescreen... or what they sometimes call The Legal, as in She swore out a pertection order on him n now he can't even see his own kids because of The Legal. These men hate The Legal as it impinges upon their lives and the lives of their friends, but it fascinates them endlessly when they consider how some people put it to work in order to further their own nefarious money-making schemes.

Southern Maine Weaving, aka The Bank of Southern Maine, aka The Massachusetts Wops, enjoyed a long and profitable run with the mills Joe Newall saved from extinction, but it's the way they have been unable to get rid of the house that fascinates the old men who spend their days in Brownie's. "It's like a booger you can't flick off the end of your finger," Lenny Partridge said once, and they all nodded. "Not even those spaghetti-suckers from Maiden n Revere can get rid of that millstone."

Old Clut and his grandson, Andy, are currently estranged, and it is the ownership of Joe Newall's ugly house which has caused it ... although there are other, more personal issues swirling around just below the surface, no doubt—there almost always are. The subject came up one night after grandfather and grandson—both widowers

now—had enjoyed a pretty decent dinner at Young Clut’s house in town.

Young Andy, who had not yet lost his job on the town’s police-force, tried (rather self-indulgently) to explain to his grandfather that Southern Maine Weaving had had nothing to do with any of the erstwhile Newall holdings for years, that the actual owner of the house in the Bend was The Bank of Southern Maine, and that the two companies had nothing whatever to do with each other. Old John told Andy he was a fool if he believed that; everyone knew, he said, that both the bank and the textile company were fronts for The Massachusetts Wops, and that the only difference between them was a couple of words. They just hid the more obvious connections with great bunches of paperwork, Old Clut explained—The Legal, in other words.

Young Clut had the bad taste to laugh at that. Old Clut turned red, threw his napkin onto his plate, and got to his feet. Laugh, he said. You just go on. Why not? The only thing a drunk does better’n laugh at what he don’t understand is cry over he don’t know what. That made Andy mad, and he said something about Melissa being the reason why he drank, and John asked his grandson how long he was going to blame a dead wife for his boozing. Andy turned white when the old man said that, and told him to get out of his house, and John did, and he hasn’t been back since. Nor does he want to. Harsh words aside, he can’t bear to see Andy going to hell on a handcart like he is.

Speculation or not, this much cannot be denied: the house on the ridge has been empty for eleven years now, no one has ever lived there for long, and The Bank of Southern Maine is usually the organization that ends up trying to sell it through one of the local real estate firms.

“The last people to buy it come from uppa state New York, didn’t they?” Paul Corliss asks, and he speaks so rarely they all turn toward him. Even Gary does.

“Yessir,” Lenny says. “They was a nice couple. The man was gonna paint the barn red and turn it into some sort of antique store, wasn’t he?”

“Ayuh,” Old Clut says. “Then their boy got the gun they kep—”

“People are so goddam careless—” Harley puts in.

“Did he die?” Lenny asks. “The boy?”

Silence greets the question. It seems no one knows. Then, at last—almost reluctantly—Gary speaks up. “No,” he said. “But it blinded him. They moved up to Auburn. Or maybe it was Leeds.”

“They was likely people,” Lenny said. “I really thought they might make a go of it. But they was set on that house. Believed everybody was pullin their leg about how it was bad luck, on account of they was from Away.” He pauses meditatively. “Maybe they think better now ... wherever they are.”

There’s silence as the old men think of the people from uppa state New York, or maybe of their own failing organs and sensory equipment. In the dimness behind the stove, oil gurgles. Somewhere beyond it, a shutter claps heavily back and forth in the restless autumn air.

“There’s a new wing going up on it, all right,” Gary says. He speaks quietly but emphatically, as if one of the others has contradicted this statement. “I saw it comin down the River Road. Most of the framing’s already done. Damn thing looks like it wants to be a hundred feet long and thirty feet wide. Never noticed it before. Nice maple, looks like. Where does anybody get nice maple like that in this day n age?”

No one answers. No one knows.

At last, very tentatively, Paul Corliss says, “Sure you’re not thinking of another house, Gary? Could be you—”

“Could be shit,” Gary says, just as quietly but even more forcefully. “It’s the Newall place, a new wing on the Newall place, already framed up, and if you still got doubts, just step outside and have a look for yourself.”

With that said, there is nothing left to say—they believe him. Neither Paul nor anyone else rushes outside to crane up at the new wing being added to the Newall house, however. They consider it a matter of some importance, and thus nothing to hurry over. More time passes—Harley McKissick has reflected more than once that if time was pulpwood, they’d all be rich. Paul goes to the old water-cooled soft-drink chest and gets an Orange Crush. He gives Harley sixty cents and Harley rings up the purchase. When he slams the cash-drawer shut again, he realizes the atmosphere in the store has changed somehow. There are other matters to discuss.

Lenny Partridge coughs, winces, presses his hands lightly against his chest where the broken ribs have never really healed, and asks Gary when they are going to have services for Dana Roy.

“Tomorrow,” Gary says, “down Gorham. That’s where his wife is laid to rest.”

Lucy Roy died in 1968; Dana, who was until 1979 an electrician for U.S. Gypsum over in Gates Falls (these men routinely and with no prejudice refer to the company as U.S. Gyp Em), died of intestinal cancer two days before. He lived in Castle Rock all his life, and liked to tell people that he’d only been out of Maine three times in his eighty years, once to visit an aunt in Connecticut, once to see the Boston Red Sox play at Fenway Park (“And they lost, those bums,” he always added at this point), and once to attend an electricians’ convention in Portsmouth, New Hampshire. “Damn waste of time,” he always said of the convention. “Nothin but drinkin and wimmin, and none of the wimmin even worth lookin at, let alone that other thing.” He was a crony of these men, and in his passing they feel a queer mixture of sorrow and triumph.

“They took out four feet of his underpinnin,” Gary tells the other men. “Didn’t do no good. It was all through him.”

“He knew Joe Newall,” Lenny says suddenly. “He was up there with his dad when his dad was puttin in Joe’s lectricity—couldn’t have been more’n six or eight, I’d judge. I remember he said Joe give him a sucker one time, but he pitched it out’n his daddy’s truck on the ride home. Said it tasted sour and funny. Then, later, after they got all the mills runnin again—the late thirties, that would’ve been—he was in charge of the rewirin. You member that, Harley?”

“Yup.”

Now that the subject has come back to Joe Newall by way of Dana Roy, the men sit quietly, conning their brains for anecdotes concerning either man. But when Old Clut finally speaks, he says a startling thing.

“It was Dana Roy’s big brother, Will, who throwed that skunk at the side of the house that time. I’m almost sure ‘twas.”

“Will?” Lenny raises his eyebrows. “Will Roy was too steady to do a thing like that, I would have said.”

Gary Paulson says, very quietly: “Ayuh, it was Will.”

They turn to look at him.

“And ‘twas the wife that give Dana a sucker that day he came with his dad,” Gary says. “Cora, not Joe. And Dana wa’ant no six or eight; the skunk was throwed around the time of the Crash, and Cora was dead by then. No, Dana maybe remembered some of it, but he couldn’t have been no more than two. It was around 1916 that he got that sucker, because it was in ‘16 that Eddie Roy wired the house. He was never up there again. Frank—the middle boy, he’s been dead ten or twelve year now—he would have been six or eight then, maybe. Frank seen what Cora done to the little one, that much I know, but not when he told Will. It don’t matter. Finally Will decided

to do somethin about it. By then the woman was dead, so he took it out on the house Joe built for her.”

“Never mind that part,” Harley says, fascinated. “What’d she do to Dana? That’s what I want to know.”

Gary speaks calmly, almost judiciously. “What Frank told me one night when he’d had a few was that the woman give him the sucker with one hand and reached into his didies with the other. Right in front of the older boy.”

“She never!” Old Clut says, shocked in spite of himself.

Gary only looks at him with his yellowed, fading eyes and says nothing.

Silence again, except for the wind and the clapping shutter. The children on the bandstand have taken their firetruck and gone somewhere else with it and still the depthless afternoon continues on and on, the light that of an Andrew Wyeth painting, white and still and full of idiot meaning. The ground has given up its meager yield and waits uselessly for snow.

Gary would like to tell them of the sickroom at Cumberland Memorial Hospital where Dana Roy lay dying with black snot caked around his nostrils and smelling like a fish left out in the sun. He would like to tell them of the cool blue tiles and of nurses with their hair drawn back in nets, young things for the most part with pretty legs and firm young breasts and no idea that 1923 was a real year, as real as the pains which haunt the bones of old men. He feels he would like to sermonize on the evil of time and perhaps even the evil of certain places, and explain why Castle Rock is now like a dark tooth which is finally ready to fall out. Most of all he would like to inform them that Dana Roy sounded as if someone had stuffed his chest full of hay and he was trying to breathe through it, and that he looked as if he had already started to rot. Yet he can say none of these things because he doesn’t know how, and so he only sucks back spit and says nothing.

“No one liked old Joe much,” Old Clut says ... and then his face brightens suddenly. “But by God, he grew on you!”

The others do not reply.

*

Nineteen days later, a week before the first snow comes to cover the useless earth, Gary Paulson has a surprisingly sexual dream... except it is mostly a memory.

On August 14, 1923, while driving by the Newall house in his father's farm truck, thirteen-year-old Gary Martin Paulson happened to observe Cora Leonard Newall turning away from her mailbox at the end of the driveway. She had the newspaper in one hand. She saw Gary and reached down with her free hand to grasp the hem of her housedress. She did not smile. That tremendous moon of a face was pallid and empty as she raised the dress, revealing her sex to him—it was the first time he had ever seen that mystery so avidly discussed by the boys he knew. And, still not smiling but only looking at him gravely, she pistoned her hips at his gaping, amazed face as he passed her by. And as he passed, his hand dropped into his lap and moments later he ejaculated into his flannel pants.

It was his first orgasm. In the years since, he has made love to a good many women, beginning with Sally Ouelette underneath the Tin Bridge back in '26, and every time he has neared the moment of orgasm—every single one—he has seen Cora Leonard Newall: has seen her standing beside her mailbox under a hot gunmetal sky, has seen her lifting her dress to reveal an almost non-existent thatch of gingery hair beneath the creamy ground-swell of her belly, has seen the exclamatory slit with its red lips tinting toward what he knows would be the most deliciously delicate coral

(Cora)

pink. Yet it is not the sight of her vulva below that somehow promiscuous swell of gut that has haunted him through all the years,

so that every woman became Cora at the moment of release; or it is not just that. What always drove him mad with lust when he remembered (and when he made love he was helpless not to) was the way she had pumped her hips at him... once, twice, three times. That, and the lack of expression on her face, a neutrality so deep it seemed more like idiocy, as if she were the sum of every very young man's limited sexual understanding and desire—a tight and yearning darkness, no more than that, a limited Eden glowing Cora-pink.

His sex-life has been both delineated and delimited by that experience—a seminal experience if ever there was one—but he has never mentioned it, although he has been tempted more than once when in his cups. He has hoarded it. And it is of this incident that he is dreaming, penis perfectly erect for the first time in almost nine years, when a small blood vessel in his cerebellum ruptures, forming a clot which kills him quietly, considerably sparing him four weeks or four months of paralysis, the flexible tubes in the arms, the catheter, the noiseless nurses with their hair in nets and their fine high breasts. He dies in his sleep, penis wilting, the dream fading like the afterimage of a television picture tube switched off in a dark room. His cronies would be puzzled, however, if any of them were there to hear the last two words he speaks—gaspd out but still clear enough:

“The moon!”

The day after he is laid to rest in Homeland, a new cupola starts to go up on the new wing on the Newall house.

#1 New York Times Best Seller

STEPHEN KING

THE JAUNT

How far is infinity?

A Novella from the Short Story Collection "Skeleton Crew"

THE JAUNT

Stephen King

“This is the last call for Jaunt-701,” the pleasant female voice echoed through the Blue Concourse of New York’s Port Authority Terminal. The PAT had not changed much in the last three hundred years or so—it was still grungy and a little frightening. The automated female voice was probably the most pleasant thing about it. “This is Jaunt Service to Whitehead City, Mars,” the voice continued. “All ticketed passengers should now be in the Blue Concourse sleep lounge. Make sure your validation papers are in order. Thank you.”

The upstairs sleep lounge was not at all grungy. It was wall-to-wall carpeted in oyster gray. The walls were an eggshell white and hung with pleasant nonrepresentational prints. A steady, soothing progression of colors met and swirled on the ceiling. There were one hundred couches in the large room, neatly spaced in rows of ten. Five Jaunt attendants circulated, speaking in low, cheery voices and offering glasses of milk. At one side of the room was the entranceway, flanked by armed guards and another Jaunt attendant who was checking the validation papers of a latecomer, a harried-looking businessman with the New York World-Times folded under one arm. Directly opposite, the floor dropped away in a trough about five feet wide and perhaps ten feet long; it passed through a doorless opening and looked a bit like a child’s slide.

The Oates family lay side by side on four Jaunt couches near the far end of the room. Mark Oates and his wife, Marilys, flanked the two children.

“Daddy, will you tell me about the Jaunt now?” Ricky asked. “You promised.”

“Yeah, Dad, you promised,” Patricia added, and giggled shrilly for no good reason.

A businessman with a build like a bull glanced over at them and then went back to the folder of papers he was examining as he lay on his back, his spit-shined shoes neatly together. From everywhere came

the low murmur of conversation and the rustle of passengers settling down on the Jaunt couches.

Mark glanced over at Marilyns Oates and winked. She winked back, but she was almost as nervous as Patty sounded. Why not? Mark thought. First Jaunt for all three of them. He and Marilyns had discussed the advantages and drawbacks of moving the whole family for the last six months—since he'd gotten notification from Texaco Water that he was being transferred to Whitehead City. Finally they had decided that all of them would go for the two years Mark would be stationed on Mars. He wondered now, looking at Marilyns's pale face, if she was regretting the decision.

He glanced at his watch and saw it was still almost half an hour to Jaunt-time. That was enough time to tell the story ... and he supposed it would take the kids' minds off their nervousness. Who knew, maybe it would even cool Marilyns out a little.

"All right," he said. Ricky and Pat were watching him seriously, his son twelve, his daughter nine. He told himself again that Ricky would be deep in the swamp of puberty and his daughter would likely be developing breasts by the time they got back to earth, and again found it difficult to believe. The kids would be going to the tiny Whitehead Combined School with the hundred-odd engineering and oil-company brats that were there; his son might well be going on a geology field trip to Phobos not so many months distant. It was difficult to believe ... but true.

Who knows? he thought wryly. Maybe it'll do something about my Jaunt-jumps, too.

"So far as we know," he began, "the Jaunt was invented about three hundred and twenty years ago, around the year 1987, by a fellow named Victor Carune. He did it as part of a private research project that was funded by some government money ... and eventually the government took it over, of course. In the end it came down to either the government or the oil companies. The reason we don't know the exact date is because Carune was something of an eccentric—"

“You mean he was crazy, Dad?” Ricky asked.

“Eccentric means a little bit crazy, dear,” Marilys said, and smiled across the children at Mark. She looked a little less nervous now, he thought.

“Oh.”

“Anyway, he’d been experimenting with the process for quite some time before he informed the government of what he had,” Mark went on, “and he only told them because he was running out of money and they weren’t going to re-fund him.”

“Your money cheerfully refunded,” Pat said, and giggled shrilly again.

“That’s right, honey,” Mark said, and ruffled her hair gently. At the far end of the room he saw a door slide noiselessly open and two more attendants came out, dressed in the bright red jumpers of the Jaunt Service, pushing a rolling table. On it was a stainless-steel nozzle attached to a rubber hose; beneath the table’s skirts, tastefully hidden, Mark knew there were two bottles of gas; in the net bag hooked to the side were one hundred disposable masks. Mark went on talking, not wanting his people to see the representatives of Letha until they had to. And, if he was given enough time to tell the whole story, they would welcome the gaspassers with open arms.

Considering the alternative.

“Of course, you know that the Jaunt is teleportation, no more or less,” he said. “Sometimes in college chemistry and physics they call it the Carune Process, but it’s really teleportation, and it was Carune himself—if you can believe the stories—who named it ‘the Jaunt.’ He was a science-fiction reader, and there’s a story by a man named Alfred Bester, *The Stars My Destination* it’s called, and this fellow Bester made up the word ‘jaunte’ for teleportation in it. Except in his book, you could Jaunt just by thinking about it, and we can’t really do that.”

The attendants were fixing a mask to the steel nozzle and handing it to an elderly woman at the far end of the room. She took it, inhaled once, and fell quiet and limp on her couch. Her skirt had pulled up a little, revealing one slack thigh road-mapped with varicose veins. An attendant considerately readjusted it for her while the other pulled off the used mask and affixed a fresh one. It was a process that made Mark think of the plastic glasses in motel rooms. He wished to God that Patty would cool out a little bit; he had seen children who had to be held down, and sometimes they screamed as the rubber mask covered their faces. It was not an abnormal reaction in a child, he supposed, but it was nasty to watch and he didn't want to see it happen to Patty. About Rick he felt more confident.

"I guess you could say the Jaunt came along at the last possible moment," he resumed. He spoke toward Ricky, but reached across and took his daughter's hand. Her fingers closed over his with an immediate panicky tightness. Her palm was cool and sweating lightly. "The world was running out of oil, and most of what was left belonged to the middle-eastern desert peoples, who were committed to using it as a political weapon. They had formed an oil cartel they called OPEC—"

"What's a cartel, Daddy?" Patty asked.

"Well, a monopoly," Mark said.

"Like a club, honey," Marilys said. "And you could only be in that club if you had lots of oil."

"Oh."

"I don't have time to sketch the whole mess in for you," Mark said. "You'll study some of it in school, but it was a mess—let's let it go at that. If you owned a car, you could only drive it two days a week, and gasoline cost fifteen oldbucks a gallon—"

"Gosh," Ricky said, "it only costs four cents or so a gallon now, doesn't it, Dad?"

Mark smiled. “That’s why we’re going where we’re going, Rick. There’s enough oil on Mars to last almost eight thousand years, and enough on Venus to last another twenty thousand ... but oil isn’t even that important, anymore. Now what we need most of all is—”

“Water!” Patty cried, and the businessman looked up from his papers and smiled at her for a moment.

“That’s right,” Mark said. “Because in the years between 1960 and 2030, we poisoned most of ours. The first waterlift from the Martian ice-caps was called—”

“Operation Straw.” That was Ricky.

“Yes. 2045 or thereabouts. But long before that, the Jaunt was being used to find sources of clean water here on earth. And now water is our major Martian export ... the oil’s strictly a sideline. But it was important then.”

The kids nodded.

“The point is, those things were always there, but we were only able to get it because of the Jaunt. When Carune invented his process, the world was slipping into a new dark age. The winter before, over ten thousand people had frozen to death in the United States alone because there wasn’t enough energy to heat them.”

“Oh, yuck,” Patty said matter-of-factly.

Mark glanced to his right and saw the attendants talking to a timid-looking man, persuading him. At last he took the mask and seemed to fall dead on his couch seconds later. First-timer, Mark thought. You can always tell.

“For Carune, it started with a pencil ... some keys ... a wristwatch ... then some mice. The mice showed him there was a problem ...”

Victor Carune came back to his laboratory in a stumbling fever of excitement. He thought he knew now how Morse had felt, and Alexander Graham Bell, and Edison ... but this was bigger than all of them, and twice he had almost wrecked the truck on the way back from the pet shop in New Paltz, where he had spent his last twenty dollars on nine white mice. What he had left in the world was the ninety-three cents in his right front pocket and the eighteen dollars in his savings account ... but this did not occur to him. And if it had, it certainly would not have bothered him.

The lab was in a renovated barn at the end of a mile-long dirt road off Route 26. It was making the turn onto this road where he had just missed cracking up his Brat pickup truck for the second time. The gas tank was almost empty and there would be no more for ten days to two weeks, but this did not concern him, either. His mind was in a delirious whirl.

What had happened was not totally unexpected, no. One of the reasons the government had funded him even to the paltry tune of twenty thousand a year was because the unrealized possibility had always been there in the field of particle transmission.

But to have it happen like this ... suddenly ... with no warning ... and powered by less electricity than was needed to run a color TV ... God! Christ!

He brought the Brat to a screech-halt in the dirt of the dooryard, grabbed the box on the dirty seat beside him by its grab-handles (on the box were dogs and cats and hamsters and goldfish and the legend I CAME FROM STACKPOLE'S HOUSE OF PETS) and ran for the big double doors. From inside the box came the scurry and whisk of his test subjects.

He tried to push one of the big doors open along its track, and when it wouldn't budge, he remembered that he had locked it. Carune uttered a loud "Shit!" and fumbled for his keys. The government commanded that the lab be locked at all times—it was one of the strings they put on their money—but Carune kept forgetting.

He brought his keys out and for a moment simply stared at them, mesmerized, running the ball of his thumb over the notches in the Brat's ignition key. He thought again: God! Christ! Then he scrabbled through the keys on the ring for the Yale key that unlocked the barn door.

As the first telephone had been used inadvertently—Bell crying into it, “Watson, come here!” when he spilled some acid on his papers and himself—so the first act of teleportation had occurred by accident. Victor Carune had teleported the first two fingers of his left hand across the fifty-yard width of the barn.

Carune had set up two portals at opposite sides of the barn. On his end was a simple ion gun, available from any electronics supply warehouse for under five hundred dollars. On the other end, standing just beyond the far portal—both of them rectangular and the size of a paperback book—was a cloud chamber. Between them was what appeared to be an opaque shower curtain, except that shower curtains are not made of lead. The idea was to shoot the ions through Portal One and then walk around and watch them streaming across the cloud chamber standing just beyond Portal Two, with the lead shield between to prove they really were being transmitted. Except that, for the last two years, the process had only worked twice, and Carune didn't have the slightest idea why.

As he was setting the ion gun in place, his fingers had slipped through the portal—ordinarily no problem, but this morning his hip had also brushed the toggle switch on the control panel at the left of the portal. He was not aware of what had happened—the machinery gave off only the lowest audible hum—until he felt a tingling sensation in his fingers.

“It was not like an electric shock,” Carune wrote in his one and only article on the subject before the government shut him up. The article was published, of all places, in *Popular Mechanics*. He had sold it to them for seven hundred and fifty dollars in a last-ditch effort to keep the Jaunt a matter of private enterprise. “There was none of that unpleasant tingle that one gets if one grasps a frayed lamp cord, for

instance. It was more like the sensation one gets if one puts one's hand on the casing of some small machine that is working very hard. The vibration is so fast and light that it is, literally, a tingling sensation.

“Then I looked down at the portal and saw that my index finger was gone on a diagonal slant through the middle knuckle, and my second finger was gone slightly above that. In addition, the nail portion of my third finger had disappeared.”

Carune had jerked his hand back instinctively, crying out. He so much expected to see blood, he wrote later, that he actually hallucinated blood for a moment or two. His elbow struck the ion gun and knocked it off the table.

He stood there with his fingers in his mouth, verifying that they were still there, and whole. The thought that he had been working too hard crossed his mind. And then the other thought crossed his mind: the thought that the last set of modifications might have ... might have done something.

He did not push his fingers back in; in fact, Carune only Jaunted once more in his entire life.

At first, he did nothing. He took a long, aimless walk around the barn, running his hands through his hair, wondering if he should call Carson in New Jersey or perhaps Buffington in Charlotte. Carson wouldn't accept a collect phone call, the cheap ass-kissing bastard, but Buffington probably would. Then an idea struck and he ran across to Portal Two, thinking that if his fingers had actually crossed the barn, there might be some sign of it.

There was not, of course. Portal Two stood atop three stacked Pomona orange crates, looking like nothing so much as one of those toy guillotines missing the blade. On one side of its stainless-steel frame was a plug-in jack, from which a cord ran back to the transmission terminal, which was little more than a particle transformer hooked into a computer feed-line.

Which reminded him—

Carune glanced at his watch and saw it was quarter past eleven. His deal with the government consisted of short money, plus computer time, which was infinitely valuable. His computer tie-in lasted until three o'clock this afternoon, and then it was good-bye until Monday. He had to get moving, had to do something—

“I glanced at the pile of crates again,” Carune writes in his Popular Mechanics article, “and then I looked at the pads of my fingers. And sure enough, the proof was there. It would not, I thought then, convince anyone but myself; but in the beginning, of course, it is only one's self that one has to convince.”

“What was it, Dad?” Ricky asked.

“Yeah!” Patty added. “What?”

Mark grinned a little. They were all hooked now, even Marilys. They had nearly forgotten where they were. From the corner of his eye he could see the Jaunt attendants whisper-wheeling their cart slowly among the Jaunters, putting them to sleep. It was never as rapid a process in the civilian sector as it was in the military, he had discovered; civilians got nervous and wanted to talk it over. The nozzle and the rubber mask were too reminiscent of hospital operating rooms, where the surgeon with his knives lurked somewhere behind the anesthetist with her selection of gases in stainless-steel canisters. Sometimes there was panic, hysteria; and always there were a few who simply lost their nerve. Mark had observed two of these as he spoke to the children: two men who had simply arisen from their couches, walked across to the entryway with no fanfare at all, unpinned the validation papers that had been affixed to their lapels, turned them in, and exited without looking back. Jaunt attendants were under strict instructions not to argue with those who left; there were always standbys, sometimes as many as forty or fifty of them, hoping against hope, As those who simply couldn't take it left, standbys were let in with their own validations pinned to their shirts.

“Carune found two splinters in his index finger,” he told the children. “He took them out and put them aside. One was lost, but you can see the other one in the Smithsonian Annex in Washington. It’s in a hermetically sealed glass case near the moon rocks the first space travelers brought back from the moon—”

“Our moon, Dad, or one of Mars’s?” Ricky asked.

“Ours,” Mark said, smiling a little. “Only one manned rocket flight has ever landed on Mars, Ricky, and that was a French expedition somewhere about 2030. Anyway, that’s why there happens to be a plain old splinter from an orange crate in the Smithsonian Institution. Because it’s the first object that we have that was actually teleported—jaunted—across space.”

“What happened then?” Patty asked.

“Well, according to the story, Carune ran ...”

Carune ran back to Portal One and stood there for a moment, heart thudding, out of breath. Got to calm down, he told himself. Got to think about this. You can’t maximize your time if you go off half-cocked.

Deliberately disregarding the forefront of his mind, which was screaming at him to hurry up and do something, he dug his nail-clippers out of his pocket and used the point of the file to dig the splinters out of his index finger. He dropped them onto the white inner sleeve of a Hershey bar he had eaten while tinkering with the transformer and trying to widen its afferent capability (he had apparently succeeded in that beyond his wildest dreams). One rolled off the wrapper and was lost; the other ended up in the Smithsonian Institution, locked in a glass case that was cordoned off with thick velvet ropes and watched vigilantly and eternally by a computer-monitored closed-circuit TV camera.

The splinter extraction finished, Carune felt a little calmer. A pencil. That was as good as anything. He took one from beside the

clipboard on the shelf above him and ran it gently into Portal One. It disappeared smoothly, inch by inch, like something in an optical illusion or in a very good magician's trick. The pencil had said EBERHARD FABER NO. 2 on one of its sides, black letters stamped on yellow-painted wood. When he had pushed the pencil in until all but EBERH had disappeared, Carune walked around to the other side of Portal One. He looked in.

He saw the pencil in cut-off view, as if a knife had chopped smoothly through it. Carune felt with his fingers where the rest of the pencil should have been, and of course there was nothing. He ran across the barn to Portal Two, and there was the missing part of the pencil, lying on the top crate. Heart thumping so hard that it seemed to shake his entire chest, Carune grasped the sharpened point of his pencil and pulled it the rest of the way through.

He held it up; he looked at it. Suddenly he took it and wrote rr WORKS! on a piece of barn-board. He wrote it so hard that the lead snapped on the last letter. Carune began to laugh shrilly in the empty barn; to laugh so hard that he startled the sleeping swallows into flight among the high rafters.

"Works!" he shouted, and ran back to Portal One. He was waving his arms, the broken pencil knotted up in one fist. "Works! Works! Do you hear me, Carson, you prick? It works AND I DID IT!"

"Mark, watch what you say to the children," Marilys reproached him.

Mark shrugged. "It's what he's supposed to have said."

"Well, can't you do a little selective editing?"

"Dad?" Patty asked. "Is that pencil in the museum, too?"

"Does a bear shit in the woods?" Mark said, and then clapped one hand over his mouth. Both children giggled wildly—but that shrill note was gone from Patty's voice, Mark was glad to hear—and after a moment of trying to look serious, Marilys began to giggle too.

The keys went through next; Carune simply tossed them through the portal. He was beginning to think on track again now, and it seemed to him that the first thing that needed finding out was if the process produced things on the other end exactly as they had been, or if they were in any way changed by the trip.

He saw the keys go through and disappear; at exactly the same moment he heard them jingle on the crate across the barn. He ran across—really only trotting now—and on the way he paused to shove the lead shower curtain back on its track. He didn't need either it or the ion gun now. Just as well, since the ion gun was smashed beyond repair.

He grabbed the keys, went to the lock the government had forced him to put on the door, and tried the Yale key. It worked perfectly. He tried the house key. It also worked. So did the keys which opened his file cabinets and the one which started the Brat pickup.

Carune pocketed the keys and took off his watch. It was a Seiko quartz LC with a built-in calculator below the digital face—twenty-four tiny buttons that would allow him to do everything from addition to subtraction to square roots. A delicate piece of machinery—and just as important, a chronometer. Carune put it down in front of Portal One and pushed it through with a pencil.

He ran across and grabbed it up. When he put it through, the watch had said 11:31:07. It now said 11:31:49. Very good. Right on the money, only he should have had an assistant over there to peg the fact that there had been no time gain once and forever. Well, no matter. Soon enough the government would have him wading hip-deep in assistants.

He tried the calculator. Two and two still made four, eight divided by four was still two; the square root of eleven was still 3.3166247 ... and so on.

That was when he decided it was mouse-time.

“What happened with the mice, Dad?” Ricky asked.

Mark hesitated briefly. There would have to be some caution here, if he didn't want to scare his children (not to mention his wife) into hysteria minutes away from their first Jaunt. The major thing was to leave them with the knowledge that everything was all right now, that the problem had been licked.

“As I said, there was a slight problem ...”

Yes. Horror, lunacy, and death. How's that for a slight problem, kids?

Carune set the box which read I CAME FROM STACKPOLE'S HOUSE OF PETS down on the shelf and glanced at his watch. Damned if he hadn't put the thing on upside down. He turned it around and saw that it was a quarter of two. He had only an hour and a quarter of computer time left. How the time flies when you're having fun, he thought, and giggled wildly.

He opened the box, reached in, and pulled out a squeaking white mouse by the tail. He put it down in front of Portal One and said, “Go on, mouse.” The mouse promptly ran down the side of the orange crate on which the portal stood and scuttered across the floor.

Cursing, Carune chased it, and managed to actually get one hand on it before it squirmed through a crack between two boards and was gone.

“SHIT!” Carune screamed, and ran back to the box of mice. He was just in time to knock two potential escapees back into the box. He got a second mouse, holding this one around the body (he was by trade a physicist, and the ways of white mice were foreign to him), and slammed the lid of the box back down.

This one he gave the old heave-ho. It clutched at Canine's palm, but to no avail; it went head over ratty little paws through Portal One. Carune heard it immediately land on the crates across the barn.

This time he sprinted, remembering how easily the first mouse had eluded him. He need not have worried. The white mouse merely crouched on the crate, its eyes dull, its sides aspirating weakly. Carune slowed down and approached it carefully; he was not a man used to fooling with mice, but you didn't have to be a forty-year veteran to see something was terribly wrong here.

("The mouse didn't feel so good after it went through," Mark Oates told his children with a wide smile that was only noticeably false to his wife.)

Carune touched the mouse. It was like touching something inert—packed straw or sawdust, perhaps—except for the aspirating sides. The mouse did not look around at Carune; it stared straight ahead. He had thrown in a squirming, very frisky and alive little animal; here was something that seemed to be a living waxwork likeness of a mouse.

Then Carune snapped his fingers in front of the mouse's small pink eyes. It blinked ... and fell dead on its side.

"So Carune decided to try another mouse," Mark said.

"What happened to the first mouse?" Ricky asked.

Mark produced that wide smile again. "It was retired with full honors," he said.

Carune found a paper bag and put the mouse into it. He would take it to Mosconi, the vet, that evening. Mosconi could dissect it and tell him if its inner works had been rearranged. The government would disapprove his bringing a private citizen into a project which would be classified triple top secret as soon as they knew about it. Tough titty, as the kitty was reputed to have said to the babes who complained about the warmth of the milk. Carune was determined that the Great White Father in Washington would know about this as late in the game as possible. For all the scant help the Great White Father had given him, he could wait. Tough titty.

Then he remembered that Mosconi lived way the hell and gone on the other side of New Paltz, and that there wasn't enough gas in the Brat to get even halfway across town ... let alone back.

But it was 2:03—he had less than an hour of computer time left. He would worry about the goddam dissection later.

Carune constructed a makeshift chute leading to the entrance of Portal One (really the first Jaunt-Slide, Mark told the children, and Patty found the idea of a Jaunt-Slide for mice deliciously funny) and dropped a fresh white mouse into it. He blocked the end with a large book, and after a few moments of aimless pattering and sniffing, the mouse went through the portal and disappeared.

Carune ran back across the barn.

The mouse was DOA.

There was no blood, no bodily swellings to indicate that a radical change in pressure had ruptured something inside. Carune supposed that oxygen starvation might—

He shook his head impatiently. It took the white mouse only nanoseconds to go through; his own watch had confirmed that time remained a constant in the process, or damn close to it.

The second white mouse joined the first in the paper sack. Carune got a third out (a fourth, if you counted the fortunate mouse that had escaped through the crack), wondering for the first time which would end first—his computer time or his supply of mice.

He held this one firmly around the body and forced its haunches through the portal. Across the room he saw the haunches reappear ... just the haunches. The disembodied little feet were digging frantically at the rough wood of the crate.

Carune pulled the mouse back. No catatonia here; it bit the webbing between his thumb and forefinger hard enough to bring blood.

Carune dropped the mouse hurriedly back into the I CAME FROM STACKPOLE'S HOUSE OF PETS box and used the small bottle of hydrogen peroxide in his lab first-aid kit to disinfect the bite.

He put a Band-Aid over it, then rummaged around until he found a pair of heavy work-gloves. He could feel the time running out, running out, running out. It was 2:11 now.

He got another mouse out and pushed it through backward—all the way. He hurried across to Portal Two. This mouse lived for almost two minutes; it even walked a little, after a fashion. It staggered across the Pomona orange crate, fell on its side, struggled weakly to its feet, and then only squatted there. Carune snapped his fingers near its head and it lurched perhaps four steps further before falling on its side again. The aspiration of its sides slowed ... slowed ... stopped. It was dead.

Carune felt a chill.

He went back, got another mouse, and pushed it halfway through headfirst. He saw it reappear at the other end, just the head ... then the neck and chest. Cautiously, Carune relaxed his grip on the mouse's body, ready to grab if it got frisky. It didn't. The mouse only stood there, half of it on one side of the barn, half on the other.

Carune jogged back to Portal Two.

The mouse was alive, but its pink eyes were glazed and dull. Its whiskers didn't move. Going around to the back of the portal, Carune saw an amazing sight; as he had seen the pencil in cutaway, so now he saw the mouse. He saw the vertebrae of its tiny spine ending abruptly in round white circles; he saw its blood moving through the vessels; he saw the tissue moving gently with the tide of life around its minuscule gullet. If nothing else, he thought (and wrote later in his Popular Mechanics article), it would make a wonderful diagnostic tool.

Then he noticed that the tidal movement of the tissues had ceased. The mouse had died.

Carune pulled the mouse out by the snout, not liking the feel of it, and dropped it into the paper sack with its companions. Enough with the white mice, he decided. The mice die. They die if you put them through all the way, and they die if you put them through halfway headfirst. Put them through halfway butt-first, they stay frisky.

What the hell is in there?

Sensory input, he thought almost randomly. When they go through they see something—hear something—touch something—God, maybe even smell something—that literally kills them. What?

He had no idea—but he meant to find out.

Carune still had almost forty minutes before COMLINK pulled the data base out from under him. He unscrewed the thermometer from the wall beside his kitchen door, trotted back to the barn with it, and put it through the portals. The thermometer went in at 83 degrees F; it came out at 83 degrees F. He rummaged through the spare room where he kept a few toys to amuse his grandchildren with; among them he found a packet of balloons. He blew one of them up, tied it off, and batted it through the portal. It came out intact and unharmed—a start down the road toward answering his question about a sudden change in pressure somehow caused by what he was already thinking of as the Jaunting process.

With five minutes to go before the witching hour, he ran into his house, snatched up his goldfish bowl (inside, Percy and Patrick swished their tails and darted about in agitation) and ran back with it. He shoved the goldfish bowl through Portal One.

He hurried across to Portal Two, where his goldfish bowl sat on the crate. Patrick was floating belly-up; Percy swam slowly around near the bottom of the bowl, as if dazed. A moment later he also floated belly-up. Carune was reaching for the goldfish bowl when Percy

gave a weak flick of his tail and resumed his lackadaisical swimming. Slowly, he seemed to throw off whatever the effect had been, and by the time Carune got back from Mosconi's Veterinary Clinic that night at nine o'clock, Percy seemed as perky as ever.

Patrick was dead.

Carune fed Percy a double ration of fish food and gave Patrick a hero's burial in the garden.

After the computer had cut him out for the day, Carune decided to hitch a ride over to Mosconi's. Accordingly, he was standing on the shoulder of Route 26 at a quarter of four that afternoon, dressed in jeans and a loud plaid sport coat, his thumb out, a paper bag in his other hand.

Finally, a kid driving a Chevette not much bigger than a sardine can pulled over, and Carune got in. "What you got in the bag, my man?"

"Bunch of dead mice," Carune said. Eventually another car stopped. When the farmer behind the wheel asked about the bag, Carune told him it was a couple of sandwiches.

Mosconi dissected one of the mice on the spot, and agreed to dissect the others later and call Carune on the telephone with the results. The initial result was not very encouraging; so far as Mosconi could tell, the mouse he had opened up was perfectly healthy except for the fact that it was dead.

Depressing.

"Victor Carune was eccentric, but he was no fool," Mark said. The Jaunt attendants were getting close now, and he supposed he would have to hurry up ... or he would be finishing this in the Wake-Up Room in Whitehead City. "Hitching a ride back home that night—and he had to walk most of the way, so the story goes—he realized that he had maybe solved a third of the energy crisis at one single stroke. All the goods that had to go by train and truck and boat and plane

before that day could be Jaunted. You could write a letter to your friend in London or Rome or Senegal, and he could have it the very next day—without an ounce of oil needing to be burned. We take it for granted, but it was a big thing to Carune, believe me. And to everyone else, as well.”

“But what happened to the mice, Daddy?” Rick asked.

“That’s what Carune kept asking himself,” Mark said, “because he also realized that if people could use the Jaunt, that would solve almost all of the energy crisis. And that we might be able to conquer space. In his Popular Mechanics article he said that even the stars could finally be ours. And the metaphor he used was crossing a shallow stream without getting your shoes wet. You’d just get a big rock, and throw it in the stream, then get another rock, stand on the first rock, and throw that into the stream, go back and get a third rock, go back to the second rock, throw the third rock into the stream, and keep up like that until you’d made a path of stepping-stones all the way across the stream ... or in this case, the solar system, or maybe even the galaxy.”

“I don’t get that at all,” Patty said.

“That’s because you got turkey-turds for brains,” Ricky said smugly.

“I do not! Daddy, Ricky said—”

“Children, don’t,” Marilys said gently.

“Carune pretty much foresaw what has happened,” Mark said.

“Drone rocket ships programmed to land, first on the moon, then on Mars, then on Venus and the outer moons of Jupiter ... drones really only programmed to do one thing after they landed—”

“Set up a Jaunt station for astronauts,” Ricky said.

Mark nodded. “And now there are scientific outposts all over the solar system, and maybe someday, long after we’re gone, there will

even be another planet for us. There are Jaunt-ships on their way to four different star systems with solar systems of their own ... but it'll be a long, long time before they get there."

"I want to know what happened to the mice," Patty said impatiently.

"Well, eventually the government got into it," Mark said. "Carune kept them out as long as he could, but finally they got wind of it and landed on him with both feet. Carune was nominal head of the Jaunt project until he died ten years later, but he was never really in charge of it again."

"Jeez, the poor guy!" Rick said.

"But he got to be a hero," Patricia said. "He's in all the history books, just like President Lincoln and President Hart."

I'm sure that's a great comfort to him ... wherever he is, Mark thought, and then went on, carefully glossing over the rough parts.

The government, which had been pushed to the wall by the escalating energy crisis, did indeed come in with both feet. They wanted the Jaunt on a paying basis as soon as possible—like yesterday. Faced with economic chaos and the increasingly probable picture of anarchy and mass starvation in the 1990's, only last-ditch pleading made them put off announcement of the Jaunt before an exhaustive spectrographic analysis of Jaunted articles could be completed. When the analyses were complete—and showed no changes in the makeup of Jaunted artifacts—the existence of the Jaunt was announced with international hoopla. Showing intelligence for once (necessity is, after all, the mother of invention), the U.S. government put Young and Rubicam in charge of the pr.

That was where the myth-making around Victor Carune, an elderly, rather peculiar man who showered perhaps twice a week and changed his clothes only when he thought of it, began. Young and Rubicam and the agencies which followed them turned Carune into a combination of Thomas Edison, Eli Whitney, Pecos Bill, and Flash

Gordon. The blackly funny part of all this (and Mark Oates did not pass this on to his family) was that Victor Carune might even then have been dead or insane; art imitates life, they say, and Carune would have been familiar with the Robert Heinlein novel about the doubles who stand in for figures in the public eye.

Victor Carune was a problem; a nagging problem that wouldn't go away. He was a loudmouthed foot-dragger, a holdover from the Ecological Sixties—a time when there was still enough energy floating around to allow foot-dragging as a luxury. These, on the other hand, were the Nasty Eighties, with coal clouds befouling the sky and a long section of the California coastline expected to be uninhabitable for perhaps sixty years due to a nuclear “excursion.”

Victor Carune remained a problem until about 1991—and then he became a rubber stamp, smiling, quiet, grandfatherly; a figure seen waving from podiums in newsfilms. In 1993, three years before he officially died, he rode in the pace-car at the Tournament of Roses Parade.

Puzzling. And a little ominous.

The results of the announcement of the Jaunt—of working teleportation—on October 19th, 1988, was a hammerstroke of worldwide excitement and economic upheaval. On the world money markets, the battered old American dollar suddenly skyrocketed through the roof. People who had bought gold at eight hundred and six dollars an ounce suddenly found that a pound of gold would bring something less than twelve hundred dollars. In the year between the announcement of the Jaunt and the first working Jaunt-Stations in New York and L.A., the stock market climbed a little over a thousand points. The price of oil dropped only seventy cents a barrel, but by 1994, with Jaunt-Stations crisscrossing the U.S. at the pressure-points of seventy major cities, OPEC had ceased to exist, and the price of oil began to tumble. By 1998, with Stations in most free-world cities and goods routinely Jaunted between Tokyo and Paris, Paris and London, London and New York, New York and Berlin, oil had dropped to fourteen dollars a barrel. By 2006, when people at

last began to use the Jaunt on a regular basis, the stock market had leveled off five thousand points above its 1987 levels, oil was selling for six dollars a barrel, and the oil companies had begun to change their names. Texaco became Texaco Oil/Water, and Mobil had become Mobil Hydro-2-Ox.

By 2045, water-prospecting became the big game and oil had become what it had been in 1906: a toy.

“What about the mice, Daddy?” Patty asked impatiently. “What happened to the mice?”

Mark decided it might be okay now, and he drew the attention of his children to the Jaunt attendants, who were passing gas out only three aisles from them. Rick only nodded, but Patty looked troubled as a lady with a fashionably shaved-and-painted head took a whiff from the rubber mask and fell unconscious.

“Can’t Jaunt when you’re awake, can you, Dad?” Ricky said.

Mark nodded and smiled reassuringly at Patricia. “Carune understood even before the government got into it,” he said.

“How did the government get into it, Mark?” Marilys asked.

Mark smiled. “Computer time,” he said. “The data base. That was the only thing that Carune couldn’t beg, borrow, or steal. The computer handled the actual particulate transmission—billions of pieces of information. It’s still the computer, you know, that makes sure you don’t come through with your head somewhere in the middle of your stomach.”

Marilys shuddered.

“Don’t be frightened,” he said. “There’s never been a screw-up like that, Mare. Never.”

“There’s always a first time,” she muttered.

Mark looked at Ricky. “How did he know?” he asked his son. “How did Carune know you had to be asleep, Rick?”

“When he put the mice in backwards,” Rick said slowly, “they were all right. At least as long as he didn’t put them all in. They were only—well, messed up—when he put them in headfirst. Right?”

“Right,” Mark said. The Jaunt attendants were moving in now, wheeling their silent cart of oblivion. He wasn’t going to have time to finish after all; perhaps it was just as well. “It didn’t take many experiments to clarify what was happening, of course. The Jaunt killed the entire trucking business, kids, but at least it took the pressure off the experimenters—”

Yes. Foot-dragging had become a luxury again, and the tests had gone on for better than twenty years, although Carune’s first tests with drugged mice had convinced him that unconscious animals were not subject to what was known forever after as the Organic Effect or, more simply, the Jaunt Effect.

He and Mosconi had drugged several mice, put them through Portal One, retrieved them at the other side, and had waited anxiously for their test subjects to reawaken ... or to die. They had reawakened, and after a brief recovery period they had taken up their mouse-lives—eating, fucking, playing, and shitting—with no ill effects whatsoever. Those mice became the first of several generations which were studied with great interest. They showed no long-term ill effects; they did not die sooner, their pups were not born with two heads or green fur and neither did these pups show any other long-term effects.

“When did they start with people, Dad?” Rick asked, although he had certainly read this in school. “Tell that part!”

“I wanna know what happened to the mice!” Patty said again.

Although the Jaunt attendants had now reached the head of their aisle (they themselves were near the foot), Mark Oates paused a

moment to reflect. His daughter, who knew less, had nevertheless listened to her heart and asked the right question. Therefore, it was his son's question he chose to answer.

The first human Jaunters had not been astronauts or test pilots; they were convict volunteers who had not even been screened with any particular interest in their psychological stability. In fact, it was the view of the scientists now in charge (Carune was not one of them; he had become what is commonly called a titular head) that the freakier they were, the better; if a mental spaz could go through and come out all right—or at least, no worse than he or she had been going in—then the process was probably safe for the executives, politicians, and fashion models of the world.

Half a dozen of these volunteers were brought to Province, Vermont (a site which had since become every bit as famous as Kitty Hawk, North Carolina, had once been), gassed, and fed through the portals exactly two hand-miles apart, one by one.

Mark told his children this, because of course all six of the volunteers came back just fine and feeling perky, thank you. He did not tell them about the purported seventh volunteer. This figure, who might have been real, or myth, or (most probably) a combination of the two, even had a name: Rudy Foggia. Foggia was supposed to have been a convicted murderer, sentenced to death in the state of Florida for the murders of four old people at a Sarasota bridge party. According to the apocrypha, the combined forces of the Central Intelligence Agency and the Effa Bee Eye had come to Foggia with a unique, one-time, take-it-or-leave-it, absolutely-not-to-be-repeated offer. Take the Jaunt wide awake. Come through okay and we put your pardon, signed by Governor Thurgood, in your hand. Out you walk, free to follow the One True Cross or to off a few more old folks playing bridge in their yellow pants and white shoes. Come through dead or insane, tough titty. As the kitty was purported to have said. What do you say?

Foggia, who understood that Florida was one state that really meant business about the death penalty and whose lawyer had told him

that he was in all probability the next to ride Old Sparky, said okay.

Enough scientists to fill a jury box (with four or five left over as alternates) were present on the Great Day in the summer of 2007, but if the Foggia story was true—and Mark Oates believed it probably was—he doubted if it had been any of the scientists who talked. More likely it had been one of the guards who had flown with Foggia from Raiford to Montpelier and then escorted him from Montpelier to Province in an armored truck.

“If I come through this alive,” Foggia is reported to have said, “I want a chicken dinner before I blow this joint.” He then stepped through Portal One and reappeared at Portal Two immediately.

He came through alive, but Rudy Foggia was in no condition to eat his chicken dinner. In the space it took to Jaunt across the two miles (pegged at 0.000000000067 of a second by computer), Foggia’s hair had turned snow white. His face had not changed in any physical way—it was not lined or jowly or wasted—but it gave the impression of great, almost incredible age. Foggia shuffled out of the portal, his eyes bulging blankly, his mouth twitching, his hands splayed out in front of him. Presently he began to drool. The scientists who had gathered around drew away from him and no, Mark really doubted if any of them had talked; they knew about the rats, after all, and the guinea pigs, and the hamsters; any animal, in fact, with more brains than your average flatworm. They must have felt a bit like those German scientists who tried to impregnate Jewish women with the sperm of German shepherds.

“What happened?” one of the scientists shouted (is reputed to have shouted). It was the only question Foggia had a chance to answer.

“It’s eternity in there,” he said, and dropped dead of what was diagnosed as a massive heart attack.

The scientists foregathered there were left with his corpse (which was neatly taken care of by the CIA and the Effa Bee Eye) and that strange and awful dying declaration: It’s eternity in there.

“Daddy, I want to know what happened to the mice,” Patty repeated. The only reason she had a chance to ask again was because the man in the expensive suit and the Eterna-Shine shoes had developed into something of a problem for the Jaunt attendants. He didn’t really want to take the gas, and was disguising it with a lot of bluff, bully-boy talk. The attendants were doing their job as well as they could—smiling, cajoling, persuading—but it had slowed them down.

Mark sighed. He had opened the subject—only as a way of distracting his children from the pre-Jaunt festivities, it was true, but he had opened it—and now he supposed he would have to close it as truthfully as he could without alarming them or upsetting them.

He would not tell them, for instance, about C. K. Summers’s book, *The Politics of the Jaunt*, which contained one section called “The Jaunt Under the Rose,” a compendium of the more believable rumors about the Jaunt. The story of Rudy Foggia, he of the bridgeclub murders and the uneaten chicken dinner, was in there. There were also case histories of some other thirty (or more ... or less ... or who knows) volunteers, scapegoats, or madmen who had Jaunted wide awake over the last three hundred years. Most of them arrived at the other end dead. The rest were hopelessly insane. In some cases, the act of reemerging had actually seemed to shock them to death.

Summers’s section of Jaunt rumors and apocrypha contained other unsettling intelligence as well: the Jaunt had apparently been used several times as a murder weapon. In the most famous (and only documented) case, which had occurred a mere thirty years ago, a Jaunt researcher named Lester Michaelson had tied up his wife with their daughter’s plexiplast Dreamropes and pushed her, screaming, through the Jaunt portal at Silver City, Nevada. But before doing it, Michaelson had pushed the Nil button on his Jaunt board, erasing each and every one of the hundreds of thousands of possible portals through which Mrs. Michaelson might have emerged—anywhere from neighboring Reno to the experimental Jaunt-Station on Io, one

of the Jovian moons. So there was Mrs. Michaelson, Jaunting forever somewhere out there in the ozone. Michaelson's lawyer, after Michaelson had been held sane and able to stand trial for what he had done (within the narrow limits of the law, perhaps he was sane, but in any practical sense, Lester Michaelson was just as mad as a hatter), had offered a novel defense: his client could not be tried for murder because no one could prove conclusively that Mrs. Michaelson was dead.

This had raised the terrible specter of the woman, discorporeal but somehow still sentient, screaming in limbo ... forever. Michaelson was convicted and executed.

In addition, Summers suggested, the Jaunt had been used by various tinpot dictators to get rid of political dissidents and political adversaries; some thought that the Mafia had their own illegal Jaunt-Stations, tied into the central Jaunt computer through their CIA connections. It was suggested that the Mafia used the Jaunt's Nil capability to get rid of bodies which, unlike that of the unfortunate Mrs. Michaelson, were already dead. Seen in that light, the Jaunt became the ultimate Jimmy Hoffa machine, ever so much better than the local gravel pit or quarry.

All of this had led to Summers's conclusions and theories about the Jaunt; and that, of course, led back to Patty's persistent question about the mice.

"Well," Mark said slowly, as his wife signaled with her eyes for him to be careful, "even now no one really knows, Patty. But all the experiments with animals—including the mice—seemed to lead to the conclusion that while the Jaunt is almost instantaneous physically, it takes a long, long time mentally."

"I don't get it," Patty said glumly. "I knew I wouldn't."

But Ricky was looking at his father thoughtfully. "They went on thinking," he said. "The test animals. And so would we, if we didn't get knocked out."

“Yes,” Mark said. “That’s what we believe now.”

Something was dawning in Ricky’s eyes. Fright? Excitement? “It isn’t just teleportation, is it, Dad? It’s some kind of time-warp.”

It’s eternity in there, Mark thought.

“In a way,” he said. “But that’s a comic-book phrase—it sounds good but doesn’t really mean anything, Rick. It seems to revolve around the idea of consciousness, and the fact that consciousness doesn’t particulate—it remains whole and constant. It also retains some screwy sense of time. But we don’t know how pure consciousness would measure time, or even if that concept has any meaning to pure mind. We can’t even conceive what pure mind might be. “

Mark fell silent, troubled by his son’s eyes, which were suddenly so sharp and curious. He understands but he doesn’t understand, Mark thought. Your mind can be your best friend; it can keep you amused even when there’s nothing to read, nothing to do. But it can turn on you when it’s left with no input for too long. It can turn on you, which means that it turns on itself, savages itself, perhaps consumes itself in an unthinkable act of auto-cannibalism. How long in there, in terms of years? 0.000000000067 seconds for the body to Jaunt, but how long for the unarticulated consciousness? A hundred years? A thousand? A million? A billion? How long alone with your thoughts in an endless field of white? And then, when a billion eternities have passed, the crashing return of light and form and body. Who wouldn’t go insane?

“Ricky—” he began, but the Jaunt attendants had arrived with their cart.

“Are you ready?” one asked.

Mark nodded.

“Daddy, I’m scared,” Patty said in a thin voice. “Will it hurt?”

“No, honey, of course it won’t hurt,” Mark said, and his voice was calm enough, but his heart was beating a little fast—it always did, although this would be something like his twenty-fifth Jaunt. “I’ll go first and you’ll see how easy it is.”

The Jaunt attendant looked at him questioningly. Mark nodded and made a smile. The mask descended. Mark took it in his own hands and breathed deep of the dark.

The first thing he became aware of was the hard black Martian sky as seen through the top of the dome which surrounded Whitehead City. It was night here, and the stars sprawled with a fiery brilliance undreamed of on earth.

The second thing he became aware of was some sort of disturbance in the recovery room—mutters, then shouts, then a shrill scream. Oh dear God, that’s Marilys! he thought, and struggled up from his Jaunt couch, fighting the waves of dizziness.

There was another scream, and he saw Jaunt attendants running toward their couches, their bright red jumpers flying around their knees. Marilys staggered toward him, pointing. She screamed again and then collapsed on the floor, sending an unoccupied Jaunt couch rolling slowly down the aisle with one weakly clutching hand.

But Mark had already followed the direction of her pointing finger. He had seen. It hadn’t been fright in Ricky’s eyes; it had been excitement. He should have known, because he knew Ricky—Ricky, who had fallen out of the highest crotch of the tree in their backyard in Schenectady when he was only seven, who had broken his arm (and was lucky that had been all he’d broken); Ricky who dared to go faster and further on his Slideboard than any other kid in the neighborhood; Ricky who was first to take any dare. Ricky and fear were not well acquainted.

Until now.

Beside Ricky, his sister still mercifully slept. The thing that had been his son bounced and writhed on its Jaunt couch, a twelve-year-old boy with a snow-white fall of hair and eyes which were incredibly ancient, the corneas gone a sickly yellow. Here was a creature older than time masquerading as a boy; and yet it bounced and writhed with a kind of horrid, obscene glee, and at its choked, lunatic cackles the Jaunt attendants drew back in terror. Some of them fled, although they had been trained to cope with just such an unthinkable eventuality.

The old-young legs twitched and quivered. Claw hands beat and twisted and danced on the air; abruptly they descended and the thing that had been his son began to claw at its face.

“Longer than you think, Dad!” it cackled. “Longer than you think! Held my breath when they gave me the gas! Wanted to see! I saw! I saw! Longer than you think!”

Cackling and screeching, the thing on the Jaunt couch suddenly clawed its own eyes out. Blood gouted. The recovery room was an aviary of screaming voices now.

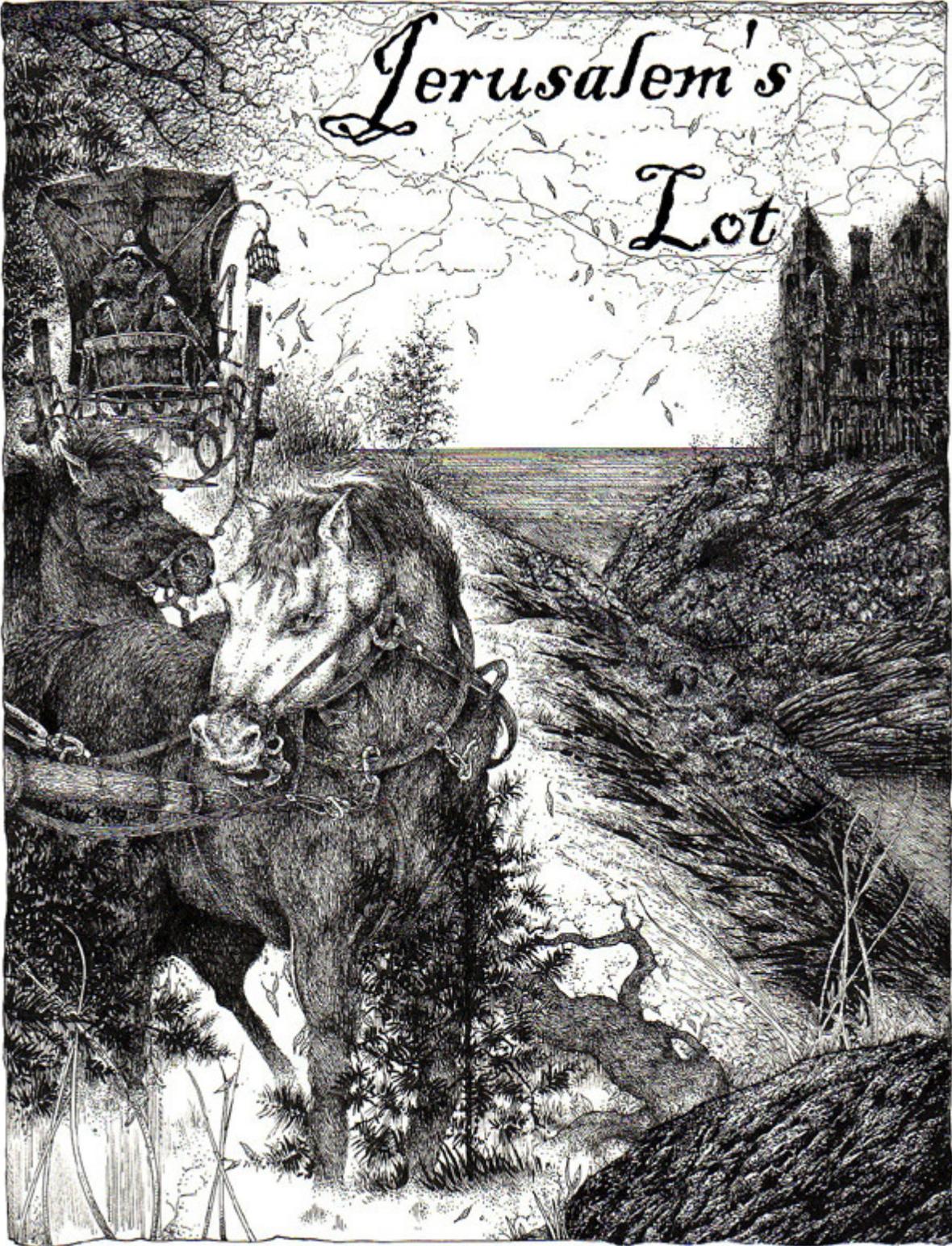
“Longer than you think, Dad! I saw! I saw! Long Jaunt! Longer than you think—”

It said other things before the Jaunt attendants were finally able to bear it away, rolling its couch swiftly away as it screamed and clawed at the eyes that had seen the unseeable forever and ever; it said other things, and then it began to scream, but Mark Oates didn't hear it because by then he was screaming himself.

*

“The Jaunt”—This was originally for Omni, which quite rightly rejected it because the science is so wonky. It was Ben Bova's idea to have the colonists in the story mining for water, and I have incorporated that in this version.

Jerusalem's
Lot



JERUSALEM'S LOT

Stephen King

Oct. 2, 1850.

DEAR BONES,

How good it was to step into the cold, draughty hall here at Chapelwaite, every bone in an ache from that abominable coach, in need of instant relief from my distended bladder—and to see a letter addressed in your own inimitable scrawl propped on the obscene little cherry-wood table beside the door! Be assured that I set to deciphering it as soon as the needs of the body were attended to (in a coldly ornate downstairs bathroom where I could see my breath rising before my eyes).

I'm glad to hear that you are recovered from the miasma that has so long set in your lungs, although I assure you that I do sympathize with the moral dilemma the cure has affected you with. An ailing abolitionist healed by the sunny climes of slave-struck Florida! Still and all, Bones, I ask you as a friend who has also walked in the valley of the shadow, to take all care of yourself and venture not back to Massachusetts until your body gives you leave. Your fine mind and incisive pen cannot serve us if you are clay, and if the Southern zone is a healing one, is there not poetic justice in that?

Yes, the house is quite as fine as I had been led to believe by my cousin's executors, but rather more sinister. It sits atop a huge and jutting point of land perhaps three miles north of Falmouth and nine miles north of Portland. Behind it are some four acres of grounds, gone back to the wild in the most formidable manner imaginable—junipers, scrub vines, bushes, and various forms of creeper climb wildly over the picturesque stone walls that separate the estate from the town domain. Awful imitations of Greek statuary peer blindly through the wrack from atop various hillocks—they seem, in most cases, about to lunge at the passer-by. My cousin Stephen's tastes seem to have run the gamut from the unacceptable to the downright horrific. There is an odd little summer house which has been nearly buried in scarlet sumac and a grotesque sundial in the midst of what must once have been a garden. It adds the final lunatic touch.

But the view from the parlour more than excuses this; I command a dizzying view of the rocks at the foot of Chapelwaite Head and the Atlantic itself. A huge, bellied bay window looks out on this, and a huge, toadlike secretary stands beside it. It will do nicely for the start of that novel which I have talked of so long [and no doubt tiresomely].

To-day has been gray with occasional splatters of rain. As I look out all seems to be a study in slate—the rocks, old and worn as Time itself, the sky, and of course the sea, which crashes against the granite fangs below with a sound which is not precisely sound but vibration—I can feel the waves with my feet even as I write. The sensation is not a wholly unpleasant one.

I know you disapprove my solitary habits, dear Bones, but I assure you that I am fine and happy. Calvin is with me, as practical, silent, and as dependable as ever, and by midweek I am sure that between the two of us we shall have straightened our affairs and made arrangement for necessary deliveries from town—and a company of cleaning women to begin blowing the dust from this place!

I will close—there are so many things as yet to be seen, rooms to explore, and doubtless a thousand pieces of execrable furniture to be viewed by these tender eyes. Once again, my thanks for the touch of familiar brought by your letter, and for your continuing regard.

Give my love to your wife, as you both have mine.

CHARLES.

Oct. 6, 1850.

DEAR BONES,

Such a place this is!

It continues to amaze me—as do the reactions of the townfolk in the closest village to my occupancy. That is a queer little place with the picturesque name of Preacher’s Corners. It was there that Calvin contracted for the weekly provisions. The other errand, that of securing a sufficient supply of cordwood for the winter, was likewise taken care of. But Cal returned with gloomy countenance, and when I asked him what the trouble was, he replied grimly enough:

“They think you mad, Mr. Boone!”

I laughed and said that perhaps they had heard of the brain fever I suffered after my Sarah died—certainly I spoke madly enough at that time, as you could attest.

But Cal protested that no-one knew anything of me except through my cousin Stephen, who contracted for the same services as I have now made provision for. “What was said, sir, was that anyone who would live in Chapelwaite must be either a lunatic or run the risk of becoming one.”

This left me utterly perplexed, as you may imagine, and I asked who had given him this amazing communication. He told me that he had been referred to a sullen and rather besotted pulp-logger named Thompson, who owns four hundred acres of pine, birch, and spruce, and who logs it with the help of his five sons, for sale to the mills in Portland and to householders in the immediate area.

When Cal, all unknowing of his queer prejudice, gave him the location to which the wood was to be brought, this Thompson stared at him with his mouth ajar and said that he would send his sons with the wood, in the good light of the day, and by the sea road.

Calvin, apparently misreading my bemusement for distress hastened to say that the man reeked of cheap whiskey and that he had then lapsed into some kind of nonsense about a deserted village and cousin Stephen’s relations—and worms! Calvin finished his business with one of Thompson’s boys, who, I take it, was rather surly and none too sober or freshly-scented himself. I take it there has been

some of this reaction in Preacher's Corners itself, at the general store where Cal spoke with the shop-keeper, although this was more of the gossipy, behind-the-hand type.

None of this has bothered me much; we know how rustics dearly love to enrich their lives with the smell of scandal and myth, and I suppose poor Stephen and his side of the family are fair game. As I told Cal, a man who has fallen to his death almost from his own front porch is more than likely to stir talk.

The house itself is a constant amazement. Twenty-three rooms, Bones! The wainscotting which panels the upper floors and the portrait gallery is mildewed but still stout. While I stood in my late cousin's upstairs bedroom I could hear the rats scuttering behind it, and big ones they must be, from the sound they make—almost like people walking there. I should hate to encounter one in the dark; or even in the light, for that matter. Still, I have noted neither holes nor droppings. Odd.

The upper gallery is lined with bad portraits in frames which must be worth a fortune. Some bear a resemblance to Stephen as I remember him. I believe I have correctly identified my Uncle Henry Boone and his wife Judith; the others are unfamiliar. I suppose one of them may be my own notorious grandfather, Robert. But Stephen's side of the family is all but unknown to me, for which I am heartily sorry. The same good humour that shone in Stephen's letters to Sarah and me, the same light of high intellect, shines in these portraits, bad as they are. For what foolish reasons families fall out! A rifled escritoire, hard words between brothers now dead three generations, and blameless descendants are needlessly estranged. I cannot help reflecting upon how fortunate it was that you and John Petty succeeded in contacting Stephen when it seemed I might follow my Sarah through the Gates—and upon how unfortunate it was that chance should have robbed us of a face-to-face meeting. How I would have loved to hear him defend the ancestral statuary and furnishings!

But do not let me denigrate the place to an extreme. Stephen's taste was not my own, true, but beneath the veneer of his additions there are pieces [a number of them shrouded by dust-covers in the upper chambers] which are true master-works. There are beds, tables, and heavy, dark scrollings done in teak and mahogany, and many of the bedrooms and receiving chambers, the upper study and small parlour, hold a somber charm. The floors are rich pine that glow with an inner and secret light. There is dignity here; dignity and the weight of years. I cannot yet say I like it, but I do respect it. I am eager to watch it change as we revolve through the changes of this northern clime.

Lord, I run on! Write soon, Bones. Tell me what progress you make, and what news you hear from Petty and the rest. And please do not make the mistake of trying to persuade any new Southern acquaintances as to your views too forcibly—I understand that not all are content to answer merely with their mouths, as is our long-winded friend, Mr. Calhoun.

Yr. affectionate friend,

CHARLES.

Oct. 16, 1850.

DEAR RICHARD,

Hello, and how are you? I have thought about you often since I have taken up residence here at Chapelwaite, and had half-expected to hear from you—and now I receive a letter from Bones telling me that I'd forgotten to leave my address at the club! Rest assured that I would have written eventually anyway, as it sometimes seems that my true and loyal friends are all I have left in the world that is sure and completely normal. And, Lord, how spread we've become! You in Boston, writing faithfully for *The Liberator* [to which I have also sent my address, incidentally], Hanson in England on another of his confounded jaunts, and poor old Bones in the very lions' lair, recovering his lungs.

It goes as well as can be expected here, Dick, and be assured I will render you a full account when I am not quite as pressed by certain events which are extant here—I think your legal mind may be quite intrigued by certain happenings at Chapelwaite and in the area about it.

But in the meantime I have a favour to ask, if you will entertain it. Do you remember the historian you introduced me to at Mr. Clary's fund-raising dinner for the cause? I believe his name was Bigelow. At any rate, he mentioned that he made a hobby of collecting odd bits of historical lore which pertained to the very area in which I am now living. My favour, then, is this: Would you contact him and ask him what facts, bits of folklore, or general rumour—if any—he may be conversant with about a small, deserted village called JERUSALEM'S LOT, near a town-ship called Preacher's Corners, on the Royal River? The stream itself is a tributary of the Androscoggin, and flows into that river approximately eleven miles above that river's emptying place near Chapelwaite. It would gratify me intensely, and, more important, may be a matter of some moment.

In looking over this letter I feel I have been a bit short with you, Dick, for which I am heartily sorry. But be assured I will explain myself shortly, and until that time I send my warmest regards to your wife, two fine sons, and, of course, to yourself.

Yr. affectionate friend,

CHARLES.

Oct. 16, 1850.

DEAR BONES,

I have a tale to tell you which seems a little strange [and even disquieting] to both Cal and me—see what you think. If nothing else, it may serve to amuse you while you battle the mosquitoes!

Two days after I mailed my last to you, a group of four young ladies arrived from the Corners under the supervision of an elderly lady of intimidatingly-competent visage named Mrs. Cloris, to set the place in order and to remove some of the dust that had been causing me to sneeze seemingly at every other step. They all seemed a little nervous as they went about their chores; indeed, one flighty miss uttered a small screech when I entered the upstairs parlour as she dusted.

I asked Mrs. Cloris about this [she was dusting the downstairs hall with grim determination that would have quite amazed you, her hair done up in an old faded bandanna], and she turned to me and said with an air of determination: “They don’t like the house, and I don’t like the house, sir, because it has always been a bad house.”

My jaw dropped at this unexpected bit, and she went on in a kindlier tone: “I do not mean to say that Stephen Boone was not a fine man, for he was; I cleaned for him every second Thursday all the time he was here, as I cleaned for his father, Mr. Randolph Boone, until he and his wife disappeared in eighteen and sixteen. Mr. Stephen was a good and kindly man, and so you seem, sir (if you will pardon my bluntness; I know no other way to speak), but the house is bad and it always has been, and no Boone has ever been happy here since your grandfather Robert and his brother Philip fell out over stolen [and here she paused, almost guiltily] items in seventeen and eighty-nine.”

Such memories these folks have, Bones!

Mrs. Cloris continued: “The house was built in unhappiness, has been lived in with unhappiness, there has been blood spilt on its floors [as you may or may not know, Bones, my Uncle Randolph was involved in an accident on the cellar stairs which took the life of his daughter Marcella; he then took his own life in a fit of remorse. The incident is related in one of Stephen’s letters to me, on the sad occasion of his dead sister’s birthday], there has been disappearance and accident.

“I have worked here, Mr. Boone, and I am neither blind nor deaf. I’ve heard awful sounds in the walls, sir, awful sounds—thumpings and crashings and once a strange wailing that was half-laughter. It fair made my blood curdle. It’s a dark place, sir.” And there she halted, perhaps afraid she had spoken too much.

As for myself, I hardly knew whether to be offended or amused, curious or merely matter-of-fact. I’m afraid that amusement won the day. “And what do you suspect, Mrs. Cloris? Ghosts rattling chains?”

But she only looked at me oddly. “Ghosts there may be. But it’s not ghosts in the walls. It’s not ghosts that wail and blubber like the damned and crash and blunder away in the darkness. It’s—”

“Come, Mrs. Cloris,” I prompted her. “You’ve come this far. Now can you finish what you’ve begun?”

The strangest expression of terror, pique, and—I would swear to it—religious awe passed over her face. “Some die not,” she whispered. “Some live in the twilight shadows Between to serve—Him!”

And that was the end. For some minutes I continued to tax her, but she grew only more obstinate and would say no more. At last I desisted, fearing she might gather herself up and quit the premises.

This is the end of one episode, but a second occurred the following evening. Calvin had laid a fire downstairs and I was sitting in the living-room, drowsing over a copy of *The Intelligencer* and listening to the sound of wind-driven rain on the large bay window. I felt comfortable as only one can on such a night, when all is miserable outside and all is warmth and comfort inside; but a moment later Cal appeared at the door, looking excited and a bit nervous.

“Are you awake, sir?” he asked.

“Barely,” I said. “What is it?”

“I’ve found something upstairs I think you should see,” he responded, with the same air of suppressed excitement.

I got up and followed him. As we climbed the wide stairs, Calvin said: “I was reading a book in the upstairs study—a rather strange one—when I heard a noise in the wall.”

“Rats,” I said. “Is that all?”

He paused on the landing, looking at me solemnly. The lamp he held cast weird, lurking shadows on the dark draperies and on the half-seen portraits that seemed now to leer rather than smile. Outside the wind rose to a brief scream and then subsided grudgingly.

“Not rats,” Cal said. “There was a kind of blundering, thudding sound from behind the book-cases, and then a horrible gurgling—horrible, sir. And scratching, as if something were struggling to get out ... to get at me!”

You can imagine my amazement, Bones. Calvin is not the type to give way to hysterical flights of imagination. It began to seem that there was a mystery here after all—and perhaps an ugly one indeed.

“What then?” I asked him. We had resumed down the hall, and I could see the light from the study spilling forth onto the floor of the gallery. I viewed it with some trepidation; the night seemed no longer comfortable.

“The scratching noise stopped. After a moment the thudding, shuffling sounds began again, this time moving away from me. It paused once, and I swear I heard a strange, almost inaudible laugh! I went to the book-case and began to push and pull, thinking there might be a partition, or a secret door.”

“You found one?”

Cal paused at the door to the study. “No—but I found this!”

We stepped in and I saw a square black hole in the left case. The books at that point were nothing but dummies, and what Cal had found was a small hiding place. I flashed my lamp within it and saw nothing but a thick fall of dust, dust which must have been decades old.

“There was only this,” Cal said quietly, and handed me a yellowed foolscap. The thing was a map, drawn in spider-thin strokes of black ink—the map of a town or village. There were perhaps seven buildings, and one, clearly marked with a steeple, bore this legend beneath it: The Worm That Doth Corrupt.

In the upper left corner, to what would have been the northwest of this little village, an arrow pointed. Inscribed beneath it: Chapelwaite.

Calvin said: “In town, sir, someone rather superstitiously mentioned a deserted village called Jerusalem’s Lot. It’s a place they steer clear of.”

“But this?” I asked, fingering the odd legend below the steeple.

“I don’t know.”

A memory of Mrs. Cloris, adamant yet fearful, passed through my mind. “The Worm ...” I muttered.

“Do you know something, Mr. Boone?”

“Perhaps ... it might be amusing to have a look for this town tomorrow, do you think, Cal?”

He nodded, eyes lighting. We spent almost an hour after this looking for some breach in the wall behind the cubby-hole Cal had found, but with no success. Nor was there a recurrence of the noises Cal had described.

We retired with no further adventure that night.

On the following morning Calvin and I set out on our ramble through the woods. The rain of the night before had ceased, but the sky was somber and lowering. I could see Cal looking at me with some doubtfulness and I hastened to reassure him that should I tire, or the journey prove too far, I would not hesitate to call a halt to the affair. We had equipped ourselves with a picnic lunch, a fine Buckwhite compass, and, of course, the odd and ancient map of Jerusalem's Lot.

It was a strange and brooding day; not a bird seemed to sing nor an animal to move as we made our way through the great and gloomy stands of pine to the south and east. The only sounds were those of our own feet and the steady pound of the Atlantic against the headlands. The smell of the sea, almost preternaturally heavy, was our constant companion.

We had gone no more than two miles when we struck an overgrown road of what I believe were once called the "corduroy" variety; this tended in our general direction and we struck off along it, making brisk time. We spoke little. The day, with its still and ominous quality, weighed heavily on our spirits.

At about eleven o'clock we heard the sound of rushing water. The remnant of road took a hard turn to the left, and on the other side of a boiling, slaty little stream, like an apparition, was Jerusalem's Lot!

The stream was perhaps eight feet across, spanned by a moss-grown footbridge. On the far side, Bones, stood the most perfect little village you might imagine, understandably weathered, but amazingly preserved. Several houses, done in that austere yet commanding form for which the Puritans were justly famous, stood clustered near the steeply-sheared bank. Further beyond, along a weed-grown thoroughfare, stood three or four of what might have been primitive business establishments, and beyond that, the spire of the church marked on the map, rising up to the gray sky and looking grim beyond description with its peeled paint and tarnished, leaning cross.

"The town is well named," Cal said softly beside me.

We crossed to the town and began to poke through it—and this is where my story grows slightly amazing, Bones, so prepare yourself!

The air seemed leaden as we walked among the buildings; weighted, if you will. The edifices were in a state of decay—shutters torn off, roofs crumbled under the weight of heavy snows gone by, windows dusty and leering. Shadows from odd corners and warped angles seemed to sit in sinister pools.

We entered an old and rotting tavern first—somehow it did not seem right that we should invade any of those houses to which people had retired when they wished privacy. An old and weather-scrubbed sign above the splintered door announced that this had been the BOAR'S HEAD INN AND TAVERN. The door creaked hellishly on its one remaining hinge, and we stepped into the shadowed interior. The smell of rot and mould was vaporous and nearly overpowering. And beneath it seemed to lie an even deeper smell, a slimy and pestiferous smell, a smell of ages and the decay of ages. Such a stench as might issue from corrupt coffins or violated tombs. I held my handkerchief to my nose and Cal did likewise. We surveyed the place.

“My God, sir—” Cal said faintly.

“It's never been touched,” I finished for him.

As indeed it had not. Tables and chairs stood about like ghostly guardians of the watch, dusty, warped by the extreme changes in temperature which the New England climate is known for, but otherwise perfect—as if they had waited through the silent, echoing decades for those long gone to enter once more, to call for a pint or a dram, to deal cards and light clay pipes. A small square mirror hung beside the rules of the tavern, unbroken. Do you see the significance, Bones? Small boys are noted for exploration and vandalism; there is not a “haunted” house which stands with windows intact, no matter how fearsome the eldritch inhabitants are rumoured to be; not a shadowy graveyard without at least one tombstone upended by young pranksters. Certainly there must be a

score of young pranksters in Preacher's Corners, not two miles from Jerusalem's Lot. Yet the inn-keeper's glass [which must have cost him a nice sum] was intact—as were the other fragile items we found in our pokings. The only damage in Jerusalem's Lot has been done by impersonal Nature. The implication is obvious: Jerusalem's Lot is a shunned town. But why? I have a notion, but before I even dare hint at it, I must proceed to the unsettling conclusion of our visit.

We went up to the sleeping quarters and found beds made up, pewter water-pitchers neatly placed beside them. The kitchen was likewise untouched by anything save the dust of the years and that horrible, sunken stench of decay. The tavern alone would be an antiquarian's paradise; the wondrously queer kitchen stove alone would fetch a pretty price at Boston auction.

“What do you think, Cal?” I asked when we had emerged again into the uncertain daylight.

“I think it's bad business, Mr. Boone,” he replied in his doleful way, “and that we must see more to know more.”

We gave the other shops scant notice—there was a hostelry with mouldering leather goods still hung on rusted flatnails, a chandler's, a warehouse with oak and pine still stacked within, a smithy.

We entered two houses as we made our way toward the church at the center of the village. Both were perfectly in the Puritan mode, full of items a collector would give his arm for, both deserted and full of the same rotten scent.

Nothing seemed to live or move in all of this but ourselves. We saw no insects, no birds, not even a cobweb fashioned in a window corner. Only dust.

At last we reached the church. It reared above us, grim, uninviting, cold. Its windows were black with the shadows inside, and any Godliness or sanctity had departed from it long ago. Of that I am certain. We mounted the steps, and I placed my hand on the large

iron door-pull. A set, dark look passed from myself to Calvin and back again. I opened the portal. How long since that door had been touched? I would say with confidence that mine was the first in fifty years; perhaps longer. Rust-clogged hinges screamed as I opened it. The smell of rot and decay which smote us was nearly palpable. Cal made a gagging sound in his throat and twisted his head involuntarily for clearer air.

“Sir,” he asked, “are you sure that you are—?”

“I’m fine,” I said calmly. But I did not feel calm, Bones, no more than I do now. I believe, with Moses, with Jereboam, with Increase Mather, and with our own Hanson [when he is in a philosophical temperament], that there are spiritually noxious places, buildings where the milk of the cosmos has become sour and rancid. This church is such a place; I would swear to it.

We stepped into a long vestibule equipped with a dusty coat rack and shelved hymnals. It was windowless. Oil-lamps stood in niches here and there. An unremarkable room, I thought, until I heard Calvin’s sharp gasp and saw what he had already noticed.

It was an obscenity.

I daren’t describe that elaborately-framed picture further than this: that it was done after the fleshy style of Rubens; that it contained a grotesque travesty of a madonna and child; that strange, half-shadowed creatures sported and crawled in the background.

“Lord,” I whispered.

“There’s no Lord here,” Calvin said, and his words seemed to hang in the air. I opened the door leading into the church itself, and the odor became a miasma, nearly overpowering.

In the glimmering half-light of afternoon the pews stretched ghostlike to the altar. Above them was a high, oaken pulpit and a shadow-struck narthex from which gold glimmered.

With a half-sob Calvin, that devout Protestant, made the Holy Sign, and I followed suit. For the gold was a large, beautifully-wrought cross—but it was hung upside-down, symbol of Satan’s Mass.

“We must be calm,” I heard myself saying. “We must be calm, Calvin. We must be calm.”

But a shadow had touched my heart, and I was afraid as I had never been. I have walked beneath death’s umbrella and thought there was none darker. But there is. There is.

We walked down the aisle, our footfalls echoing above and around us. We left tracks in the dust. And at the altar there were other tenebrous objets d’art. I will not, cannot, let my mind dwell upon them.

I began to mount to the pulpit itself.

“Don’t, Mr. Boone!” Cal cried suddenly. “I’m afraid—”

But I had gained it. A huge book lay open upon the stand, writ both in Latin and crabbed runes which looked, to my unpractised eye, either Druidic or pre-Celtic. I enclose a card with several of the symbols, redrawn from memory.

I closed the book and looked at the words stamped into the leather: *De Vermis Mysteriis*, My Latin is rusty, but serviceable enough to translate: *The Mysteries of the Worm*.

As I touched it, that accursed church and Calvin’s white, upturned face seemed to swim before me. It seemed that I heard low, chanting voices, full of hideous yet eager fear—and below that sound, another, filling the bowels of the earth. An hallucination, I doubt it not—but at the same moment, the church was filled with a very real sound, which I can only describe as a huge and macabre turning beneath my feet. The pulpit trembled beneath my fingers; the desecrated cross trembled on the wall.

We exited together, Cal and I, leaving the place to its own darkness, and neither of us dared look back until we had crossed the rude planks spanning the stream. I will not say we defiled the nineteen hundred years man has spent climbing upward from a hunkering and superstitious savage by actually running; but I would be a liar to say that we strolled.

That is my tale. You mustn't shadow your recovery by fearing that the fever has touched me again; Cal can attest to all in these pages, up to and including the hideous noise.

So I close, saying only that I wish I might see you [knowing that much of my bewilderment would drop away immediately], and that I remain your friend and admirer,

CHARLES.

Oct. 17, 1850.

DEAR GENTLEMEN:

In the most recent edition of your catalogue of household items (i.e., Summer, 1850), I noticed a preparation which is titled Rat's Bane. I should like to purchase one (1) 5-pound tin of this preparation at your stated price of thirty cents (\$.30). I enclose return postage. Please mail to: Calvin McCann, Chapelwaite, Preacher's Corners, Cumberland County, Maine.

Thank you for your attention in this matter.

I remain, dear Gentlemen,

CALVIN McCANN.

Oct. 19, 1850.

DEAR BONES,

Developments of a disquieting nature.

The noises in the house have intensified, and I am growing more to the conclusion that rats are not all that move within our walls. Calvin and I went on another fruitless search for hidden crannies or passages, but found nothing. How poorly we would fit into one of Mrs. Radcliffe's romances! Cal claims, however, that much of the sound emanates from the cellar, and it is there we intend to explore tomorrow. It makes me no easier to know that Cousin Stephen's sister met her unfortunate end there.

Her portrait, by the by, hangs in the upstairs gallery. Marcella Boone was a sadly pretty thing, if the artist got her right, and I do know she never married. At times I think that Mrs. Cloris was right, that it is a bad house. It has certainly held nothing but gloom for its past inhabitants.

But I have more to say of the redoubtable Mrs. Cloris, for I have had this day a second interview with her. As the most level-headed person from the Corners that I have met thus far, I sought her out this afternoon, after an unpleasant interview which I will relate.

The wood was to have been delivered this morning, and when noon came and passed and no wood with it, I decided to take my daily walk into the town itself. My object was to visit Thompson, the man with whom Cal did business.

It has been a lovely day, full of the crisp snap of bright autumn, and by the time I reached the Thompsons' homestead [Cal, who remained home to poke further through Uncle Stephen's library, gave me adequate directions] I felt in the best mood that these last few days have seen, and quite prepared to forgive Thompson's tardiness with the wood.

The place was a massive tangle of weeds and fallen-down buildings in need of paint; to the left of the barn a huge sow, ready for November butchering, grunted and wallowed in a muddy sty, and in the littered yard between house and outbuildings a woman in a tattered gingham dress was feeding chickens from her apron. When I hailed her, she turned a pale and vapid face toward me.

The sudden change in expression from utter, doltish emptiness to one of frenzied terror was quite wonderful to behold. I can only think she took me for Stephen himself, for she raised her hand in the prong-fingered sign of the evil eye and screamed. The chicken-feed scattered on the ground and the fowls fluttered away, squawking.

Before I could utter a sound, a huge, hulking figure of a man clad only in long-handled underwear lumbered out of the house with a squirrel-rifle in one hand and a jug in the other. From the red light in his eye and unsteady manner of walking, I judged that this was Thompson the Woodcutter himself.

“A Boone!” he roared. “G—d—n your eyes!” He dropped the jug a-rolling and also made the Sign.

“I’ve come,” I said with as much equanimity as I could muster under the circumstances, “because the wood has not. According to the agreement you struck with my man—”

“G—d—n your man too, say I!” And for the first time I noticed that beneath his bluff and bluster he was deadly afraid. I began seriously to wonder if he mightn’t actually use his rifle against me in his excitement.

I began carefully: “As a gesture of courtesy, you might—”

“G—d—n your courtesy!”

“Very well, then,” I said with as much dignity as I could muster. “I bid you good day until you are more in control of yourself.” And with this I turned away and began down the road to the village.

“Don’tchee come back!” he screamed after me. “Stick wi’ your evil up there! Cursed! Cursed! Cursed!” He pelted a stone at me, which struck my shoulder. I would not give him the satisfaction of dodging.

So I sought out Mrs. Cloris, determined to solve the mystery of Thompson’s enmity, at least. She is a widow [and none of your

confounded matchmaking, Bones; she is easily fifteen years my senior, and I'll not see forty again] and lives by herself in a charming little cottage at the ocean's very doorstep. I found the lady hanging out her wash, and she seemed genuinely pleased to see me. I found this a great relief; it is vexing almost beyond words to be branded pariah for no understandable reason.

"Mr. Boone," said she, offering a half-curtsey. "If you've come about washing, I take none in past September. My rheumatiz pains me so that it's trouble enough to do my own."

"I wish laundry was the subject of my visit. I've come for help, Mrs. Cloris. I must know all you can tell me about Chapelwaite and Jerusalem's Lot and why the townfolk regard me with such fear and suspicion!"

"Jerusalem's Lot! You know about that, then."

"Yes," I replied, "and visited it with my companion a week ago."

"God!" She went pale as milk, and tottered. I put out a hand to steady her. Her eyes rolled horribly, and for a moment I was sure she would swoon.

"Mrs. Cloris, I am sorry if I have said anything to—"

"Come inside," she said. "You must know. Sweet Jesu, the evil days have come again!"

She would not speak more until she had brewed strong tea in her sunshiny kitchen. When it was before us, she looked pensively out at the ocean for a time. Inevitably, her eyes and mine were drawn to the jutting brow of Chapelwaite Head, where the house looked out over the water. The large bay window glittered in the rays of the westering sun like a diamond. The view was beautiful but strangely disturbing. She suddenly turned to me and declared vehemently:

"Mr. Boone, you must leave Chapelwaite immediately!"

I was flabbergasted.

“There has been an evil breath in the air since you took up residence. In the last week—since you set foot in the accursed place—there have been omens and portents. A caul over the face of the moon; flocks of whippoorwills which roost in the cemeteries; an unnatural birth. You must leave!”

When I found my tongue, I spoke as gently as I could. “Mrs. Cloris, these things are dreams. You must know that.”

“Is it a dream that Barbara Brown gave birth to a child with no eyes? Or that Clifton Brockett found a flat, pressed trail five feet wide in the woods beyond Chapelwaite where all had withered and gone white? And can you, who have visited Jerusalem’s Lot, say with truth that nothing still lives there?”

I could not answer; the scene in that hideous church sprang before my eyes.

She clamped her gnarled hands together in an effort to calm herself. “I know of these things only from my mother and her mother before her. Do you know the history of your family as it applies to Chapelwaite?”

“Vaguely,” I said. “The house has been the home of Philip Boone’s line since the 1780s; his brother Robert, my grandfather, located in Massachusetts after an argument over stolen papers. Of Philip’s side I know little, except that an unhappy shadow fell over it, extending from father to son to grand-children—Marcella died in a tragic accident and Stephen fell to his death. It was his wish that Chapelwaite become the home of me and mine, and that the family rift thus be mended.”

“Never to be mended,” she whispered. “You know nothing of the original quarrel?”

“Robert Boone was discovered rifling his brother’s desk.”

“Philip Boone was mad,” she said. “A man who trafficked with the unholy. The thing which Robert Boone attempted to remove was a profane Bible writ in the old tongues—Latin, Druidic, others. A hell-book.”

“De Vermis Mysteriis.”

She recoiled as if struck. “You know of it?”

“I have seen it ... touched it.” It seemed again she might swoon. A hand went to her mouth as if to stifle an outcry. “Yes; in Jerusalem’s Lot. On the pulpit of a corrupt and desecrated church.”

“Still there; still there, then.” She rocked in her chair. “I had hoped God in His wisdom had cast it into the pit of hell.”

“What relation had Philip Boone to Jerusalem’s Lot?”

“Blood relation,” she said darkly. “The Mark of the Beast was on him, although he walked in the clothes of the Lamb. And on the night of October 31, 1789, Philip Boone disappeared ... and the entire populace of that damned village with him.”

She would say little more; in fact, seemed to know little more. She would only reiterate her pleas that I leave, giving as reason something about “blood calling to blood” and muttering about “those who watch and those who guard.” As twilight drew on she seemed to grow more agitated rather than less, and to placate her I promised that her wishes would be taken under strong consideration.

I walked home through lengthening, gloomy shadows, my good mood quite dissipated and my head spinning with questions which still plague me. Cal greeted me with the news that our noises in the walls have grown worse still—as I can attest at this moment. I try to tell myself that I hear only rats, but then I see the terrified, earnest face of Mrs. Cloris.

The moon has risen over the sea, bloated, full, the colour of blood, staining the ocean with a noxious shade. My mind turns to that church again and

(here a line is struck out)

But you shall not see that, Bones. It is too mad. It is time I slept, I think. My thoughts go out to you.

Regards,

CHARLES.

*

(The following is from the pocket journal of Calvin McCann.)

Oct. 20, '50

Took the liberty this morning of forcing the lock which binds the book closed; did it before Mr. Boone arose. No help; it is all in cypher. A simple one, I believe. Perhaps I may break it as easily as the lock. A diary, I am certain, the hand oddly like Mr. Boone's own. Whose book, shelved in the most obscure corner of this library and locked across the pages? It seems old, but how to tell? The corrupting air has largely been kept from its pages. More later, if time; Mr. Boone set upon looking about the cellar. Am afraid these dreadful goings-on will be too much for his chancy health yet. I must try to persuade him

But he comes.

Oct. 20, 1850.

BONES,

I can't write I cant [sic] write of this yet I I I

(From the pocket journal of Calvin McCann)

Oct. 20, '50.

As I had feared, his health has broken—

Dear God, our Father Who art in Heaven!

Cannot bear to think of it; yet it is planted, burned on my brain like a tin-type; that horror in the cellar—!

Alone now; half-past eight o'clock; house silent but—

Found him swooned over his writing table; he still sleeps; yet for those few moments how nobly he acquitted himself while I stood paralyzed and shattered!

His skin is waxy, cool. Not the fever again, God be thanked. I daren't move him or leave him to go to the village. And if I did go, who would return with me to aid him? Who would come to this cursed house?

O, the cellar! The things in the cellar that have haunted our walls!

*

Oct. 22, 1850.

DEAR BONES,

I am myself again, although weak, after thirty-six hours of unconsciousness. Myself again ... what a grim and bitter joke! I shall never be myself again, never. I have come face to face with an insanity and a horror beyond the limits of human expression. And the end is not yet.

If it were not for Cal, I believe I should end my life this minute. He is one island of sanity in all this madness.

You shall know it all.

We had equipped ourselves with candles for our cellar exploration, and they threw a strong glow that was quite adequate—hellishly adequate! Calvin tried to dissuade me, citing my recent illness, saying that the most we should probably find would be some healthy rats to mark for poisoning.

I remained determined, however; Calvin fetched a sigh and answered: “Have it as you must, then, Mr. Boone.”

The entrance to the cellar is by means of a trap in the kitchen floor [which Cal assures me he has since stoutly boarded over], and we raised it only with a great deal of straining and lifting.

A foetid, overpowering smell came up out of the darkness, not unlike that which pervaded the deserted town across the Royal River. The candle I held shed its glow on a steeply-slanting flight of stairs leading down into darkness. They were in a terrible state of repair—in one place an entire riser missing, leaving only a black hole—and it was easy enough to see how the unfortunate Marcella might have come to her end there.

“Be careful, Mr. Boone!” Cal said; I told him I had no intention of being anything but, and we made the descent.

The floor was earthen, the walls of stout granite, and hardly wet. The place did not look like a rat haven at all, for there were none of the things rats like to make their nests in, such as old boxes, discarded furniture, piles of paper, and the like. We lifted our candles, gaining a small circle of light, but still able to see little. The floor had a gradual slope which seemed to run beneath the main living-room and the dining-room—i.e., to the west. It was in this direction we walked. All was in utter silence. The stench in the air grew steadily stronger, and the dark about us seemed to press like wool, as if jealous of the light which had temporarily deposed it after so many years of undisputed dominion.

At the far end, the granite walls gave way to a polished wood which seemed totally black and without reflective properties. Here the cellar

ended, leaving what seemed to be an alcove off the main chamber. It was positioned at an angle which made inspection impossible without stepping around the corner.

Calvin and I did so.

It was as if a rotten spectre of this dwelling's sinister past had risen before us. A single chair stood in this alcove, and above it, fastened from a hook in one of the stout overhead beams, was a decayed noose of hemp.

"Then it was here that he hung himself," Cal muttered. "God!"

"Yes ... with the corpse of his daughter lying at the foot of the stairs behind him."

Cal began to speak; then I saw his eyes jerked to a spot behind me; then his words became a scream.

How, Bones, can I describe the sight which fell upon our eyes? How can I tell you of the hideous tenants within our walls?

The far wall swung back, and from that darkness a face leered—a face with eyes as ebon as the Styx itself. Its mouth yawned in a toothless, agonized grin; one yellow, rotted hand stretched itself out to us. It made a hideous, mewling sound and took a shambling step forward. The light from my candle fell upon it—

And I saw the livid rope-burn about its neck!

From beyond it something else moved, something I shall dream of until the day when all dreams cease: a girl with a pallid, mouldering face and a corpse-grin; a girl whose head lolled at a lunatic angle.

They wanted us; I know it. And I know they would have drawn us into that darkness and made us their own, had I not thrown my candle directly at the thing in the partition, and followed it with the chair beneath that noose.

After that, all is confused darkness. My mind has drawn the curtain. I awoke, as I have said, in my room with Cal at my side.

If I could leave, I should fly from this house of horror with my nightdress flapping at my heels. But I cannot. I have become a pawn in a deeper, darker drama. Do not ask how I know; I only do. Mrs. Cloris was right when she spoke of blood calling to blood; and how horribly right when she spoke of those who watch and those who guard. I fear that I have wakened a Force which has slept in the tenebrous village of 'Salem's Lot for half a century, a Force which has slain my ancestors and taken them in unholy bondage as nosferatu—the Undead. And I have greater fears than these, Bones, but I still see only in part. If I knew ... if I only knew all!

CHARLES.

Postscriptum—And of course I write this only for myself; we are isolated from Preacher's Corners. I daren't carry my taint there to post this, and Calvin will not leave me. Perhaps, if God is good, this will reach you in some manner.

C.

(From the pocket journal of Calvin McCann)

Oct. 23, '50

He is stronger to-day; we talked briefly of the apparitions in the cellar; agreed they were neither hallucinations or of an ectoplasmic origin, but real. Does Mr. Boone suspect as I do, that they have gone? Perhaps; the noises are still; yet all is ominous yet, o'ercast with a dark pall. It seems we wait in the deceptive Eye of the Storm

...

Have found a packet of papers in an upstairs bedroom, lying in the bottom drawer of an old roll-top desk. Some correspondence & receipted bills lead me to believe the room was Robert Boone's. Yet

the most interesting document is a few jottings on the back of an advertisement for gentlemen's beaver hats. At the top is writ:

Blessed are the meek.

Below, the following apparent nonsense is writ:

bke dshdermthes eak

elmsoerare shamed

I believe 'tis the key of the locked and coded book in the library. The cypher above is certainly a rustic one used in the War for Independence known as the Fence-Rail. When one removes the "nulls" from the second bit of scribble, the following is obtained:

besdrteek

Iseahme

Read up and down rather than across, the result is the original quotation from the Beatitudes.

Before I dare show this to Mr. Boone, I must be sure of the book's contents ...

Oct. 24, 1850.

DEAR BONES,

An amazing occurrence—Cal, always close-mouthed until absolutely sure of himself [a rare and admirable human trait!], has found the diary of my grandfather Robert. The document was in a code which Cal himself has broken. He modestly declares that the discovery was an accident, but I suspect that perseverance and hard work had rather more to do with it.

At any rate, what a somber light it sheds on our mysteries here!

The first entry is dated June 1, 1789, the last October 27, 1789—four days before the cataclysmic disappearance of which Mrs. Cloris spoke. It tells a tale of deepening obsession—nay, of madness—and makes hideously clear the relationship between Great-uncle Philip, the town of Jerusalem's Lot, and the book which rests in that desecrated church

The town itself, according to Robert Boone, pre-dates Chapelwaite (built in 1782) and Preacher's Corners (known in those days as Preacher's Rest and founded in 1741); it was founded by a splinter group of the Puritan faith in 1710, a sect headed by a dour religious fanatic named James Boon. What a start that name gave me! That this Boon bore relation to my family can hardly be doubted, I believe. Mrs. Cloris could not have been more right in her superstitious belief that familial bloodline is of crucial importance in this matter; and I recall with terror her answer to my question about Philip and his

relationship to 'Salem's Lot. "Blood relation," said she, and I fear that it is so.

The town became a settled community built around the church where Boon preached—or held court. My grandfather intimates that he also held commerce with any number of ladies from the town, assuring them that this was God's way and will. As a result, the town became an anomaly which could only have existed in those isolated and queer days when belief in witches and the Virgin Birth existed hand in hand: an interbred, rather degenerate religious village controlled by a half-mad preacher whose twin gospels were the Bible and de Goudge's sinister Demon Dwellings; a community in which rites of exorcism were held regularly; a community of incest and the insanity and physical defects which so often accompany that sin. I suspect [and believe Robert Boone must have also] that one of Boon's bastard offspring must have left [or have been spirited away from] Jerusalem's Lot to seek his fortune to the south—and thus founded our present lineage. I do know, by my own family reckoning, that our clan supposedly originated in that part of Massachusetts which has so lately become this Sovereign State of Maine. My great-grandfather, Kenneth Boone, became a rich man as a result of the then-flourishing fur trade. It was his money, increased by time and wise investment, which built this ancestral home long after his death in 1763. His sons, Philip and Robert, built Chapelwaite. Blood calls to blood, Mrs. Cloris said. Could it be that Kenneth was born of James Boon, fled the madness of his father and his father's town, only to have his sons, all-unknowing, build the Boone home not two miles from the Boon beginnings? If 'tis true, does it not seem that some huge and invisible Hand has guided us?

According to Robert's diary, James Boon was ancient in 1789—and he must have been. Granting him an age of twenty-five in the year of the town's founding, he would have been one hundred and four, a prodigious age. The following is quoted direct from Robert Boone's diary:

August 4, 1789.

To-day for the first time I met this Man with whom my Brother has been so unhealthily taken; I must admit this Boon controls a strange Magnetism which upset me Greatly. He is a veritable Ancient, white-bearded, and dresses in a black Cassock which struck me as somehow obscene. More disturbing yet was the Fact that he was surrounded by Women, as a Sultan would be surrounded by his Harem; and P. assures me he is active yet, although at least an Octogenarian ...

The Village itself I had visited only once before, and will not visit again; its Streets are silent and filled with the Fear the old Man inspires from his Pulpit: I fear also that Like has mated with Like, as so many of the Faces are similar. It seemed that each way I turned I beheld the old Man's Visage ... all are so wan; they seem Lack-Luster, as if sucked dry of all Vitality, I beheld Eyeless and Noseless Children, Women who wept and gibbered and pointed at the Sky for no Reason, and garbled talk from the Scriptures with talk of Demons; ...

P. wished me to stay for Services, but the thought of that sinister Ancient in the Pulpit before an Audience of this Town's interbred Populace repulsed me and I made an Excuse ...

The entries preceding and following this tell of Philip's growing fascination with James Boon. On September 1, 1789, Philip was baptized into Boon's church. His brother says: "I am aghast with Amaze and Horror—my Brother has changed before my very Eyes—he even seems to grow to resemble the wretched Man."

First mention of the book occurs on July 23. Robert's diary records it only briefly: "P. returned from the smaller Village tonight with, I thought, a rather wild Visage. Would not speak until Bedtime, when he said that Boon had enquired after a Book titled Mysteries of the Worm. To please P. I promised to write Johns & Goodfellow a letter of enquiry; P. almost fawningly Grateful."

On August 12, this notation: "Rec'd two Letters in the Post to-day ... one from Johns & Goodfellow in Boston. They have Note of the

Tome in which P. has expressed an Interest. Only five Copies extant in this Country. The Letter is rather cool; odd indeed. Have known Henry Goodfellow for Years.”

August 13:

P. insanely excited by Goodfellow’s letter; refuses to say why. He would only say that Boon is exceedingly anxious to obtain a Copy. Cannot think why, since by the Title it seems only a harmless gardening Treatise ...

Am worried for Philip; he grows stranger to me Daily. I wish now we had not returned to Chapelwaite. The Summer is hot, oppressive, and filled with Omens ...

There are only two further mentions of the infamous book in Robert’s diary [he seems not to have realized the true importance of it, even at the end]. From the entry of September 4:

I have petitioned Goodfellow to act as P.’s Agent in the matter of the Purchase, although my better Judgement cries against It. What use to demur? Has he not his own Money, should I refuse? And in return I have extracted a Promise from Philip to recant this noisome Baptism ... yet he is so Hectic; nearly Feverish; I do not trust him. I am hopelessly at Sea in this Matter ...

Finally, September 16:

The Book arrived to-day, with a note from Goodfellow saying he wishes no more of my Trade ... P. was excited to an unnatural Degree; all but snatched the Book from my Hands. It is writ in bastard Latin and a Runic Script of which I can read Nothing. The Thing seemed almost warm to the Touch, and to vibrate in my Hands, as if it contained a huge Power ... I reminded P. of his Promise to Recant and he only laughed in an ugly, crazed Fashion and waved that Book in my Face, crying over and over again: “We have it! We have it! The Worm! The Secret of the Worm!”

He is now fled, I suppose to his mad Benefactor, and I have not seen him more this Day ...

Of the book there is no more, but I have made certain deductions which seem at least probable. First, that this book was, as Mrs. Cloris has said, the subject of the falling-out between Robert and Philip; second, that it is a repository of unholy incantation, possibly of Druidic origin [many of the Druidic blood-rituals were preserved in print by the Roman conquerors of Britain in the name of scholarship, and many of these infernal cook-books are among the world's forbidden literature]; third, that Boon and Philip intended to use the book for their own ends. Perhaps, in some twisted way, they intended good, but I do not believe it. I believe they had long before bound themselves over to whatever faceless powers exist beyond the rim of the Universe; powers which may exist beyond the very fabric of Time. The last entries of Robert Boone's diary lend a dim glow of approbation to these speculations, and I allow them to speak for themselves:

October 26, 1789

A terrific Babble in Preacher's Corners to-day; Frawley, the Blacksmith, seized my Arm and demanded to know "What your Brother and that mad Antichrist are into up there." Goody Randall claims there have been Signs in the Sky of great impending Disaster. A Cow has been born with two Heads.

As for Myself, I know not what impends; perhaps 'tis my Brother's Insanity. His Hair has gone Gray almost Overnight, his Eyes are great bloodshot Circles from which the pleasing light of Sanity seems to have departed. He grins and whispers, and, for some Reason of his Own, has begun to haunt our Cellar when not in Jerusalem's Lot.

The Whippoorwills congregate about the House and upon the Grass; their combined Calling from the Mist blends with the Sea into an unearthly Shriek that precludes all thought of Sleep.

October 27, 1789

Followed P. this Evening when he departed for Jerusalem's Lot, keeping a safe Distance to avoid Discovery. The cursed Whippoorwills flock through the Woods, filling all with a deathly, psycho-pompotic Chant. I dared not cross the Bridge; the Town all dark except for the Church, which was litten with a ghastly red Glare that seemed to transform the high, peak'd Windows into the Eyes of the Inferno. Voices rose and fell in a Devil's Litany, sometimes laughing, sometimes sobbing. The very Ground seem'd to swell and groan beneath me, as if it bore an awful Weight, and I fled, amaz'd and full of Terror, the hellish, screaming Cries of the Whippoorwills dinning in my ears as I ran through those shadow-riven Woods.

All tends to the Climax, yet unforeseen. I dare not sleep for the Dreams that come, yet not remain awake for what lunatic Terrors may come. The night is full of awful Sounds and I fear—

And yet I feel the urge to go again, to watch, to see. It seems that Philip himself calls me, and the old Man.

The Birds

cursed cursed cursed

Here the diary of Robert Boone ends.

Yet you must notice, Bones, near the conclusion, that he claims Philip himself seemed to call him. My final conclusion is formed by these lines, by the talk of Mrs. Cloris and the others, but most of all by those terrifying figures in the cellar, dead yet alive. Our line is yet an unfortunate one, Bones. There is a curse over us which refuses to be buried; it lives a hideous shadow-life in this house and that town. And the culmination of the cycle is drawing close again. I am the last of the Boone blood. I fear that something knows this, and that I am at the nexus of an evil endeavor beyond all sane understanding. The anniversary is All Saints' Eve, one week from today.

How shall I proceed? If only you were here to counsel me, to help me! If only you were here!

I must know all; I must return to the shunned town. May God support me!

CHARLES.

*

(From the pocket journal of Calvin McCann)

Oct. 25, '50

Mr. Boone has slept nearly all this day. His face is pallid and much thinner. I fear recurrence of his fever is inevitable.

While refreshing his water carafe I caught sight of two unmailed letters to Mr. Granson in Florida. He plans to return to Jerusalem's Lot; 'twill be the killing of him if I allow it. Dare I steal away to Preacher's Corners and hire a buggy? I must, and yet what if he wakes? If I should return and find him gone?

The noises have begun in our walls again. Thank God he still sleeps!
My mind shudders from the import of this.

Later

I brought him his dinner on a tray. He plans on rising later, and despite his evasions, I know what he plans; yet I go to Preacher's Corners. Several of the sleeping-powders prescribed to him during his late illness remained with my things; he drank one with his tea, all-unknowing. He sleeps again.

To leave him with the Things that shamble behind our walls terrifies me; to let him continue even one more day within these walls terrifies me even more greatly. I have locked him in.

God grant he should still be there, safe and sleeping, when I return with the buggy!

Still later

Stoned me! Stoned me like a wild and rabid dog! Monsters and fiends! These, that call themselves men! We are prisoners here—

The birds, the whippoorwills, have begun to gather.

October 26, 1850.

DEAR BONES,

It is nearly dusk, and I have just wakened, having slept nearly the last twenty-four hours away. Although Cal has said nothing, I suspect he put a sleeping-powder in my tea, having gleaned my intentions. He is a good and faithful friend, intending only the best, and I shall say nothing.

Yet my mind is set. Tomorrow is the day. I am calm, resolved, but also seem to feel the subtle onset of the fever again. If it is so, it must be tomorrow. Perhaps tonight would be better still; yet not even the fires of Hell itself could induce me to set foot in that village by shadowlight.

Should I write no more, may God bless and keep you, Bones.

CHARLES.

Postscriptum—The birds have set up their cry, and the horrible shuffling sounds have begun again. Cal does not think I hear, but I do.

C.

(From the pocket journal of Calvin McCann)

Oct. 27, '50

5 AM

He is impersuadable. Very well. I go with him.

November 4, 1850.

DEAR BONES,

Weak, yet lucid. I am not sure of the date, yet my almanac assures me by tide and sunset that it must be correct. I sit at my desk, where I sat when I first wrote you from Chapelwaite, and look out over the dark sea from which the last of the light is rapidly fading. I shall never see more. This night is my night; I leave it for whatever shadows be.

How it heaves itself at the rocks, this sea! It throws clouds of sea-foam at the darkling sky in banners, making the floor beneath me tremble. In the window-glass I see my reflection, pallid as any vampire's. I have been without nourishment since the twenty-seventh of October, and should have been without water, had not Calvin left the carafe beside my bed on that day.

O, Cal! He is no more, Bones. He is gone in my place, in the place of this wretch with his pipestem arms and skull face who I see reflected back in the darkened glass. And yet he may be the more fortunate; for no dreams haunt him as they have haunted me these last days—twisted shapes that lurk in the nightmare corridors of delirium. Even now my hands tremble; I have splotched the page with ink.

Calvin confronted me on that morning just as I was about to slip away—and I thinking I had been so crafty. I had told him that I had decided we must leave, and asked him if he would go to Tandrell, some ten miles distant, and hire a trap where we were less notorious. He agreed to make the hike and I watched him leave by the sea-road. When he was out of sight I quickly made myself ready, donning both coat and muffler [for the weather had turned frosty; the first touch of coming winter was on that morning's cutting breeze]. I

wished briefly for a gun, then laughed at myself for the wish. What avails guns in such a matter?

I let myself out by the pantry-way, pausing for a last look at sea and sky; for the smell of the fresh air against the putrescence I knew I should smell soon enough; for the sight of a foraging gull wheeling below the clouds.

I turned—and there stood Calvin McCann.

“You shall not go alone,” said he; and his face was as grim as ever I have seen it.

“But Calvin—” I began.

“No, not a word! We go together and do what we must, or I return you bodily to the house. You are not well. You shall not go alone.”

It is impossible to describe the conflicting emotions that swept over me: confusion, pique, gratefulness—yet the greatest of them was love.

We made our way silently past the summer house and the sundial, down the weed-covered verge and into the woods. All was dead still—not a bird sang nor a wood-cricket chirruped. The world seemed cupped in a silent pall. There was only the ever-present smell of salt, and from far away, the faint tang of woodsmoke. The woods were a blazoned riot of colour, but, to my eye, scarlet seemed to predominate all.

Soon the scent of salt passed, and another, more sinister odour took its place; that rottenness which I have mentioned. When we came to the leaning bridge which spanned the Royal, I expected Cal to ask me again to defer, but he did not. He paused, looked at that grim spire which seemed to mock the blue sky above it, and then looked at me. We went on.

We proceeded with quick yet dread footsteps to James Boon's church. The door still hung ajar from our latter exit, and the darkness within seemed to leer at us. As we mounted the steps, brass seemed to fill my heart; my hand trembled as it touched the doorhandle and pulled it. The smell within was greater, more noxious than ever.

We stepped into the shadowy anteroom and, with no pause, into the main chamber.

It was a shambles.

Something vast had been at work in there, and a mighty destruction had taken place. Pews were overturned and heaped like jackstraws. The wicked cross lay against the east wall, and a jagged hole in the plaster above it testified to the force with which it had been hurled. The oil-lamps had been ripped from their high fixtures, and the reek of whale-oil mingled with the terrible stink which pervaded the town. And down the center aisle, like a ghastly bridal path, was a trail of black ichor, mingled with sinister tendrils of blood. Our eyes followed it to the pulpit—the only untouched thing in view. Atop it, staring at us from across that blasphemous Book with glazed eyes, was the butchered body of a lamb.

“God,” Calvin whispered.

We approached, keeping clear of the slime on the floor. The room echoed back our footsteps and seemed to transmute them into the sound of gigantic laughter.

We mounted the narthex together. The lamb had not been torn or eaten; it appeared, rather, to have been squeezed until its blood-vessels had forcibly ruptured. Blood lay in thick and noisome puddles on the lectern itself, and about the base of it ... yet on the book it was transparent, and the crabbed runes could be read through it, as through coloured glass!

“Must we touch it?” Cal asked, unfaltering.

“Yes. I must have it.”

“What will you do?”

“What should have been done sixty years ago. I am going to destroy it.”

We rolled the lamb’s corpse away from the book; it struck the floor with a hideous, lolling thud. The blood-stained pages now seemed alive with a scarlet glow of their own.

My ears began to ring and hum; a low chant seemed to emanate from the walls themselves. From the twisted look on Cal’s face I knew he heard the same. The floor beneath us trembled, as if the familiar which haunted this church came now unto us, to protect its own. The fabric of sane space and time seemed to twist and crack; the church seemed filled with spectres and litten with the hell-glow of eternal cold fire. It seemed that I saw James Boon, hideous and misshapen, cavorting around the supine body of a woman, and my Grand-uncle Philip behind him, an acolyte in a black, hooded cassock, who held a knife and a bowl.

“Deum vobiscum magna vermis—”

The words shuddered and writhed on the page before me, soaked in the blood of sacrifice, prize of a creature that shambles beyond the stars—

A blind, interbred congregation swaying in mindless, daemoniac praise; deformed faces filled with hungering, nameless anticipation—

And the Latin was replaced by an older tongue, ancient when Egypt was young and the Pyramids unbuilt, ancient when this Earth still hung in an unformed, boiling firmament of empty gas:

“Gyyagin vardar Yogsoggoth! Verminis! Gyyagin! Gyyagin! Gyyagin!”

The pulpit began to rend and split, pushing upward—

Calvin screamed and lifted an arm to shield his face. The narthex trembled with a huge, tenebrous motion like a ship wracked in a gale. I snatched up the book and held it away from me; it seemed filled with the heat of the sun and I felt that I should be cindered, blinded.

“Run!” Calvin screamed. “Run!”

But I stood frozen and the alien presence filled me like an ancient vessel that had waited for years—for generations!

“Gyyagin vardar!” I screamed. “Servant of Yogsoggoth, the Nameless One! The Worm from beyond Space! Star-Eater! Blinder of Time! Verminis! Now comes the Hour of Filling, the Time of Rending! Verminis! Alyah! Alyah! Gyyagin!”

Calvin pushed me and I tottered, the church whirling before me, and fell to the floor. My head crashed against the edge of an upturned pew, and red fire filled my head—yet seemed to clear it.

I groped for the sulphur matches I had brought.

Subterranean thunder filled the place. Plaster fell. The rusted bell in the steeple pealed a choked devil’s carillon in sympathetic vibration.

My match flared. I touched it to the book just as the pulpit exploded upward in a rending explosion of wood. A huge black maw was discovered beneath; Cal tottered on the edge his hands held out, his face distended in a wordless scream that I shall hear forever.

And then there was a huge surge of gray, vibrating flesh. The smell became a nightmare tide. It was a huge outpouring of a viscid, pustulant jelly, a huge and awful form that seemed to skyrocket from the very bowels of the ground. And yet, with a sudden horrible comprehension which no man can have known, I perceived that it was but one ring, one segment, of a monster worm that had existed eyeless for years in the chambered darkness beneath that abominated church!

The book flared alight in my hands, and the Thing seemed to scream soundlessly above me. Calvin was struck glancingly and flung the length of the church like a doll with a broken neck.

It subsided—the thing subsided, leaving only a huge and shattered hole surrounded with black slime, and a great screaming, mewling sound that seemed to fade through colossal distances and was gone.

I looked down. The book was ashes.

I began to laugh, then to howl like a struck beast.

All sanity left me, and I sat on the floor with blood streaming from my temple, screaming and gibbering into those unhallowed shadows while Calvin sprawled in the far corner, staring at me with glazing, horror-struck eyes.

I have no idea how long I existed in that state. It is beyond all telling. But when I came again to my faculties, shadows had drawn long paths around me and I sat in twilight. Movement had caught my eye, movement from the shattered hole in the narthex floor.

A hand groped its way over the riven floorboards.

My mad laughter choked in my throat. All hysteria melted into numb bloodlessness.

With terrible, vengeful slowness, a wracked figure pulled itself up from darkness, and a half-skull peered at me. Beetles crawled over the fleshless forehead. A rotted cassock clung to the askew hollows of mouldered collarbones. Only the eyes lived—red, insane pits that glared at me with more than lunacy; they glared with the empty life of the pathless wastes beyond the edges of the Universe.

It came to take me down to darkness.

That was when I fled, screeching, leaving the body of my lifelong friend unheeded in that place of dread. I ran until the air seemed to burst like magma in my lungs and brain. I ran until I had gained this possessed and tainted house again, and my room, where I collapsed and have lain like a dead man until to-day. I ran because even in my crazed state, and even in the shattered ruin of that dead-yet-animated shape, I had seen the family resemblance. Yet not of Philip or of Robert, whose likenesses hang in the upstairs gallery. That rotted visage belonged to James Boon, Keeper of the Worm!

He still lives somewhere in the twisted, lightless wanderings beneath Jerusalem's Lot and Chapelwaite—and It still lives. The burning of the book thwarted It, but there are other copies.

Yet I am the gateway, and I am the last of the Boone blood. For the good of all humanity I must die ... and break the chain forever.

I go to the sea now, Bones. My journey, like my story, is at an end. May God rest you and grant you all peace.

CHARLES.

The odd series of papers above was eventually received by Mr. Everett Granson, to whom they had been addressed. It is assumed that a recurrence of the unfortunate brain fever which struck him originally following the death of his wife in 1848 caused Charles Boone to lose his sanity and murder his companion and longtime friend, Mr. Calvin McCann.

The entries in Mr. McCann's pocket journal are a fascinating exercise in forgery, undoubtedly perpetrated by Charles Boone in an effort to reinforce his own paranoid delusions.

In at least two particulars, however, Charles Boone is proved wrong. First, when the town of Jerusalem's Lot was "rediscovered" (I use the term historically, of course), the floor of the narthex, although rotted, showed no sign of explosion or huge damage. Although the ancient pews were overturned and several windows shattered, this can be

assumed to be the work of vandals from neighboring towns over the years. Among the older residents of Preacher's Corners and Tandrell there is still some idle rumor about Jerusalem's Lot (perhaps, in his day, it was this kind of harmless folk legend which started Charles Boone's mind on its fatal course), but this seems hardly relevant.

Second, Charles Boone was not the last of his line. His grandfather, Robert Boone, sired at least two bastards. One died in infancy. The second took the Boone name and located in the town of Central Falls, Rhode Island. I am the final descendant of this offshoot of the Boone line; Charles Boone's second cousin, removed by three generations. These papers have been in my committal for ten years. I offer them for publication on the occasion of my residence in the Boone ancestral home, Chapelwaite, in the hope that the reader will find sympathy in his heart for Charles Boone's poor, misguided soul. So far as I can tell, he was correct about only one thing: this place badly needs the services of an exterminator.

There are some huge rats in the walls, by the sound.

Signed,

James Robert Boone

October 2, 1971.

JHONATHAN AND THE WITCHES

Stephen King

From : First Words

Once upon a time, there was a boy named Jhonathan. He was smart, handsome, and very brave. But Jhonathan was a cobbler's son.

One day, his father said, "Jhonathan, you must go and seek your fortune. You are old enough."

Jhonathan, being a smart boy, knew he better ask the king for work.

So, he set out.

On the way, he met a rabbit who was a fairy in disguise. The scared thing was being pursued by hunters and jumped into Jhonathan's arms. When the hunters came up, Jhonathan pointed excitedly and shouted, "That way, that way!"

After the hunters had gone, the rabbit turned into a fairy and said, "You have helped me. I will give you three wishes. What are they?"

But Jhonathan could not think of anything, so the fairy agreed to give him the wishes when he needed them.

So Jhonathan kept walking until he made the kingdom without incident.

So he went to the king and asked for work.

But, as luck would have it, the king was in a very bad mood that day. So he vented his mood on Jhonathan.

"Yes, there is something you can do. On yonder mountain, there are three witches. If you can kill them, I will give you 5,000 crowns. If you cannot do it, I will have your head! You have 20 days." With this, he dismissed Jhonathan.

"Now, what am I to do?" thought Jhonathan. "Well, I shall try."

Then he remembered the three wishes granted him and set out for the mountain.

*

Now, Jhonathan was at the mountain and was just going to wish for a knife to kill the witch, when he heard a voice in his ear, "The first witch cannot be pierced. The second witch cannot be pierced or smothered. The third witch cannot be pierced or smothered and is invisible."

With this knowledge, Jhonathan looked about and saw no one. Then he remembered the fairy and smiled.

He then went in search of the first witch.

At last, he found her. She was in a cave near the foot of the mountain and was a mean-looking hag.

He remembered the fairy's words, and before the witch could do anything but give him an ugly look, he wished she would be smothered. And lo! It was done.

Now, he went higher in search of the second witch. There was a second cave higher up. There he found the second witch. He was about to wish her smothered when he remembered she could not be smothered. And then before the witch could do anything but give him an ugly look, he had wished her crushed. And lo! It was done.

Now he had only to kill the third witch and he would have the 5,000 crowns. But on the way up, he was plagued with thoughts of how?

Then he hit upon a wonderful plan.

Then he saw the last cave. He waited outside the entrance until he heard the witch's footsteps. He then picked up a couple of big rocks and wished.

He then wished the witch was a normal woman and lo! She became visible and then Jhonathan struck her dead with the rocks he had.

Jhonathan collected his 5,000 crowns, and he and his father lived happily ever after.

KEYHOLES

Stephen King

1980

The opening segment of an unfinished, unpublished short story

Conklin's first, snap, judgement was that this man, Michael Briggs, was not the sort of fellow who usually sought psychiatric help. He was dressed in dark courderoy [sic] pants, a neat blue shirt, and a sport-coat that matched—sort-of-both. His hair was long, almost shoulder-length. His face was sunburned. His large hands were chapped, scabbed in a number of places, and when he reached over the desk to shake, he felt the rasp of rough callouses.

“Hello, Mr. Briggs.”

“Hello.” Briggs smiled—a small ill-at-ease smile. His eyes moved about the room and centered on the couch—it was an eye movement Conklin had seen before, but it was not one Conklin associated with people who had been in therapy before—they knew the couch would be there. This Briggs with his work-hardened hands and sunburned face was looking for the profession's most well-known symbol—the one they saw in the movies and the magazine cartoons.

“You're a construction worker?” Conklin asked.

“Yes.” Briggs sat down carefully across the desk.

“You want to talk to me about your son?”

“Yes.”

“Jeremy.”

“Yes.”

A little silence fell. Conklin, used to using silence as his tool, was less uncomfortable with it than Briggs obviously was. Mrs. Adrian, his nurse and receptionist, had taken the call five days before, and had

said Briggs sounded distraught—a man who had control, she said, but by inches. Conklin’s speciality was not child psychology and his schedule was full, but Nancy Adrian’s assessment of that man behind the bare facts typed onto the printed form in front of him had intrigued him. Michael Briggs was forty-five, a construction worker who lived in Lovinger, New York, a town forty miles north of New York City. He was a widower. He wanted to consult with Conklin about his son, Jeremy, who was seven. Nancy had promised him a call-back by the end of the day.

“Tell him to try Milton Abrams in Albany,” Conklin had said, sliding the form back across the desk toward her.

“Can I suggest you see him once before you decide that?” Nancy Abrams [sic] asked.

Conklin looked at her, then leaned back in his chair and took out his cigarette case. Each morning he filled it with exactly ten Winston 100’s—when they were gone, he was done smoking until the next day. It was not as good as quitting; he knew that. It was just a truce he had been able to reach. Now it was the end of the day—no more patients, anyway—and he deserved a cigarette. And Nancy’s reaction to Briggs intrigued him. Such suggestions as this were not unheard of, but they were rare...and the woman’s intuitions were good.

“Why?” he asked, lighting the cigarette.

“Well, I suggested Milton Abrams—he’s close to where this man Briggs is, and he likes kids—but Briggs knows him a little—he worked on a construction crew that built a pool addition at Abrams’s country house two years ago. He says he would go to him if you still recommended it after hearing what he has to say, but that he wanted to tell a total stranger first and get an opinion. He said, ‘I’d tell a priest if I was Catholic.’”

“Um.”

“He said, ‘I just want to know what’s going on with my kid—if it’s me or what.’ He sounded aggressive about it, but he also sounded very, very scared.”

“The boy is—”

“Seven.”

“Um. And you want me to see him.”

She shrugged, then grinned. She was forty-five, but when she grinned she still looked twenty. “He sounded...concrete. As though he could tell a clear story with no shadows. Phenomena, not ephemera.”

“Quote me all you want—I still won’t raise your salary.”

She wrinkled her nose at him, then grinned. In his way he loved Nancy Abrams [sic]—once, over drinks, he had called her the Della Street of psychiatry, and she had almost hit him. But he valued her insights, and here came one now, clear and simple:

“He sounded like a man who thinks there’s something physical wrong with his son. Except he called the of a New York psychiatrist. An expensive New York psychiatrist. And he sounded scared.”

“All right. Enough.” He butted the cigarette—not without regret. “Book him next week—Tuesday or Wednesday—around four.”

And here it was, Wednesday afternoon—not around four but 4:03 on the nose—and here was Mr. Briggs sitting opposite him with his work-reddened hand folded in his lap and looking warily at Conklin.

THE KILLER
Stephen King

Suddenly he snapped awake, and realized he didn't know who he was, or what he was doing here, in a munitions factory. He couldn't remember his name, or what he had been doing. He couldn't remember anything.

The factory was a large one, with assembly lines, and conveyor belts, and the click-clack sound of parts being snapped together.

He took one of the finished guns out of a box where they were being automatically packed. Evidently he had been operating the machine, but it was stopped now.

It seemed reflex for him to pick up the gun, natural. He walked slowly over to another part of the factory, along the catwalk. There another man was packing bullets.

“Who am I?” He said slowly, hesitantly.

The man went on working. He did not look up, he made no motion that he had heard.

“Who am I? Who am I?” He screamed it, but although the whole domelike factory room echoed with his wild yells, nothing changed. The men went on working, without looking up.

He swung the gun at the bullet-packer's head. It hit with a crunch, and the packer fell forward onto his face, spilling bullets all over the floor.

He picked up one. It happened to be the right calibre (caliber?). He jammed in several more.

There was the click-click of footfalls above him. “Who am I?” he screamed up, not really expecting to get an answer.

But the man looked down, and begun to run.

He jerked the gun upward and fired twice. The man stopped, and he fell to his knees, but before he fell, he pressed a red button on the wall.

A siren began to wail, loud and clear.

“Killer! Killer! Killer” The loudspeakers screamed.

The workers did not look up. They tolled on.

He ran, trying to get away from the siren, from the loudspeakers. He saw a door, and ran toward it. It opened, and four uniformed men stood there. They fired at him with queer energy guns. The bolts sped by him. He fired three times more, and one of the uniformed men fell, his energy gun clattering to the floor.

He ran the other way, but more of them were coming from another door. He looked wildly around. They were coming in on him from all sides! He had to get away!

He climbed, higher and higher, toward the upper story. But there were more of them up there. They had him trapped. He fired until his gun was empty.

They came toward him, some from above, some from below.
“Please! Don’t shoot! Can’t you see I just want to know who I am?”

They fired, and the energy beams slammed into him. Everything went black...

They watched them slam the door on him, and then truck rolled away. “One of them turns killer every now and then,” The guard said.

“I just don’t understand it,” the second said, scratching his head.
“Take that one. That’d he say—“I just want to know who I am.” That was it. Seemed almost human. I’m beginning to think they’re making these robots too good.”

They watched the robot repair truck disappear around the curve.

THE KING FAMILY AND THE WICKED WITCH

Stephen King

EDITOR'S NOTE:

Stephen King and I went to college together. No, we were not the best of friends, but we did share a few brews together at University Motor Inn. We did work for the school newspaper at the same time. No, Steve and I are not best friends. But I sure am glad he made it. He worked hard and believed in himself. After eight million book sales, it's hard to remember him as a typically broke student. We all knew he'd make it through.

Last January, I wrote of a visit with Steve over the holiday vacation. We talked about his books -- Carrie, 'Salem's Lot, The Shining, and the soon to be released, The Stand. We talked about how Stanley Kubrick wants to do the film versions of his new books. We didn't talk about the past much though. We talked of the future - his kids, FLINT...

He gave me a copy of a story he had written for his children. We almost ran it then, but there was much concern on the staff as to how it would be received by our readers. We didn't run it.

Well, we've debated long enough. It's too cute for you not to read it. We made the final decision after spending in evening watching TV last week. There were at least 57 more offensive things said, not to mention all the murders, rapes, and wars... we decided to let you be the judge. If some of you parents might be offended by the word 'fart,' you'd better not read it - but don't stop your kids, they'll love it!

On the Secret Road in the town of Bridgton, there lived a wicked witch. Her name was Witch Hazel.

How wicked was Witch Hazel? Well, once she had changed a Prince from the Kingdom of New Hampshire into a woodchuck. She turned a little kid's favorite kitty into whipped cream.

And she liked to turn mommies' baby carriages into big piles of horse-turds while the mommies and their babies were shopping.

She was a mean old witch.

The King family lived by Long Lake In Bridgton, Maine. They were nice people.

There was a daddy who wrote books. There was a mommy who wrote poems and cooked food. There was a girl named Naomi who was six years old. She went to school. She was tall and straight and brown. There was a boy named Joe who was four years old. He went to school too, although he only went two days a week. He was short and blonde with hazel eyes.

And Witch Hazel hated the Kings more than anyone else. In Bridgton, Witch Hazel especially hated the Kings, because they were the happiest family in Bridgton. She would peer out at their bright red Cadillac when it passed her dirty, falling down haunted house with mean hateful eyes. Witch Hazel hated bright colors. She would see the mommy reading Joe a story on the bench outside the drug store and her bony fingers would itch to cast a spell. She would see the daddy talking to Naomi on their way home from school in the red Cadillac or the blue truck, and she would want to reach out her awful arms and catch them and pop into her witches cauldron.

And finally, she cast her spell.

One day, Witch Hazel put on a nice dress. She went to the Bridgton Beauty Parlor and had her hair permed. She put on a pair of Rockers from Fayva (an East Coast shoe store chain).

She looked almost pretty.

She bought some of daddy's books at the Bridgton Pharmacy. Then she drove out to the Kings' house and pretended she wanted daddy to sign his books. She drove in a car. She could have ridden her broom, but she didn't want the Kings to know she was a witch.

And in her handbag were four magic cookies. Four evil, magic cookies.

Four cookies! Four cookies full of black magic!

The banana cookie, the milk bottle cookie, and worst of all, two crying cookies. Don't let her in, Kings! Oh, please, don't let her in!

But she looked so nice... and she was smiling... and she had the daddy's books.

Soooo... they let her in. Daddy signed her book and mommy offered her tea. Naomi asked if she would like to see her room.

Joe asked if she would like to see him write his name. Witch Hazel smiled and smiled. It almost broke her face to smile.

"You have been so nice to me that I would like to be nice to you," said Witch Hazel. "I have baked four cookies. A cookie for each King."

"Cookies!" shouted Naomi. "Hooray!"

"Cookies!" shouted Joe. "Cookies!"

"That was awfully nice," said Mommy. "You shouldn't have."

"But we're glad you did," said the daddy.

They took the cookies. Witch Hazel smiled. And when she was in her car, she shrieked and cackled with laughter. She laughed so hard that her cat, Basta, hissed and shrank away from her. Witch Hazel was happy when her wicked plan succeeded.

"I will like this banana cookie," Daddy said. He ate it and what a terrible thing happened.

His nose turned into a banana and when he went down to his office to work on his book much later that terrible day, the only word he

could write was banana.

It was Witch Hazel's wicked magic Banana Cookie.

Poor Daddy!

"I will like this milk-bottle cookie," Mommy said. "What a funny name for a cookie. She ate it, and the evil cookie turned her hands into milk-bottles.

What an awful thing. Could she fix the food with milk-bottles for hands? Could she type? No!

She could not even pick her nose.

Poor Mommy!

"We will like these crying cookies," said Naomi, and Joe said, "What a funny name for a cookie."

They each ate one and they began to cry! They cried and cried and could not stop! The tears streamed out of their eyes. There were puddles on the rug. Their clothes got all wet.

They couldn't eat good meals, because they were crying. They even cried in their sleep.

It was all because of Witch Hazel's evil crying cookies.

The Kings were not the happiest family in Bridgton anymore. Now they were the saddest family in Bridgton. Mommy didn't want to go shopping, because everybody laughed at her milk-bottle hands. Daddy couldn't write books, because all the words came out banana and it was hard to see the typewriter, anyway, because his nose was a banana. And Joe and Naomi just cried and cried and cried.

Witch Hazel was as happy as wicked witch ever gets. It was her greatest spell.

One day, about a month after the horrible day of the four cookies, Mommy was walking in the woods. It was about the only thing she liked to do with her milk-bottle hands. And in the woods, she found a woodchuck caught in a trap.

Poor thing! It was almost dead from fright and pain. There was blood all over the trap.

“Poor old thing,” Mommy said. “I’ll get you out of that nasty trap.” But could she open the trap with milk bottles for hands? No.

So she ran for Daddy and Naomi and Joe. Fifteen minutes later, all four Kings were standing around the poor bloody woodchuck in the trap. The Kings were not bloody, but what a strange, sad sight they were! Daddy had a banana in the middle of his face. Mommy had milk-bottle hands. And the two children could not stop crying.

“I think we can get him out,” Daddy said. “Yes,” Mommy said. “I think we can get him out if we all work together. And I will start. I will give the poor thing a drink of milk from my hands.”

And she gave him a drink. She felt a little better. Naomi and Joe were trying to open the jaws of the cruel trap, while the woodchuck looked at them hopefully. But the trap would not open. It was an old trap, and its hinges and mean sharp teeth were clogged with rust.

“It will not open,” Naomi said and cried harder than ever. “No. it will not open at all!”

“I can’t open it,” Joe said and cried his eyes out. The tears streamed out of his eyes and down his cheeks. “I can’t open it either.”

And Daddy said, “I know what to do, I think.” Daddy bent over the hinge of the trap with his funny banana nose. He squeezed the end of it with both hands. Ouch! It hurt! But out came six drops of banana oil. They fell onto the rusty hinge of the trap, one drop at a time.

“Now, try,” said Daddy.

This time the trap opened easily.

“Hooray!” shouted Naomi.

“He’s out! He’s out!” shouted Joe.

“We have all worked together.” said Mommy. “I gave the woodchuck milk. Daddy oiled the trap with his banana nose. And Naomi and Joe opened the trap to let him out.”

And then they all felt a little better, for the first time since Witch Hazel cast her wicked spell.

And have you guessed yet? Oh, I bet you have. The woodchuck was really not a woodchuck at all. He was the Prince of the Kingdom of New Hampshire who had also fallen under the spell of Wicked Witch Hazel.

When the trap was opened, the spell was broken, and instead of a woodchuck, a radiant Prince in a Brooks Brothers suit stood before the King family.

“You have been kind to me, even in your own sadness.” said the Prince, “and that is the most difficult thing of all. And so through the power vested in me, the spell of the wicked witch is broken and you are free!”

Oh, happy day!

Daddy’s banana nose disappeared and was replaced with his own nose, which was not too handsome but certainly better than a slightly squeezed banana. Mommy’s milk-bottles were replaced with her own pink hands.

Best of all, Naomi and Joe stopped crying. They began to smile. Then they began to laugh!

Then the Prince of New Hampshire began to laugh. Then Daddy and Mommy began to laugh. The Prince danced with Mommy and Naomi

and carried Joe on his shoulders. He shook hands with Daddy and said he had admired Daddy's books before he had been turned into a woodchuck.

All five of them went back to the nice house by the lake, and Mommy made tea for everyone. They all sat at the table and drank their tea.

"We ought to do something about that witch," Mommy said. "So she can't do something wicked to someone else."

"I think that is true," said the Prince. "And it so happens that I know one spell myself. It will get rid of her."

He whispered to Daddy. He whispered to Mommy. He whispered to Naomi and Joe, and they nodded and giggled and laughed.

That very afternoon, they drove up to Witch Hazel's haunted house on the Secret Road.

Basta, the cat, looked at them with his big yellow eyes, hissed, and ran away.

They did not drive up in the Kings' pretty red Cadillac or in the Prince's Mist Grey Mercedes 390SL. They drove up in an old, old car that wheezed and blew oil.

They were wearing old clothes with fleas jumping out of them. They wanted to look poor to fool Witch Hazel.

They went up and the Prince knocked on the door.

Witch Hazel ripped the door open. She was wearing a tall, black hat. There was a wart on the end of her nose. She smelled of frog's blood and owls' hearts and ant's eyeballs, because she had been whipping up a horrible brew to make more black magic cookies.

"What do you want?" she rasped at them. She didn't recognize them in their old clothes.

“Get out. I’m busy!”

“We are a poor family on our way to California to pick oranges,” the Prince said. “What has that to do with me?” the witch shrieked. “I ought to turn you into oranges for disturbing me! Now, good day!”

She tried to close the door, but the Prince put his foot in it. Naomi and Joe shoved it back open.

“We have something to sell you,” Daddy said. “It is the wickedest cookie in the world. If you eat it, it will make you the wickedest witch in the world, even wickeder than Witch Indira in India. We will sell it to you for one thousand dollars.”

“I don’t buy what I can steal!” Witch Hazel shrieked. She snatched the cookie and gobbled it down. “Now I will be the wickedest witch in the whole world!” And she cackled so loudly that the shutters fell off her house.

But the Prince wasn’t sorry. He was glad. And Mommy wasn’t sorry, because she had baked the cookie. And Daddy wasn’t sorry, because he had gone to New Hampshire to get the 300 year-old baked beans that went into the cookie.

Naomi and Joe? They just laughed and laughed, because they knew that it wasn’t a Wicked Cookie that Witch Hazel had just eaten.

It was a Farting Cookie.

Witch Hazel felt something funny.

She felt it building in her tummy and her behind. It felt like a lot of gas. It felt like an explosion looking for a place to happen.

“What have you done to me!” she shrieked. “Who are you?”

“I am the Prince of New Hampshire,” the Prince cried, raising his face so she could see it clearly for the first time.

“And we are the Kings,” Daddy said. “Shame on you for turning my wife’s hands into milk bottles! Double shame on you for turning my nose into a banana. Triple shame on you for making my Naomi and my Joe cry all day and all night. But we’ve fixed you now, Wicked Witch Hazel!”

“You won’t be casting any more spells,” said Naomi. “Because you are going to the moon!”

“I’m not going to the moon!” Witch Hazel screeched so loudly that the chimney fell on the lawn. “I’m going to turn you all into cheap antiques that not even tourists will buy!”

“No, you’re not,” said Joe, “because you ate the magic cookie. You ate the magic farting cookie.”

The wicked witch foamed and frothed. She tried to cast her spell. But it was too late; the Farting Cookie had done its work. She felt a big fart coming on. She squeezed her butt to keep it in until she could cast her spell, but it was too late.

WHONK! went the fart. It blew all the fur off her cat, Basta. It blew in the windows. And Witch Hazel went up in the air like a rocket.

“Get me down!” Witch Hazel screamed. Witch Hazel came down all right. She came down on her fanny. And when she came down, she let another fart.

DRRRRRRAPPP! went the fart. It was so windy, it knocked down the witch’s home and the Bridgton Trading Post. You could see Dom Cardozl sitting on the toilet where he had been pooping. It was all that was left of the Trading Post except for one bureau that had been made in Grand Rapids.

The witch went flying up into the sky. She flew up and up until she was as small as a speck of coal dust.

“Get me down,” Witch Hazel called, sounding very small and far away.

“You’ll come down all right,” Naomi said.

Down came Witch Hazel.

“Yeeeeaaahhhh,” she screamed falling out of the sky.

Just before she could hit the ground and be crushed (as maybe she deserved), she cut another fart, the biggest one of all, and the smell was like two million egg salad sandwiches. And the sound was KA-HIONK!!!

Up she went again.

“Goodbye, Witch Hazel,” yelled Mommy waving. “Enjoy the moon.”

“Hope you stay a long time,” called Joe.

Up and up went Witch Hazel until she was out of sight. During the news that night, the Kings and the Prince of New Hampshire heard Barbara Walters report that a UFW had been seen by a 747 airplane over Bridgton, Maine - an unidentified flying witch.

And that was the end of wicked Witch Hazel. She is on the moon now, and probably still farting.

And the Kings are the happiest family in Bridgton again. They often exchange visits with the Prince of New Hampshire, who is now the King. Daddy writes books and never uses the word banana. Mommy uses her hands more than ever. And Joe and Naomi King hardly ever cry.

As for Witch Hazel, she was never seen again, and considering those terrible farts she was letting when she left, that is probably a good thing!

STEPHEN KING



LT'S THEORY OF PETS



COMPACT
DISC

A LIVE READING BY THE AUTHOR

AUDIO

L.T.'S THEORY OF PETS

Stephen King

My friend L.T. hardly ever talks about how his wife disappeared, or how she's probably dead, just another victim of the Axe Man, but he likes to tell the story of how she walked out on him. He does it with just the right roll of the eyes, as if to say, "She fooled me, boys-right, good, and proper!" He'll sometimes tell the story to a bunch of men sitting on one of the loading docks behind the plant and eating their lunches, him eating his lunch, too, the one he fixed for himself - no Lulubelle back at home to do it for him these days. They usually laugh when he tells the story, which always ends with L.T.'s Theory of Pets. Hell, I usually laugh. It's a funny story, even if you do know how it turned out. Not that any of us do, not completely.

"I punched out at four, just like usual," L.T. will say, "then went down to Deb's Den for a couple of beers, just like most days. Had a game of pinball, then went home. That was where things stopped being just like usual. When a person gets up in the morning, he doesn't have the slightest idea how much may have changed in his life by the time he lays his head down again that night. 'Ye know not the day or the hour,' the Bible says. I believe that particular verse is about dying, but it fits everything else, boys. Everything else in this world. You just never know when you're going to bust a fiddle-string.

"When I turn into the driveway I see the garage door's open and the little Subaru she brought to the marriage is gone, but that doesn't strike me as immediately peculiar. She was always driving off someplace - to a yard sale or someplace - and leaving the goddam garage door open. I'd tell her, 'Lulu, if you keep doing that long enough, someone'll eventually take advantage of it. Come in and take a rake or a bag of peat moss or maybe even the power mower. Hell, even a Seventh Day Adventist fresh out of college and doing his merit badge rounds will steal if you put enough temptation in his way, and that's the worst kind of person to tempt, because they feel it more than the rest of us.' Anyway, she'd always say, 'I'll do better, L.T., try, anyway, I really will, honey.' And she did do better, just backslid from time to time like any ordinary sinner.

“I park off to the side so she’ll be able to get her car in when she comes back from wherever, but I close the garage door. Then I go in by way of the kitchen. I check the mailbox, but it’s empty, the mail inside on the counter, so she must have left after eleven, because he don’t come until at least then. The mailman, I mean.

“Well, Lucy’s right there by the door, crying in that way Siamese have - I like that cry, think it’s sort of cute, but Lulu always hated it, maybe because it sounds like a baby’s cry and she didn’t want anything to do with babies. ‘What would I want with a rugmonkey?’ she’d say.

“Lucy being at the door wasn’t anything out of the ordinary, either. That cat loved my ass. Still does. She’s two years old now. We got her at the start of the last year we were married. Right around. Seems impossible to believe Lulu’s been gone a year, and we were only together three to start with. But Lulubelle was the type to make an impression on you. Lulubelle had what I have to call star quality. You know who she always reminded me of? Lucille Ball. Now that I think of it, I guess that’s why I named the cat Lucy, although I don’t remember thinking it at the time. It might have been what you’d call a subconscious association. She’d come into a room-Lulubelle, I mean, not the cat-and just light it up somehow. A person like that, when they’re gone you can hardly believe it, and you keep expecting them to come back.

“Meanwhile, there’s the cat. Her name was Lucy to start with, but Lulubelle hated the way she acted so much that she started calling her Screwlucy, and it kind of stuck. Lucy wasn’t nuts, though, she only wanted to be loved. Wanted to be loved more than any other pet I ever had in my life, and I’ve had quite a few.

“Anyway, I come in the house and pick up the cat and pet her a little and she climbs up onto my shoulder and sits there, purring and talking her Siamese talk. I check the mail on the counter, put the bills in the basket, then go over to the fridge to get Lucy something to eat. I always keep a working can of cat food in there, with a piece of tinfoil over the top. Saves having Lucy get excited and digging her

claws into my shoulder when she hears the can opener. Cats are smart, you know. Much smarter than dogs. They're different in other ways, too. It might be that the biggest division in the world isn't men and women but folks who like cats and folks who like dogs. Did any of you pork-packers ever think of that?

"Lulu bitched like hell about having an open can of cat food in the fridge, even one with a piece of foil over the top, said it made everything in there taste like old tuna, but I wouldn't give in on that one. On most stuff I did it her way, but that cat food business was one of the few places where I really stood up for my rights. It didn't have anything to do with the cat food, anyway. It had to do with the cat. She just didn't like Lucy, that was all. Lucy was her cat, but she didn't like it.

"Anyway, I go over to the fridge, and I see there's a note on it, stuck there with one of the vegetable magnets. It's from Lulubelle. Best as I can remember, it goes like this:

" 'Dear L.T. - I am leaving you, honey. Unless you come home early, I will be long gone by the time you get this note. I don't think you will get home early, you have never got home early in all the time we have been married, but at least I know you'll get this almost as soon as you get in the door, because the first thing you always do when you get home isn't to come see me and say, "Hi sweet girl I'm home" and give me a kiss but go to the fridge and get whatever's left of the last nasty can of Calo you put in there and feed Screwlucy. So at least I know you won't just go upstairs and get shocked when you see my Elvis Last Supper picture is gone and my half of the closet is mostly empty and think we had a burglar who likes ladies' dresses (unlike some who only care about what is under them).

" 'I get irritated with you sometimes, honey, but I still think you're sweet and kind and nice, you will always be my little maple duff and sugar dumpling, no matter where our paths may lead. It's just that I have decided I was never cut out to be a Spam-packer's wife. I don't mean that in any conceited way, either. I even called the Psychic Hotline last week as I struggled with this decision, lying awake night

after night (and listening to you snore, boy, I don't mean to hurt your feelings but have you ever got a snore on you), and I was given this message: "A broken spoon may become a fork." I didn't understand that at first, but I didn't give up on it. I am not smart like some people (or like some people think they are smart), but I work at things. The best mill grinds slow but exceedingly fine, my mother used to say, and I ground away at this like a pepper mill in a Chinese restaurant, thinking late at night while you snored and no doubt dreamed of how many pork-snouts you could get in a can of Spam. And it came to me that saying about how a broken spoon can become a fork is a beautiful thing to behold. Because a fork has tines. And those tines may have to separate, like you and me must now have to separate, but still they have the same handle. So do we. We are both human beings, L.T., capable of loving and respecting one another. Look at all the fights we had about Frank and Screwlucy, and still, we mostly managed to get along. Yet the time has now come for me to seek my fortune along different lines from yours, and to poke into the great roast of life with a different point from yours. Besides, I miss my mother."

(I can't say for sure if all this stuff was really in the note L.T. found on his fridge; it doesn't seem entirely likely, I must admit, but the men listening to his story would be rolling in the aisles by this point - or around on the loading dock, at least-and it did sound like Lulubelle, that I can testify to.)

" 'Please do not try to follow me, L.T., and although I'll be at MY mother's and I know you have that number, I would appreciate you not calling but waiting for me to call you. In time I will, but in the meanwhile I have a lot of thinking to do, and although I have gotten on a fair way with it, I'm not "out of the fog" yet. I suppose I will be asking you for a divorce eventually, and think it is only fair to tell you SO. I have never been one to hold out false hope, believing it better to tell the truth and smoke out the devil." Please remember that what I do I do in love, not in hatred and resentment. And please remember what was told to me and what I now tell to you: a broken spoon may be a fork in disguise. All my love, Lulubelle Simms.' "

L.T. would pause there, letting them digest the fact that she had gone back to her maiden name, and giving his eyes a few of those patented L.T. DeWitt rolls. Then he'd tell them the P.S. she'd tacked on the note.

"I have taken Frank with me and left Screwluca for you. I thought this would probably be the way you'd want it. Love, Lulu." "

If the DeWitt family was a fork, Screwluca and Frank were the other two tines on it. If there wasn't a fork (and speaking for myself, I've always felt marriage was more like a knife - the dangerous kind with two sharp edges), Screwluca and Frank could still be said to sum up everything that went wrong in the marriage of L.T. and Lulubelle. Because, think of it - although Lulubelle bought Frank for L.T. (first wedding anniversary) and L.T. bought Luca, soon to be Screwluca, for Lulubelle (second wedding anniversary), they each wound up with the other's pets when Lulu walked out on the marriage.

"She got me that dog because I liked the one on Frasier," L.T. would say. "That kind of dog's a terrier, but I don't remember now what they call that kind. A Jack something. Jack Sprat? Jack Robinson? Jack Shit? You know how a thing like that gets on the tip of your tongue?"

Somebody would tell him that Frasier's dog was a Jack Russell terrier and L.T. would nod emphatically.

"That's right!" he'd exclaim. "Sure! Exactly! That's what Frank was, all right, a Jack Russell terrier. But you want to know the cold hard truth? An hour from now, that will have slipped away from me again - it'll be there in my brain, but like something behind a rock. An hour from now, I'll be going to myself, 'What did that guy say Frank was? A Jack Handle terrier? A Jack Rabbit terrier? That's close, I know that's close... 'And so on. Why? I think because I just hated that little fuck so much. That barking rat. That fur-covered shit machine. I hated it from the first time I laid eyes on it. There. It's out and I'm glad. And do you know what? Frank felt the same about me. It was hate at first sight.

“You know how some men train their dog to bring them their slippers? Frank wouldn’t bring me my slippers, but he’d puke in them. Yes. The first time he did it, I stuck my right foot right into it. It was like sticking your foot into warm tapioca with extra big lumps in it. Although I didn’t see him, my theory is that he waited outside the bedroom door until he saw me coming - fucking lurked outside the bedroom door - then went in, unloaded in my right slipper, then hid under the bed to watch the fun. I deduce that on the basis of how it was still warm. Fucking dog. Man’s best friend, my ass. I wanted to take it to the pound after that, had the leash out and everything, but Lulu threw an absolute shit fit. You would have thought she’d come into the kitchen and caught me trying to give the dog a drain-cleaner enema.

” ‘If you take Frank to the pound, you might as well take me to the pound,’ she says, starting to cry. ‘That’s all you think of him, and that’s all you think of me. Honey, all we are to you is nuisances you’d like to be rid of. That’s the cold hard truth.’ I mean, oh my bleeding piles, on and on.

” ‘He puked in my slipper,’ I says.

‘The dog puked in his slipper so off with his head,’ she says. ‘Oh, sugarpie, if only you could hear yourself!’

” ‘Hey,’ I say, ‘you try sticking your bare foot into a slipper filled with dog puke and see how you like it.’ Getting mad by then, you know.

“Except getting mad at Lulu never did any good. Most times, if you had the king, she had the ace. If you had the ace, she had a trump. Also, the woman would fucking escalate. If something happened and I got irritated, she’d get pissed. If I got pissed, she’d get mad. If I got mad, she’d go fucking Red Alert Defcon I and empty the missile silos. I’m talking scorched flicking earth. Mostly it wasn’t worth it. Except almost every time we’d get into a fight, I’d forget that.

“She goes, ‘Oh dear. Maple duff stuck his wittle footie in a wittle spit-up.’ I tried to get in there, tell her that wasn’t right, spit-up is like

drool, spit-up doesn't have these big flicking chunks in it, but she won't let me get a word out. By then she's over in the passing lane and cruising, all pumped up and ready to teach school.

'Let me tell you something, honey,' she goes, 'a little drool in your slipper is very minor stuff. You men slay me. Try being a woman sometimes, okay? Try always being the one that ends up laying with the small of your back in that come-spot, or the one that goes to the toilet in the middle of the night and the guy's left the goddam ring up and you splash your can right down into this cold water. Little midnight skindiving. The toilet probably hasn't been flushed, either, men think the Urine Fairy comes by around two a.m. and takes care of that, and there you are, sitting crack-deep in piss, and all at once you realize your feet're in it, too, you're paddling around in Lemon Squirt because, although guys think they're dead-eye Dick with that thing, most can't shoot for shit, drunk or sober they gotta wash the goddam floor all around the toilet before they can even start the main event. All my life I've been living with this, honey - a father, four brothers, one ex-husband, plus a few roommates that are none of your business at this late date-and you're ready to send poor Frank off to the gas factory because just one time he happened to reflux a little drool into your slipper.'

" 'My fur-lined slipper,' I tell her, but it's just a little shot back over my shoulder. One thing about living with Lulu, and maybe to my credit, I always knew when I was beat. When I lost, it was fucking decisive. One thing I certainly wasn't going to tell her even though I knew it for a fact was that the dog puked in my slipper on purpose, the same way that he peed on my underwear on purpose if I forgot to put it in the hamper before I went off to work. She could leave her bras and pants scattered around from hell to Harvard - and did - but if I left so much as a pair of athletic socks in the corner, I'd come home and find that fucking Jack Shit terrier had given it a lemonade shower. But tell her that? She would have been booking me time with a psychiatrist. She would have been doing that even though she knew it was true. Because then she might have had to take the stuff I was saying seriously, and she didn't want to. She loved Frank, you see,

and Frank loved her. They were like Romeo and Juliet or Rocky and Adrian.

“Frank would come to her chair while we were watching TV, lie down on the floor beside her, and put his muzzle on her shoe. Just lie there like that all night, looking up at her, all soulful and loving and with his butt pointed in my direction so if he should have to blow a little gas, I’d get the full benefit of it. He loved her and she loved him. Why? Christ knows. Love’s a mystery to everyone except the poets, I guess, and nobody sane can understand a thing they write about it. I don’t think most of them can understand it themselves on the rare occasions when they wake up and smell the coffee.

“But Lulubelle never gave me that dog so she could have it, let’s get that one thing straight. I know that some people do stuff like that - a guy’ll give his wife a trip to Miami because he wants to go there, or a wife’ll give her husband a NordicTrack because she thinks he ought to do something about his gut - but this wasn’t that kind of deal. We were crazy in love with each other at the beginning; I know I was with her, and I’d stake my life she was with me. No, she bought that dog for me because I always laughed so hard at the one on Frasier. She wanted to make me happy, that’s all. She didn’t know Frank was going to take a shine to her, or her to him, no more than she knew the dog was going to dislike me so much that throwing up in one of my slippers or chewing the bottoms of the curtains on my side of the bed would be the high point of his day.”

L.T. would look around at the grinning men, not grinning himself, but he’d give his eyes that knowing, long - suffering roll, and they’d laugh again, in anticipation. Me too, likely as not, in spite of what I knew about the Axe Man.

“I haven’t ever been hated before,” he’d say, “not by man or beast, and it unsettled me a lot. It unsettled me bigtime. I tried to make friends with Frank - first for my sake, then for the sake of her that gave him to me - but it didn’t work. For all I know, he might’ve tried to make friends with me ... with a dog, who can tell? If he did, it didn’t work for him, either. Since then I’ve read-in ‘Dear Abby,’ I think it was

- that a pet is just about the worst present you can give a person, and I agree. I mean, even if you like the animal and the animal likes you, think about what that kind of gift says. 'Say, darling, I'm giving you this wonderful present, it's a machine that eats at one end and shits out the other, it's going to run for fifteen years, give or take, merry fucking Christmas.' But that's the kind of thing you only think about after, more often than not. You know what I mean?

"I think we did try to do our best, Frank and I. After all, even though we hated each other's guts, we both loved Lulubelle. That's why, I think, that although he'd sometimes growl at me if I sat down next to her on the couch during Murphy Brown or a movie or something, he never actually bit. Still, it used to drive me crazy. Just the fucking nerve of it, that little bag of hair and eyes daring to growl at me. 'Listen to him,' I'd say, 'he's growling at me.'

"She'd stroke his head the way she hardly ever stroked mine, unless she'd had a few, and say it was really just a dog's version of purring. That he was just happy to be with us, having a quiet evening at home. I'll tell you something, though, I never tried patting him when she wasn't around. I'd feed him sometimes, and I never gave him a kick (although I was tempted a few times, I'd be a liar if I said different), but I never tried patting him. I think he would have snapped at me, and then we would have gotten into it. Like two guys living with the same pretty girl, almost. Menage a trois is what they call it in the Penthouse Forum. Both of us love her and she loves both of us, but as time goes by, I start realizing that the scales are tipping and she's starting to love Frank a little more than me. Maybe because Frank never talks back and never pukes in her slippers and with Frank the goddam toilet ring is never an issue, because he goes outside. Unless, that is, I forget and leave a pair of my shorts in the corner or under the bed."

At this point L.T. would likely finish off the iced coffee in his thermos, crack his knuckles, or both. It was his way of saying the first act was over and Act Two was about to commence.

“So then one day, a Saturday, Lulu and I are out to the mall. just walking around, like people do. You know. And we go by Pet Notions, up by J.C. Penney, and there’s a whole crowd of people in front of the display window. ‘Oh, let’s see,’ Lulu says, so we go over and work our way to the front.

“It’s a fake tree with bare branches and fake grass - Astroturf all around it. And there are these Siamese kittens, half a dozen of them chasing each other around, climbing the tree, batting each other’s ears.

‘Oh ain’ dey jus’ da key-youtes ones!’ Lulu says. ‘Oh ain’t dey jus’ the key-youtest wittle babies! Look, honey, look!’

‘I’m lookin’,’ I says, and what I’m thinking is that I just found what I wanted to get Lulu for our anniversary. And that was a relief. I wanted it to be something extra special, something that would really bowl her over, because things had been quite a bit short of great between us during the last year. I thought about Frank, but I wasn’t too worried about him; cats and dogs always fight in the cartoons, but in real life they usually get along, that’s been my experience. They usually get along better than people do. Especially when it’s cold outside.

“To make a long story just a little bit shorter, I bought one of them and gave it to her on our anniversary. Got it a velvet collar, and tucked a little card under it. ‘HELLO, I am LUCY! the card said. ‘I come with love from L.T.! Happy second anniversary!’

“You probably know what I’m going to tell you now, don’t you? Sure. It was just like goddamn Frank the terrier all over again, only in reverse. At first I was as happy as a pig in shit with Frank, and Lulubelle was as happy as a pig in shit with Lucy at first. Held her up over her head, talking that baby-talk to her, ‘Oh yookit you, oh yookit my wittle pwecious, she so key-yout,’ and so on and so on ... until Lucy let out a yowl and batted at the end of Lulubelle’s nose. With her claws out, too. Then she ran away and hid under the kitchen table. Lulu laughed it off, like it was the funniest thing she’d ever had

happen to her, and as key-yout as anything else a little kitten might do, but I could see she was miffed.

“Right then Frank came in. He’d been sleeping up in our room-at the foot of her side of the bed-but Lulu’d let out a little shriek when the kitten batted her nose, so he came down to see what the fuss was about.

“He spotted Lucy under the table right away and walked toward heir, sniffing the linoleum where she’d been.

‘Stop them, honey, stop them, L.T., they’re going to get into it,’ Lulubelle says. ‘Frank’ll kill her.’

‘Just let them alone a minute,’ I says. ‘See what happens.’

Lucy humped up her back the way cats do, but stood her ground and’, watched him come. Lulu started forward, wanting to get in between them in spite of what I’d said (listening up wasn’t exactly one of Lulu’s strong points), but I took her wrist and held her back. It’s best to let them work it out between them, if you can. Always best. It’s quicker.

“Well, Frank got to the edge of the table, poked his nose under, and started this low rumbling way back in his throat. ‘Let me go, L.T. I got to get her,’ Lulubelle says, ‘Frank’s growling at her.’

‘No, he’s not,’ I say, ‘he’s just purring. I recognize it from all the times he’s purred at me.’

“She gave me a look that would just about have boiled water, but didn’t say anything. The only times in the three years we were married that I got the last word, it was always about Frank and Screwlucy. Strange but true. Any other subject, Lulu could talk rings around me. But when it came to the pets, it seemed she was always fresh out of comebacks. Used to drive her crazy.

“Frank poked his head under the table a little farther, and Lucy batted his nose the way she’d batted Lulubelle’s - only when she batted Frank, she did it without popping her claws. I had an idea Frank would go for her, but he didn’t. He just kind of whoofed and turned away. Not scared, more like he’s thinking, ‘Oh, okay, so that’s what that’s about.’ Went back into the living room and laid down in front of the TV.

“And that was all the confrontation there ever was between them. They divvied up the territory pretty much the way that Lulu and I divvied it up that last year we spent together, when things were getting bad; the bedroom belonged to Frank and Lulu, the kitchen belonged to me and Lucy - only by Christmas, Lulubelle was calling her Screwlucy - and the living room was neutral territory. The four of us spent a lot of evenings there that last year, Screwlucy on my lap, Frank with his muzzle on Lulu’s shoe, us humans on the couch, Lulubelle reading a book and me watching Wheel of Fortune or Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous, which Lulubelle always called Lifestyles of the Rich and Topless.

“The cat wouldn’t have a thing to do with her, not from day one. Frank, every now and then you could get the idea Frank was at least trying to get along with me. His nature would always get the better of him in the end and he’d chew up one of my sneakers or take another leak on my underwear, but every now and then it did seem like he was putting forth an effort. Lap my hand, maybe give me a grin. Usually if I had a plate of something he wanted a bite of.

“Cats are different, though. A cat won’t curry favor even if it’s in their best interests to do so. A cat can’t be a hypocrite. If more preachers were like cats, this would be a religious country again. If a cat likes you, you know. If she doesn’t, you know that, too. Screwlucy never liked Lulu, not one whit, and she made it clear from the start. If I was getting ready to feed her, Lucy’d rub around my legs, purring, while I spooned it up and dumped it in her dish. If Lulu fed her, Luey’d sit all the way across the kitchen, in front of the fridge, watching her. And wouldn’t go to the dish until Lulu had cleared off. It drove Lulu crazy.

'That cat thinks she's the Queen of Sheba,' she'd say. By then she'd given up the baby-talk. Given up picking Lucy up, too. If she did, she'd get her wrist scratched, more often than not.

"Now, I tried to pretend I liked Frank and Lulu tried to pretend she liked Lucy, but Lulu gave up pretending a lot sooner than I did. I guess maybe neither one of them, the cat or the woman, could stand being a hypocrite. I don't think Lucy was the only reason Lulu left hell, I know it wasn't - but I'm sure Lucy helped Lulubelle make her final decision. Pets can live a long time, you know. So the present I got her for our second was really the straw that broke the camel's back. Tell that to 'Dear Abby'!

"The cat's talking was maybe the worst, as far as Lulu was concerned. She couldn't stand it. One night Lulubelle says to me, 'If that cat doesn't stop yowling, L.T., I think I'm going to hit it with an encyclopedia.'

" 'That's not yowling,' I said, 'that's chatting.'

" 'Well,' Lulu says, - 'I wish it would stop chatting.'

"And right about then, Lucy jumped up into my lap and she did shut up. She always did, except for a little low purring, way back in her throat. Purring that really was purring. I scratched her between her ears like she likes, and I happened to look up. Lulu turned her eyes back down on her book, but before she did, what I saw was real hate. Not for me. For Screwlucy. Throw an encyclopedia at it? She looked like she'd like to stick the cat between two encyclopedias and just kind of clap it to death.

Sometimes Lulu would come into the kitchen and catch the cat up on the table and swat it off. I asked her once if she'd ever seen me swat Frank off the bed that way - he'd get up on it, you know, always on her side, and leave these nasty tangles of white hair. When I said that, Lulu gave me a kind of grin. Her teeth were showing, anyway. 'If you ever tried, you'd find yourself a finger or three shy, most likely,' she says.

“Sometimes Lucy really was Screwlucy. Cats are moody, and sometimes they get manic; anyone who’s ever had one will tell you that. Their eyes get big and kind of glary, their tails bush out, they go racing around the house; sometimes they’ll rear right up on their back legs and prance, boxing at the air, like they’re fighting with something they can see but human beings can’t. Lucy got into a mood like that one night when she was about a year old - couldn’t have been more than three weeks from the day when I come home and found Lulubelle gone.

“Anyway, Lucy came pelting in from the kitchen, did a kind of racing slide on the wood floor, jumped over Frank, and went skittering up the living room drapes, paw over paw. Left some pretty good holes in them, with threads hanging down. Then she just perched at the top on the rod, staring around the room with her blue eyes all big and wild and the tip of her tail snapping back and forth.

“Frank only jumped a little and then put his muzzle back on Lulubelle’s shoe, but the cat scared the hell out of Lulubelle, who was deep in her book, and when she looked up at the cat, I could see that outright hate in her eyes again.

All right,’ she said, ‘that’s enough. Everybody out of the goddam pool. We’re going to find a good home for that little blue-eyed bitch, and if we’re not smart enough to find a home for a purebred Siamese, we’re going to take her to the animal shelter. I’ve had enough.’

” ‘What do you mean?’ I ask her.

” ‘Are you blind?’ she asks. ‘Look what she did to my drapes I They’re full of holes!’

‘You want to see drapes with holes in them,’ I say, ‘why don’t you go upstairs and look at the ones on my side of the bed. The bottoms are all ragged. Because he chews them.’

'That's different,' she says, glaring at me. 'That's different and you know it.'

"Well, I wasn't going to let that lie. No way I was going to let that one lie. 'The only reason you think it's different is because you like the dog you gave me and you don't like the cat I gave you,' I says. 'But I'll tell you one thing, Mrs. DeWitt: you take the cat to the animal shelter for clawing the living room drapes on Tuesday, I guarantee you I'll take the dog to the animal shelter for chewing the bedroom drapes on Wednesday. You got that?'

"She looked at me and started to cry. She threw her book at me and called me a bastard. A mean bastard. I tried to grab hold of her, make her stay long enough for me to at least try to make up - if there was a way to make up without backing down, which I didn't mean to do that time - but she pulled her arm out of my hand and ran out of the room. Frank ran out after her. They went upstairs and the bedroom door slammed.

"I gave her half an hour or so to cool off, then I went upstairs myself. The bedroom door was still shut, and when I started to open it, I was pushing against Frank. I could move him, but it was slow work with him sliding across the floor, and also noisy work. He was growling. And I mean growling, my friends; that was no fucking purr. If I'd gone in there, I believe he would have tried his solemn best to bite my manhood off. I slept on the couch that night. First time.

"A month later, give or take, she was gone."

If L.T. had timed his story right (most times he did; practice makes perfect), the bell signaling back to work at the W.S. Hepperton Processed Meats Plant of Ames, Iowa, would ring just about then, sparing him any questions from the new men (the old hands knew... and knew better than to ask) about whether or not L.T. and Lulubelle had reconciled, or if he knew where she was today, or - the all-time sixty-four-thousand-dollar question - if she and Frank were still together. There's nothing like the back-to-work bell to close off life's more embarrassing questions.

“Well,” L.T. would say, putting away his thermos and then standing up and giving a stretch, “it has all led me to create what I call L.T. DeWitt’s Theory of Pets.”

They’d look at him expectantly, just as I had the first time I heard him use that grand phrase, but they would always end up feeling let down, just as I always had; a story that good deserved a better punchline, but L.T.’s never changed.

“If your dog and cat are getting along better than you and your wife,” he’d say, “you better expect to come home some night and find a Dear John note on your refrigerator door.”

He told that story a lot, as I’ve said, and one night when he came to my house for dinner, he told it for my wife and my wife’s sister. My wife had invited Holly, who had been divorced almost two years, so the boys and the girls would balance up. I’m sure that’s all it was, because Roslyn never liked L.T. DeWitt. Most people do, most people take to him like hands take to warm water, but Roslyn has never been most people. She didn’t like the story of the note on the fridge and the pets, either - I could tell she didn’t, although she chuckled in the right places. Holly ... shit, I don’t know. I’ve never been able to tell what that girl’s thinking. Mostly just sits there with her hands in her lap, smiling like Mona Lisa. It was my fault that time, though, and I admit it. L.T. didn’t want to tell it, but I kind of egged him on because it was so quiet around the dinner table, just the click of silverware and the clink of glasses, and I could almost feel my wife disliking L.T. It seemed to be coming off her in waves. And if L.T. had been able to feel that little Jack Russell terrier disliking him, he would probably be able to feel my wife doing the same. That’s what I figured, anyhow.

So he told it, mostly to please me, I suppose, and he rolled his eyeballs in all the right places, as if saying “Gosh, she fooled me right and proper, didn’t she?” and my wife chuckled here and there - they sounded as phony to me as Monopoly money looks - and Holly smiled her little Mona Lisa smile with her eyes downcast. Otherwise the dinner went off all right, and when it was over L.T. told Roslyn

that he thanked her for “a sportin-fine meal” (whatever that is) and she told him to come any time, she and I liked to see his face in the place. That was a lie on her part, but I doubt there was ever a dinner party in this history of the world where a few lies weren’t told. So it went off all right, at least until I was driving him home. L.T. started to talk about how it would be a year Lulubelle had been gone in just another week or so, their fourth anniversary, which is flowers if you’re old-fashioned and electrical appliances if you’re newfangled. Then he said as how Lulubelle’s mother - at whose house Lulubelle had never shown up - was going to put up a marker with Lulubelle’s name on it at the local cemetery. “Mrs. Simms says we have to consider her as one dead,” L.T. said, and then he began to bawl. I was so shocked I nearly ran off the goddam road.

He cried so hard that when I was done being shocked, I began to be afraid all that pent-up grief might kill him with a stroke or a burst blood vessel or something. He rocked back and forth in the seat and slammed his open hands down on the dashboard. It was like there was a twister loose inside him. Finally I pulled over to the side of the road and began patting his shoulder. I could feel the heat of his skin right through his shirt, so hot it was baking.

“Come on, L.T.,” I said. “That’s enough.”

“I just miss her,” he said in a voice so thick with tears I could barely understand what he was saying. “Just so goddam much. I come home and there’s no one but the cat, crying and crying, and pretty soon I’m crying, too, both of us crying while I fill up her dish with that goddam muck she eats.”

He turned his flushed, streaming face full on me. Looking back into it was almost more than I could take, but I did take it; felt I had to take it. Who had gotten him telling the story about Lucy and Frank and the note on the refrigerator that night, after all? It hadn’t been Mike Wallace, or Dan Rather, that was for sure. So I looked back at him. I didn’t quite dare hug him, in case that twister should somehow jump from him to me, but I kept patting his arm.

“I think she’s alive somewhere, that’s what I think,” he said. His voice was still thick and wavery, but there was a kind of pitiful weak defiance in it as well. He wasn’t telling me what he believed, but what he wished he could believe. I’m pretty sure of that.

“Well,” I said, “you can believe that. No law against it, is there? And it isn’t as if they found her body, or anything.”

“I like to think of her out there in Nevada singing in some little casino hotel,” he said. “Not in Vegas or Reno, she couldn’t make it in one of the big towns, but in Winnemucca or Ely I’m pretty sure she could get by. Some place like that. She just saw a Singer Wanted sign and give up her idea of going home to her mother. Hell, the two of them never got on worth a shit anyway, that’s what Lu used to say. And she could sing, you know. I don’t know if you ever heard her, but she could. I don’t guess she was great, but she was good. The first time I saw her, she was singing in the lounge of the Marriott Hotel. In Columbus, Ohio, that was. Or, another possibility...”

He hesitated, then went on in a lower voice.

“Prostitution is legal out there in Nevada, you know. Not in all the counties, but in most of them. She could be working one of them Green Lantern trailers or the Mustang Ranch. Lots of women have got a streak of whore in them. Lu had one. I don’t mean she stepped around on me, or slept around on me, so I can’t say how I know, but I do. She ... yes, she could be in one of those places.”

He stopped, eyes distant, maybe imagining Lulubelle on a bed in the back room of a Nevada trailer whorehouse, Lulubelle wearing nothing but stockings, washing off some unknown cowboy’s stiff cock while from the other room came the sound of Steve Earle and the Dukes singing “Six Days on the Road” or a TV playing Hollywood Squares. Lulubelle whoring but not dead, the car by the side of the road - the little Subaru she had brought to the marriage - meaning nothing. The way an animal’s look, so seemingly attentive, usually means nothing.

“I can believe that if I want,” he said, swiping his swollen eyes with insides of his wrists.

“Sure,” I said. “You bet, L.T.” Wondering what the grinning men who listened to his story while they ate their lunches would make of this L.T., this shaking man with his pale cheeks and red eyes and hot skin.

“Hell,” he said, I do believe that.” He hesitated, then said it again: “I do believe that.”

When I got back, Roslyn was in bed with a book in her hand and the covers pulled up to her breasts. Holly had gone home while I was driving L.T. back to his house. Roslyn was in a bad mood, and I found out why soon enough. The woman behind the Mona Lisa smile had been quite taken with my friend. Smitten by him, maybe. And my wife most definitely did not approve.

“How did he lose his license?” she asked, and before I could answer: “Drinking, wasn’t it?”

“Drinking, yes. OUM’ I sat down on my side of the bed and slipped off my shoes. “But that was nearly six months ago, and if he keeps his nose clean another two months, he gets it back. I think he will. He goes to AA, you know.”

My wife grunted, clearly not impressed. I took off my shirt, sniffed the armpits, hung it back in the closet. I’d only worn it an hour or two, just for dinner.

“You know,” my wife said, I think it’s a wonder the police didn’t look a little more closely at him after his wife disappeared.”

“They asked him some questions,” I said, “but only to get as much information as they could. There was never any question of him doing it, Ros. They were never suspicious of him.”

“Oh, you’re so sure.”

“As a matter of fact, I am. I know some stuff. Lulubelle called her mother from a hotel in eastern Colorado the day she left, and called her again from Salt Lake City the next day. She was fine then. Those were both weekdays, and L.T. was at the plant. He was at the plant the day they found her car parked off that ranch road near Caliente as well. Unless he can magically transport himself from place to place in the blink of an eye, he didn’t kill her. Besides, he wouldn’t. He loved her.”

She grunted. It’s this hateful sound of skepticism she makes sometimes. After almost thirty years of marriage, that sound still makes me want to turn on her and yell at her to stop it, to shit or get off the pot, either say what she means or keep quiet. This time I thought about telling her how L.T. had cried; how it had been like there was a cyclone inside of him, tearing loose everything that wasn’t nailed down. I thought about it, but I didn’t. Women don’t trust tears from men. They may say different, but down deep they don’t trust tears from men.

“Maybe you ought to call the police yourself,” I said. “Offer them a little of your expert help. Point out the stuff they missed, just like Angela Lansbury on *Murder, She Wrote*”

I swung my legs into bed. She turned off the light. We lay there in darkness. When she spoke again, her tone was gentler.

“I don’t like him. That’s all. I don’t, and I never have.”

“Yeah,” I said. I guess that’s clear.”

“And I didn’t like the way he looked at Holly.”

Which meant, as I found out eventually, that she hadn’t liked the way Holly looked at him. When she wasn’t looking down at her plate, that is.

“I’d prefer you didn’t ask him back to dinner,” she said.

I kept quiet. It was late. I was tired. It had been a hard day, a harder evening, and I was tired. The last thing I wanted was to have an argument with my wife when I was tired and she was worried. That's the sort of argument where one of you ends up spending the night on the couch. And the only way to stop an argument like that is to be quiet. In a marriage, words are like rain. And the land of a marriage is filled with dry washes and arroyos that can become raging rivers in almost the wink of an eye. The therapists believe in talk, but most of them are either divorced or queer. It's silence that is a marriage's best friend.

Silence.

After a while, my best friend rolled over on her side, away from me and into the place where she goes when she finally gives up the day. I lay awake a little while longer, thinking of a dusty little car, perhaps once white, parked nose-down in the ditch beside a ranch road out in the Nevada desert not too far from Caliente. The driver's side door standing open, the rearview mirror torn off its post and lying on the floor, the front seat sodden with blood and tracked over by the animals that had come in to investigate, perhaps to sample.

There was a man - they assumed he was a man, it almost always is - who had butchered five women out in that part of the world, five in three years, mostly during the time L.T. had been living with Lulubelle. Four of the women were transients. He would get them to stop somehow, then pull them out of their cars, rape them, dismember them with an axe, leave them a rise or two away for the buzzards and crows and weasels. The fifth one was an elderly rancher's wife. The police call this killer the Axe Man. As I write this, the Axe Man has not been captured. Nor has he killed again; if Cynthia Lulubelle Simms DeWitt was the Axe Man's sixth victim, she was also his last, at least so far. There is still some question, however, as to whether or not she was his sixth victim. If not in most minds' that question exists in the part of L.T.'s mind which is still allowed to hope.

The blood on the seat wasn't human blood, you see; it didn't take the Nevada State Forensics Unit five hours to determine that. The ranch hand who found Lulubelle's Subaru saw a cloud of circling birds half a mile away, and when he reached them, he found not a dismembered woman but a dismembered dog. Little was left but bones and teeth; the predators and scavengers had had their day, and there's not much meat on a Jack Russell terrier to begin with. The Axe Man most definitely got Frank; Lulubelle's fate is probable, but far from certain.

Perhaps, I thought, she is alive. Singing "Tie a Yellow Ribbon" at The Jailhouse in Ely or "Take a Message to Michael" at The Rose of Santa Fe in Hawthorne. Backed up by a three-piece combo. Old men trying to look young in red vests and black string ties. Or maybe she's blowing GM cowboys in Austin or Wendover - bending forward until her breasts press flat on her thighs beneath a calendar showing tulips in Holland; gripping set after set of flabby buttocks in her hands and thinking about what to watch on TV that night, when her shift is done. Perhaps she just pulled over to the side of the road and walked away. People do that. I know it, and probably you do, too. Sometimes people just say fuck it and walk away. Maybe she left Frank behind, thinking someone would come along and give him a good home, only it was the Axe Man who came along, and...

But no. I met Lulubelle, and for the life of me I can't see her leaving a dog to most likely roast to death or starve to death in the barrens. Especially not a dog she loved the way she loved Frank. No, L.T. hadn't been exaggerating about that; I saw them together, and I know.

She could still be alive somewhere. Technically speaking, at least, L.T.'s right about that. Just because I can't think of a scenario that would lead from that car with the door hanging open and the rearview mirror lying on the floor and the dog lying dead and crow-picked two rises away, just because I can't think of a scenario that would lead from that place near Caliente to some other place where Lulubelle Simms sings or sews or blows truckers, safe and unknown,

well, that doesn't mean that no such scenario exists. As I told L.T., it isn't as if they found her body; they just found her car, and the remains of the dog a little way from the car. Lulubelle herself could be anywhere. You can see that.

I couldn't sleep and I felt thirsty. I got out of bed, went into the bathroom, and took the toothbrushes out of the glass we keep by the sink. I filled the glass with water. Then I sat down on the closed lid of the toilet and drank the water and thought about the sound that Siamese cats make, that weird crying, how it must sound good if you love them, how it must sound like coming home.

THE

LAST RUNG ON THE LADDER



THE LAST RUNG ON THE LADDER

Stephen King

I got Katrina's letter yesterday, less than a week after my father and I got back from Los Angeles. It was addressed to Wilmington, Delaware, and I'd moved twice since then. People move around so much now, and it's funny how those crossed-off addresses and change-of-address stickers can look like accusations. Her letter was rumpled and smudged, one of the corners dog-eared from handling. I read what was in it and the next thing I knew I was standing in the living room with the phone in my hand, getting ready to call Dad. I put the phone down with something like horror. He was an old man, and he'd had two heart attacks. Was I going to call him and tell about Katrina's letter so soon after we'd been in L.A.? To do that might very well have killed him.

So I didn't call. And I had no one I could tell ... a thing like that letter, it's too personal to tell anyone except a wife or a very close friend. I haven't made many close friends in the last few years, and my wife Helen and I divorced in 1971. What we exchange now are Christmas cards. How are you? How's the job? Have a happy New Year.

I've been awake all night with it, with Katrina's letter. She could have put it on a postcard. There was only a single sentence below the "Dear Larry." But a sentence can mean enough. It can do enough.

I remembered my dad on the plane, his face seeming old and wasted in the harsh sunlight at 18,000 feet as we went west from New York. We had just passed over Omaha, according to the pilot, and Dad said, "It's a lot further away than it looks, Larry." There was a heavy sadness in his voice that made me uncomfortable because I couldn't understand it. I understood it better after getting Katrina's letter.

We grew up eighty miles west of Omaha in a town called Hemingford Home—my dad, my mom, my sister Katrina, and me, I was two years older than Katrina, whom everyone called Kitty. She was a beautiful child and a beautiful woman—even at eight, the year of the incident in the barn, you could see that her cornsilk hair was never

going to darken and that those eyes would always be a dark, Scandinavian blue. A look in those eyes and a man would be gone.

I guess you'd say we grew up hicks. My dad had three hundred acres of flat, rich land, and he grew feed corn and raised cattle. Everybody just called it "the home place." In those days all the roads were dirt except Interstate 80 and Nebraska Route 96, and a trip to town was something you waited three days for.

Nowadays I'm one of the best independent corporation lawyers in America, so they tell me—and I'd have to admit for the sake of honesty that I think they're right. A president of a large company once introduced me to his board of directors as his hired gun. I wear expensive suits and my shoelace is the best. I've got three assistants on full-time pay, and I can call in another dozen if I need them. But in those days I walked up a dirt road to a one-room school with books tied in a belt over my shoulder, and Katrina walked with me. Sometimes, in the spring, we went barefoot. That was in the days before you couldn't get served in a diner or shop in a market unless you were wearing shoes.

Later on, my mother died—Katrina and I were in high school up at Columbia City then—and two years after that my dad lost the place and went to work selling tractors. It was the end of the family, although that didn't seem so bad then. Dad got along in his work, bought himself a dealership, and got tapped for a management position about nine years ago. I got a football scholarship to the University of Nebraska and managed to learn something besides how to run the ball out of a slot-right formation.

And Katrina? But it's her I want to tell you about.

It happened, the barn thing, one Saturday in early November. To tell you the truth I can't pin down the actual year, but Ike was still President. Mom was at a bake fair in Columbia City, and Dad had gone over to our nearest neighbor's (and that was seven miles away) to help the man fix a hayrake. There was supposed to be a

hired man on the place, but he had never showed up that day, and my dad fired him not a month later.

Dad left me a list of chores to do (and there were some for Kitty, too) and told us not to get to playing until they were all done. But that wasn't long. It was November, and by that time of year the make-or-break time had gone past. We'd made it again that year. We wouldn't always.

I remember that day very clearly. The sky was overcast and while it wasn't cold, you could feel it wanting to be cold, wanting to get down to the business of frost and freeze, snow and sleet. The fields were stripped. The animals were sluggish and morose. There seemed to be funny little drafts in the house that had never been there before.

On a day like that, the only really nice place to be was the barn. It was warm, filled with a pleasant mixed aroma of hay and fur and dung, and with the mysterious chuckling, cooing sounds of the barnswallows high up in the third loft. If you cricked your neck up, you could see the white November light coming through the chinks in the roof and try to spell your name. It was a game that really only seemed agreeable on overcast autumn days.

There was a ladder nailed to a crossbeam high up in the third loft, a ladder that went straight down to the main barn floor. We were forbidden to climb on it because it was old and shaky. Dad had promised Mom a thousand times that he would pull it down and put up a stronger one, but something else always seemed to come up when there was time ... helping a neighbor with his hayrake, for instance. And the hired man was just not working out.

If you climbed up that rickety ladder—there were exactly forty-three rungs, Kitty and I had counted them enough to know—you ended up on a beam that was seventy feet above the straw-littered barn floor. And then if you edged out along the beam about twelve feet, your knees jittering, your ankle joints creaking, your mouth dry and tasting like a used fuse, you stood over the haymow. And then you could jump off the beam and fall seventy feet straight down, with a horrible

hilarious dying swoop, into a huge soft bed of lush hay. It has a sweet smell, hay does, and you'd come to rest in that smell of reborn summer with your stomach left behind you way up there in the middle of the air, and you'd feel ... well, like Lazarus must have felt. You had taken the fall and lived to tell the tale.

It was a forbidden sport, all right. If we had been caught, my mother would have shrieked blue murder and my father would have laid on the strap, even at our advanced ages. Because of the ladder, and because if you happened to lose your balance and topple from the beam before you had edged out over the loose fathoms of hay, you would fall to utter destruction on the hard planking of the barn floor.

But the temptation was just too great. When the cats are away ... well, you know how that one goes.

That day started like all the others, a delicious feeling of dread mixed with anticipation. We stood at the foot of the ladder, looking at each other. Kitty's color was high, her eyes darker and more sparkling than ever.

"Dare you," I said.

Promptly from Kitty: "Dares go first."

Promptly from me: "Girls go before boys."

"Not if it's dangerous," she said, casting her eyes down demurely, as if everybody didn't know she was the second-biggest tomboy in Hemingford. But that was how she was about it. She would go, but she wouldn't go first.

"Okay," I said. "Here I go."

I was ten that year, and thin as Scratch-the-demon, about ninety pounds. Kitty was eight, and twenty pounds lighter. The ladder had always held us before, we thought it would always hold us again,

which is a philosophy that gets men and nations in trouble time after time.

I could feel it that day, beginning to shimmy around a little bit in the dusty barn air as I climbed higher and higher. As always, about halfway up, I entertained a vision of what would happen to me if it suddenly let go and gave up the ghost. But I kept going until I was able to clap my hands around the beam and boost myself up and look down.

Kitty's face, turned up to watch me, was a small white oval. In her faded checked shirt and blue denims, she looked like a doll. Above me still higher, in the dusty reaches of the eaves, the swallows cooed mellowly.

Again, by rote:

"Hi, down there!" I called, my voice floating down to her on motes of chaff.

"Hi, up there!"

I stood up. Swayed back and forth a little. As always, there seemed suddenly to be strange currents in the air that had not existed down below. I could hear my own heartbeat as I began to inch along with my arms held out for balance. Once, a swallow had swooped close by my head during this part of the adventure, and in drawing back I had almost lost my balance. I lived in fear of the same thing happening again.

But not this time. At last I stood above the safety of the hay. Now looking down was not so much frightening as sensual. There was a moment of anticipation. Then I stepped off into space, holding my nose for effect, and as it always did, the sudden grip of gravity, yanking me down brutally, making me plummet, made me feel like yelling: Oh, I'm sorry, I made a mistake, let me back up!

Then I hit the hay, shot into it like a projectile, its sweet and dusty smell billowing up around me, still going down, as if into heavy water, coming slowly to rest buried in the stuff. As always, I could feel a sneeze building up in my nose. And hear a frightened field mouse or two fleeing for a more serene section of the haymow. And feel, in that curious way, that I had been reborn. I remember Kitty telling me once that after diving into the hay she felt fresh and new, like a baby. I shrugged it off at the time—sort of knowing what she meant, sort of not knowing—but since I got her letter I think about that, too.

I climbed out of the hay, sort of swimming through it, until I could climb out onto the barn floor. I had hay down my pants and down the back of my shirt. It was on my sneakers and sticking to my elbows. Hayseeds in my hair? You bet.

She was halfway up the ladder by then, her gold pigtails bouncing against her shoulderblades, climbing through a dusty shaft of light. On other days that light might have been as bright as her hair, but on this day her pigtails had no competition—they were easily the most colorful thing up there.

I remember thinking that I didn't like the way the ladder was swaying back and forth. It seemed like it had never been so loosey-goosey.

Then she was on the beam, high above me—now I was the small one, my face was the small white upturned oval as her voice floated down on errant chaff stirred up by my leap:

“Hi, down there!”

“Hi, up there!”

She edged along the beam, and my heart loosened a little in my chest when I judged she was over the safety of the hay. It always did, although she was always more graceful than I was ... and more athletic, if that doesn't sound like too strange a thing to say about your kid sister.

She stood, poising on the toes of her old low-topped Keds, hands out in front of her. And then she swanned. Talk about things you can't forget, things you can't describe. Well, I can describe it ... in a way. But not in a way that will make you understand how beautiful that was, how perfect, one of the few things in my life that seem utterly real, utterly true. No, I can't tell you like that. I don't have the skill with either my pen or my tongue.

For a moment she seemed to hang in the air, as if borne up by one of those mysterious updrafts that only existed in the third loft, a bright swallow with golden plumage such as Nebraska has never seen since. She was Kitty, my sister, her arms swept behind her and her back arched, and how I loved her for that beat of time!

Then she came down and plowed into the hay and out of sight. An explosion of chaff and giggles rose out of the hole she made. I'd forgotten about how rickety the ladder had looked with her on it, and by the time she was out, I was halfway up again.

I tried to swan myself, but the fear grabbed me the way it always did, and my swan turned into a cannonball. I think I never believed the hay was there the way Kitty believed it.

How long did the game go on? Hard to tell. But I looked up some ten or twelve dives later and saw the light had changed. Our mom and dad were due back and we were all covered with chaff ... as good as a signed confession. We agreed on one more turn each.

Going up first, I felt the ladder moving beneath me and I could hear—very faintly—the whining rasp of old nails loosening up in the wood. And for the first time I was really, actively scared. I think if I'd been closer to the bottom I would have gone down and that would have been the end of it, but the beam was closer and seemed safer. Three rungs from the top the whine of pulling nails grew louder and I was suddenly cold with terror, with the certainty that I had pushed it too far.

Then I had the splintery beam in my hands, taking my weight off the ladder, and there was a cold, unpleasant sweat matting the twigs of hay to my forehead. The fun of the game was gone.

I hurried out over the hay and dropped off. Even the pleasurable part of the drop was gone. Coming down, I imagined how I'd feel if that was solid barn planking coming up to meet me instead of the yielding give of the hay.

I came out to the middle of the barn to see Kitty hurrying up the ladder. I called: "Hey, come down! It's not safe!"

"It'll hold me!" she called back confidently. "I'm lighter than you!"

"Kitty—"

But that never got finished. Because that was when the ladder let go.

It went with a rotted, splintering crack. I cried out and Kitty screamed. She was about where I had been when I'd become convinced I'd pressed my luck too far.

The rung she was standing on gave way, and then both sides of the ladder split. For a moment the ladder below her, which had broken entirely free, looked like a ponderous insect—a praying mantis or a ladderbug—which had just decided to walk off.

Then it toppled, hitting the barn floor with a flat clap that raised dust and caused the cows to moo worriedly. One of them kicked at its stall door.

Kitty uttered a high, piercing scream.

"Larry! Larry! Help me!"

I knew what had to be done, I saw right away. I was terribly afraid, but not quite scared out of my wits. She was better than sixty feet above me, her blue-jeaned legs kicking wildly at the blank air, then barnswallows cooing above her. I was scared, all right. And you

know, I still can't watch a circus aerial act, not even on TV. It makes my stomach feel weak.

But I knew what had to be done.

"Kitty!" I bawled up at her. "Just hold still! Hold still!"

She obeyed me instantly. Her legs stopped kicking and she hung straight down, her small hands clutching the last rung on the ragged end of the ladder like an acrobat whose trapeze has stopped.

I ran to the haymow, clutched up a double handful of the stuff, ran back, and dropped it. I went back again. And again. And again.

I really don't remember it after that, except the hay got up my nose and I started sneezing and couldn't stop. I ran back and forth, building a haystack where the foot of the ladder had been. It was a very small haystack. Looking at it, then looking at her hanging so far above it, you might have thought of one of those cartoons where the guy jumps three hundred feet into a water glass.

Back and forth. Back and forth.

"Larry, I can't hold on much longer!" Her voice was high and despairing.

"Kitty, you've got to! You've got to hold on!"

Back and forth. Hay down my shirt. Back and forth. The haystack was as high as my chin now, but the haymow we had been diving into was twenty-five feet deep. I thought that if she only broke her legs it would be getting off cheap. And I knew if she missed the hay altogether, she would be killed. Back and forth.

"Larry! The rung! It's letting go!"

I could hear the steady, rasping cry of the rung pulling free under her weight. Her legs began to kick again in panic, but if she was thrashing like that, she would surely miss the hay.

“No!” I yelled. “No! Stop that! Just let go! Let go, Kitty!” Because it was too late for me to get any more hay. Too late for anything except blind hope.

She let go and dropped the second I told her to. She came straight down like a knife. It seemed to me that she dropped forever, her gold pigtailed standing straight up from her head, her eyes shut, her face as pale as china. She didn’t scream. Her hands were locked in front of her lips, as if she was praying.

And she struck the hay right in the center. She went down out of sight in it—hay flew up all around as if a shell had struck—and I heard the thump of her body hitting the boards. The sound, a loud thud, sent a deadly chill into me. It had been too loud, much too loud. But I had to see.

Starting to cry, I pounced on the haystack and pulled it apart, flinging the straw behind me in great handfuls. A blue-jeaned leg came to light, then a plaid shirt ... and then Kitty’s face. It was deadly pale and her eyes were shut. She was dead, I knew it as I looked at her. The world went gray for me, November gray. The only things in it with any color were her pigtailed, bright gold.

And then the deep blue of her irises as she opened her eyes.

“Kitty?” My voice was hoarse, husky, unbelieving. My throat was coated with haychaff. “Kitty?”

“Larry?” she asked, bewildered. “Am I alive?”

I picked her out of the hay and hugged her and she put her arms around my neck and hugged me back.

“You’re alive,” I said. “You’re alive, you’re alive.”

She had broken her left ankle and that was all. When Dr. Pedersen, the GP from Columbia City, came out to the barn with my father and

me, he looked up into the shadows for a long time. The last rung on the ladder still hung there, aslant, from one nail.

He looked, as I said, for a long time. "A miracle," he said to my father, and then kicked disdainfully at the hay I'd put down. He went out to his dusty DeSoto and drove away.

My father's hand came down on my shoulder. "We're going to the woodshed, Larry," he said in a very calm voice. "I believe you know what's going to happen there."

"Yes, sir," I whispered.

"Every time I whack you, Larry, I want you to thank God your sister is still alive."

"Yes, sir."

Then we went. He whacked me plenty of times, so many times I ate standing up for a week and with a cushion on my chair for two weeks after that. And every time he whacked me with his big red callused hand, I thanked God.

In a loud, loud voice. By the last two or three whacks, I was pretty sure He was hearing me.

They let me in to see her just before bedtime. There was a catbird outside her window, I remember that. Her foot, all wrapped up, was propped on a board.

She looked at me so long and so lovingly that I was uncomfortable. Then she said, "Hay. You put down hay."

"Course I did," I blurted. "What else would I do? Once the ladder broke there was no way to get up there."

"I didn't know what you were doing," she said.

"You must have! I was right under you, for cripe's sake!"

“I didn’t dare look down,” she said. “I was too scared. I had my eyes shut the whole time.”

I stared at her, thunderstruck.

“You didn’t know? Didn’t know what I was doing?”

She shook her head.

“And when I told you to let go you ... you just did it?”

She nodded.

“Kitty, how could you do that?”

She looked at me with those deep blue eyes. “I knew you must have been doing something to fix it,” she said. “You’re my big brother. I knew you’d take care of me.”

“Oh, Kitty, you don’t know how close it was.”

I had put my hands over my face. She sat up and took them away. She kissed my cheek. “No,” she said. “But I knew you were down there. Gee, am I sleepy. I’ll see you tomorrow, Larry. I’m going to have a cast, Dr. Pedersen says.”

She had the cast on for a little less than a month, and all her classmates signed it—she even got me to sign it. And when it came off, that was the end of the barn incident. My father replaced the ladder up to the third loft with a new strong one, but I never climbed up to the beam and jumped off into the haymow again. So far as I know, Kitty didn’t either.

It was the end, but somehow not the end. Somehow it never ended until nine days ago, when Kitty jumped from the top story of an insurance building in Los Angeles. I have the clipping from The L.A. Times in my wallet. I guess I’ll always carry it, not in the good way you carry snapshots of people you want to remember or theater tickets from a really good show or part of the program from a World

Series game. I carry that clipping the way you carry something heavy, because carrying it is your work. The headline reads: CALL GIRL SWAN-DIVES TO HER DEATH.

We grew up. That's all I know, other than facts that don't mean anything. She was going to go to business college in Omaha, but in the summer after she graduated from high school, she won a beauty contest and married one of the judges. It sounds like a dirty joke, doesn't it? My Kitty.

While I was in law school she got divorced and wrote me a long letter, ten pages or more, telling me how it had been, how messy it had been, how it might have been better if she could have had a child. She asked me if I could come. But losing a week in law school is like losing a term in liberal-arts undergraduate. Those guys are greyhounds. If you lose sight of the little mechanical rabbit, it's gone forever.

She moved to L.A. and got married again. When that one broke up I was out of law school. There was another letter, a shorter one, more bitter. She was never going to get stuck on that merry-go-round, she told me. It was a fix job. The only way you could catch the brass ring was to tumble off the horse and crack your skull. If that was what the price of a free ride was, who wanted it? PS, Can you come, Larry? It's been a while.

I wrote back and told her I'd love to come, but I couldn't. I had landed a job in a high-pressure firm, low guy on the totem pole, all the work and none of the credit. If I was going to make it up to the next step, it would have to be that year. That was my long letter, and it was all about my career.

I answered all of her letters. But I could never really believe that it was really Kitty who was writing them, you know, no more than I could really believe that the hay was really there ... until it broke my fall at the bottom of the drop and saved my life. I couldn't believe that my sister and the beaten woman who signed "Kitty" in a circle at the

bottom of her letters were really the same person. My sister was a girl with pigtails, still without breasts.

She was the one who stopped writing. I'd get Christmas cards, birthday cards, and my wife would reciprocate. Then we got divorced and I moved and just forgot. The next Christmas and the birthday after, the cards came through the forwarding address. The first one. And I kept thinking: Gee, I've got to write Kitty and tell her that I've moved. But I never did.

But as I've told you, those are facts that don't mean anything. The only things that matter are that we grew up and she swanned from that insurance building, and that Kitty was the one who always believed the hay would be there. Kitty was the one who had said, "I knew you must be doing something to fix it." Those things matter. And Kitty's letter.

People move around so much now, and it's funny how those crossed-off addresses and change-of-address stickers can look like accusations. She'd printed her return address in the upper left corner of the envelope, the place she'd been staying at until she jumped. A very nice apartment building on Van Nuys. Dad and I went there to pick up her things. The landlady was nice. She had liked Kitty.

The letter was postmarked two weeks before she died. It would have gotten to me a long time before, if not for the forwarding addresses. She must have gotten tired of waiting.

Dear Larry,

I've been thinking about it a lot lately ... and what I've decided is that it would have been better for me if that last rung had broken before you could put the hay down.

Your,

Kitty

Yes, I guess she must have gotten tired of waiting. I'd rather believe that than think of her deciding I must have forgotten. I wouldn't want her to think that, because that one sentence was maybe the only thing that would have brought me on the run.

But not even that is the reason sleep comes so hard now. When I close my eyes and start to drift off, I see her coming down from the third loft, her eyes wide and dark blue, her body arched, her arms swept up behind her.

She was the one who always knew the hay would be there.

JEFF FAHEY

PIERCE BROSNAN

THE LAWNMOWER MAN



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THE LAWNMOWER MAN

Stephen King

In previous years, Harold Parkette had always taken pride in his lawn. He had owned a large silver Lawnboy and paid the boy down the block five dollars per cutting to push it. In those days Harold Parkette had followed the Boston Red Sox on the radio with a beer in his hand and the knowledge that God was in his heaven and all was right with the world, including his lawn. But last year, in mid-October, fate had played Harold Parkette a nasty trick. While the boy was mowing the grass for the last time of the season, the Castonmeyers' dog had chased the Smiths' cat under the mower.

Harold's daughter had thrown up half a quart of cherry Kool-Aid into the lap of her new jumper, and his wife had nightmares for a week afterward. Although she had arrived after the fact, she had arrived in time to see Harold and the green-faced boy cleaning the blades. Their daughter and Mrs. Smith stood over them, weeping, although Alicia had taken time enough to change her jumper for a pair of blue jeans and one of those disgusting skimpy sweaters. She had a crush on the boy who mowed the lawn.

After a week of listening to his wife moan and gobble in the next bed, Harold decided to get rid of the mower. He didn't really need a mower anyway, he supposed. He had hired a boy this year; next year he would just hire a boy and a mower. And maybe Carla would stop moaning in her sleep. He might even get laid again.

So he took the silver Lawnboy down to Phil's Sunoco, and he and Phil dickered over it. Harold came away with a brand-new Kelly blackwall tire and a tankful of hi-test, and Phil put the silver Lawnboy out on one of the pump islands with a hand-lettered FOR SALE sign on it.

And this year, Harold just kept putting off the necessary hiring. When he finally got around to calling last year's boy, his mother told him Frank had gone to the state university. Harold shook his head in wonder and went to the refrigerator to get a beer. Time certainly flew, didn't it? My God, yes.

He put off hiring a new boy as first May and then June slipped past him and the Red Sox continued to wallow in fourth place. He sat on the back porch on the weekends and watched glumly as a never ending progression of young boys he had never seen before popped out to mutter a quick hello before taking his buxom daughter off to the local passion pit. And the grass thrived and grew in a marvelous way. It was a good summer for grass; three days of shine followed by one of gentle rain, almost like clockwork.

By mid-July, the lawn looked more like a meadow than a suburbanite's backyard, and Jack Castonmeyer had begun to make all sorts of extremely unfunny jokes, most of which concerned the price of hay and alfalfa. And Don Smith's four-year-old daughter Jenny had taken to hiding in it when there was oatmeal for breakfast or spinach for supper.

One day in late July, Harold went out on the patio during the seventh-inning stretch and saw a woodchuck sitting perkily on the overgrown back walk. The time had come, he decided. He flicked off the radio, picked up the paper, and turned to the classifieds. And half way down the Part Time column, he found this: Lawns mowed. Reasonable. 776-2390

Harold called the number, expecting a vacuuming house-wife who would yell outside for her son. Instead, a briskly professional voice said, "Pastoral Greenery and Outdoor Services ... how may we help you?"

Cautiously, Harold told the voice how Pastoral Greenery could help him. Had it come to this, then? Were lawncutters starting their own businesses and hiring office help? He asked the voice about rates, and the voice quoted him a reasonable figure.

Harold hung up with a lingering feeling of unease and went back to the porch. He sat down, turned on the radio, and stared out over his glandular lawn at the Saturday clouds moving slowly across the Saturday sky. Carla and Alicia were at his mother-in-law's and the

house was his. It would be a pleasant surprise for them if the boy who was coming to cut the lawn finished before they came back.

He cracked a beer and sighed as Dick Drago was touched for a double and then hit a batter. A little breeze shuffled across the screened-in porch. Crickets hummed softly in the long grass. Harold grunted something unkind about Dick Drago and then dozed off.

He was jarred awake a half hour later by the doorbell. He knocked over his beer getting up to answer it.

A man in grass-stained denim overalls stood on the front stoop, chewing a toothpick. He was fat. The curve of his belly pushed his faded blue overall out to a point where Harold half suspected he had swallowed a basketball.

“Yes?” Harold Parkette asked, still half asleep.

The man grinned, rolled his toothpick from one corner of his mouth to the other, tugged at the seat of his overalls, and then pushed his green baseball cap up a notch on his forehead. There was a smear of fresh engine oil on the bill of his cap. And there he was, smelling of grass, earth, and oil, grinning at Harold Parkett.

“Pastoral sent me, buddy,” he said jovially, scratching his crotch. “You called, right? Right, buddy?” He grinned on endlessly.

“Oh. The lawn. You?” Harold stared stupidly.

“Yep, me.” The lawnmower man bellowed fresh laughter into Harold’s sleep-puffy face.

Harold stood helplessly aside and the lawnmower man tromped ahead of him down the hall, through the living room and kitchen, and onto the back porch. Now Harold had placed the man and everything was all right. He had seen the type before, working for the sanitation department and the highway repair crews out on the turnpike. Always with a spare minute to lean on their shovels and smoke

Lucky Strikes or Camels, looking at you as if they were the salt of the earth, able to hit you for five or sleep with your wife anytime they wanted to. Harold had always been slightly afraid of men like this; they were always tanned dark brown, there were always nets of wrinkles around their eyes, and they always knew what to do.

“The back lawn’s the real chore,” he told the man, unconsciously deepening his voice. “It’s square and there are no obstructions, but it’s pretty well grown up.” His voice faltered back into its normal register and he found himself apologizing: “I’m afraid I’ve let it go.”

“No sweat, buddy. No strain. Great-great-great.” The lawnmower man grinned at him with a thousand traveling-salesman jokes in his eyes. “The taller, the better. Healthy soil, that’s what you got there, by Circe. That’s what I always say.”

By Circe?

The lawnmower man cocked his head at the radio. Yastrzemski had just struck out. “Red Sox fan? I’m a Yankees man, myself.” He clumped back into the house and down the front hall. Harold watched him bitterly.

He sat back down and looked accusingly for a moment at the puddle of beer under the table with the overturned Coors can in the middle of it. He thought of getting the mop from the kitchen and decided it would keep.

No sweat. No strain.

He opened his paper to the financial section and cast a judicious eye at the closing stock quotations. As a good Republican, he considered the Wall Street executives behind the columned type to be at least minor demigods—

(By Circe??)

—and he had wished many times that he could better understand the Word, as handed down from the mount not on stone tablets but in such enigmatic abbreviations as pct. and Kdk and 3.28 up 2/3. He had once bought a judicious three shares in a company called Midwest Bisonburgers, Inc., that had gone broke in 1968. He had lost his entire seventy-five-dollar investment. Now, he understood, bisonburgers were quite the coming thing. The wave of the future. He had discussed this often with Sonny, the bartender down at the Goldfish Bowl. Sonny told Harold his trouble was that he was five years ahead of his time, and he should ...

A sudden racketing roar startled him out of the new doze he had just been slipping into.

Harold jumped to his feet, knocking his chair over and staring around wildly.

“That’s a lawnmower?” Harold Parkette asked the kitchen. “My God, that’s a lawnmower?”

He rushed through the house and stared out the front door. There was nothing out there but a battered green van with the words PASTORAL GREENERY, INC. painted on the side. The roaring sound was in back now. Harold rushed through his house again, burst onto the back porch, and stood frozen.

It was obscene.

It was a travesty.

The aged red power mower the fat man had brought in his van was running on its own. No one was pushing it; in fact, no one was within five feet of it. It was running at a fever pitch, tearing through the unfortunate grass of Harold Parkette’s back lawn like an avenging red devil straight from hell. It screamed and bellowed and farted oily blue smoke in a crazed kind of mechanical madness that made Harold feel ill with terror. The overripe smell of cut grass hung in the air like sour wine.

But the lawnmower man was the true obscenity.

The lawnmower man had removed his clothes—every stitch. They were folded neatly in the empty birdbath that was at the center of the back lawn. Naked and grass-stained, he was crawling along about five feet behind the mower, eating the cut grass. Green juice ran down his chin and dripped onto his pendulous belly. And every time the lawnmower whirled around a corner, he rose and did an odd, skipping jump before prostrating himself again.

“Stop!” Harold Parkette screamed. “Stop that!”

But the lawnmower man took no notice, and his screaming scarlet familiar never slowed. If anything, it seemed to speed up. Its nicked steel grill seemed to grin sweatily at Harold as it raved by.

Then Harold saw the mole. It must have been hiding in stunned terror just ahead of the mower, in the swath of grass about to be slaughtered. It bolted across the cut band of lawn toward safety under the porch, a panicky brown streak.

The lawnmower swerved.

Blatting and howling, it roared over the mole and spat it out in a string of fur and entrails that reminded Harold of the Smiths' cat. The mole destroyed, the lawnmower rushed back to the main job.

The lawnmower man crawled rapidly by, eating grass. Harold stood paralyzed with horror, stocks, bonds, and bisonburgers completely forgotten. He could actually see that huge, pendulous belly expanding. The lawnmower man swerved and ate the mole.

That was when Harold Parkette leaned out the screen door and vomited into the zinnias. The world went gray, and suddenly he realized he was fainting, had fainted. He collapsed backward onto the porch and closed his eyes ...

Someone was shaking him. Carla was shaking him. He hadn't done the dishes or emptied the garbage and Carla was going to be very angry but that was all right. As long as she was waking him up, taking him out of the horrible dream he had been having, back into the normal world, nice normal Carla with her Playtex Living Girdle and her buck teeth—

Buck teeth, yes. But not Carla's buck teeth. Carla had weak-looking chipmunk buck teeth. But these teeth were—

Hairy.

Green hair was growing on these buck teeth. It almost looked like—

Grass'?

“Oh my God,” Harold said.

“You fainted, buddy, right, huh?” The lawnmower man was bending over him, grinning with his hairy teeth. His lips and chin were hairy, too. Everything was hairy. And green. The yard stank of grass and gas and too sudden silence.

Harold bolted up to a sitting position and stared at the dead mower. All the grass had been neatly cut. And there would be no need to rake this job, Harold observed sickly. If the lawnmower man had missed a single cut blade, he couldn't see it. He squinted obliquely at the lawnmower man and winced. He was still naked, still fat, still terrifying. Green trickles ran from the corners of his mouth.

“What is this?” Harold begged.

The man waved an arm benignly at the lawn. “This? Well, it's a new thing the boss has been trying. It works out real good. Real good, buddy. We're killing two birds with one stone. We keep getting along toward the final stage, and we're making money to support our other operations to boot. See what I mean? Of course every now and then we run into a customer who doesn't understand—some people got

no respect for efficiency, right?—but the boss is always agreeable to a sacrifice. Sort of keeps the wheels greased, if you catch me.”

Harold said nothing. One word knelled over and over in his mind, and that word was “sacrifice.” In his mind’s eye he saw the mole spewing out from under the battered red mower.

He got up slowly, like a palsied old man. “Of course,” he said, and could only come up with a line from one of Alicia’s folk-rock records. “God bless the grass.”

The lawnmower man slapped one summer-apple-colored thigh. “That’s pretty good, buddy. In fact, that’s damned good. I can see you got the right spirit. Okay if I write that down when I get back to the office? Might mean a promotion.”

“Certainly,” Harold said, retreating toward the back door and striving to keep his melting smile in place. “You go right ahead and finish. I think I’ll take a little nap—”

“Sure, buddy,” the lawnmower man said, getting ponderously to his feet. Harold noticed the unusually deep split between the first and second toes, almost as if the feet were ... well, cloven.

“It hits everybody kinda hard at first,” the lawnmower man said. “You’ll get used to it.” He eyed Harold’s portly figure shrewdly. “In fact, you might even want to give it a whirl yourself. The boss has always got an eye out for new talent.”

“The boss,” Harold repeated faintly.

The lawnmower man paused at the bottom of the steps and gazed tolerantly up at Harold Parkette. “Well, say, buddy. I figured you must have guessed ... God bless the grass and all.”

Harold shook his head carefully and the lawnmower man laughed.

“Pan. Pan’s the boss.” And he did a half hop, half shuffle in the newly cut grass and the lawnmower screamed into life and began to trundle around the house.

“The neighbors—” Harold began, but the lawnmower man only waved cheerily and disappeared.

Out front the lawnmower blatted and howled. Harold Parkette refused to look, as if by refusing he could deny the grotesque spectacle that the Castonmeyers and Smiths—wretched Democrats both—were probably drinking in with horrified but no doubt righteously I-told-you-so eyes.

Instead of looking, Harold went to the telephone, snatched it up, and dialed police headquarters from the emergency decal pasted on the phone’s handset.

“Sergeant Hall,” the voice at the other end said.

Harold stuck a finger in his free ear and said, “My name is Harold Parkette. My address is 1421 East Endicott Street. I’d like to report ...” What? What would he like to report? A man is in the process of raping and murdering my lawn and he works for a fellow named Pan and has cloven feet?

“Yes, Mr. Parkette?”

Inspiration struck. “I’d like to report a case of indecent exposure.”

“Indecent exposure,” Sergeant Hall repeated.

“Yes. There’s a man mowing my lawn. He’s in the, uh, altogether.”

“You mean he’s naked?” Sergeant Hall asked, politely incredulous.

“Naked!” Harold agreed, holding tightly to the frayed ends of his sanity. “Nude. Unclothed. Bare-assed. On my front lawn. Now will you get somebody the hell over here?”

“That address was 1421 West Endicott?” Sergeant Hall asked bemusedly.

“East!” Harold yelled. “For God’s sake—”

“And you say he’s definitely naked? You are able to observe his, uh, genitals and so on?”

Harold tried to speak and could only gargle. The sound of the insane lawnmower seemed to be growing louder and louder, drowning out everything in the universe. He felt his gorge rise.

“Can you speak up?” Sergeant Hall buzzed. “There’s an awfully noisy connection there at your end—”

The front door crashed open.

Harold looked around and saw the lawnmower man’s mechanized familiar advancing through the door. Behind it came the lawnmower man himself, still quite naked. With something approaching true insanity, Harold saw the man’s pubic hair was a rich fertile green. He was twirling his baseball cap on one finger.

“That was a mistake, buddy,” the lawnmower man said reproachfully. “You shoulda stuck with God bless the grass.”

“Hello? Hello, Mr. Parkette—”

The telephone dropped from Harold’s nerveless fingers as the lawnmower began to advance on him, cutting through the nap of Carla’s new Mohawk rug and spitting out brown hunks of fiber as it came.

Harold stared at it with a kind of bird-and-snake fascination until it reached the coffee table. When the mower shunted it aside, shearing one leg into sawdust and splinters as it did so, he climbed over the back of his chair and began to retreat toward the kitchen, dragging the chair in front of him.

“That won’t do any good, buddy,” the lawnmower man said kindly. “Apt to be messy, too. Now if you was just to show me where you keep your sharpest butcher knife, we could get this sacrifice business out of the way real painless ... I think the birdbath would do ... and then—”

Harold shoved the chair at the lawnmower, which had been craftily flanking him while the naked man drew his attention, and bolted through the doorway. The lawnmower roared around the chair, jetting out exhaust, and as Harold smashed open the porch screen door and leaped down the steps, he heard it—smelled it, felt it—right at his heels.

The lawnmower roared off the top step like a skier going off a jump. Harold sprinted across his newly cut back lawn, but there had been too many beers, too many afternoon naps. He could sense it nearing him, then on his heels, and then he looked over his shoulder and tripped over his own feet.

The last thing Harold Parkette saw was the grinning grill of the charging lawnmower, rocking back to reveal its flashing, green-stained blades, and above it the fat face of the lawnmower man, shaking his head in good-natured reproof.

“Hell of a thing,” Lieutenant Goodwin said as the last of the photographs were taken. He nodded to the two men in white, and they trundled their basket across the lawn. “He reported some naked guy on his lawn not two hours ago.”

“Is that so?” Patrolman Cooley asked.

“Yeah. One of the neighbors called in, too. Guy named Castonmeyer. He thought it was Parkette himself. Maybe it was, Cooley. Maybe it was.”

“Sir?”

“Crazy with the heat,” Lieutenant Goodwin said gravely, and tapped his temple. “Schizo-fucking-phrenia.”

“Yes sir,” Cooley said respectfully.

“Where’s the rest of him?” one of the white-coats asked.

“The birdbath,” Goodwin said. He looked profoundly up at the sky.

“Did you say the birdbath?” the white-coat asked.

“Indeed I did,” Lieutenant Goodwin agreed. Patrolman Cooley looked at the birdbath and suddenly lost most of his tan.

“Sex maniac,” Lieutenant Goodwin said. “Must have been.”

“Prints?” Cooley asked thickly.

“You might as well ask for footprints,” Goodwin said. He gestured at the newly cut grass.

Patrolman Cooley made a strangled noise in his throat.

Lieutenant Goodwin stuffed his hands into his pockets and rocked back on his heels. “The world,” he said gravely, “is full of nuts. Never forget that, Cooley. Schizos. Lab boys say somebody chased Parkette through his own living room with a lawnmower. Can you imagine that?”

“No sir,” Cooley said.

Goodwin looked out over Harold Parkette’s neatly manicured lawn. “Well, like the man said when he saw the black-haired Swede, it surely is a Norse of a different color.”

Goodwin strolled around the house and Cooley followed him. Behind them, the scent of newly mown grass hung pleasantly in the air.

THE LEDGE

Stephen King

“Go on,” Cressner said again. “Look in the bag.”

We were in his penthouse apartment, forty-three stories up. The carpet was deep-cut pile, burnt orange. In the middle, between the Basque sling chair where Cressner sat and the genuine leather couch where no one at all sat, there was a brown shopping bag.

“If it’s a payoff, forget it,” I said. “I love her.”

“It’s money, but it’s not a payoff. Go on. Look.” He was smoking a Turkish cigarette in an onyx holder. The air-circulation system allowed me just a dry whiff of the tobacco and then whipped it away. He was wearing a silk dressing gown on which a dragon was embroidered. His eyes were calm and intelligent behind his glasses. He looked just like what he was: an A-number-one, 500-carat, dyed-in-the-wool son of a bitch. I loved his wife, and she loved me. I had expected him to make trouble, and I knew this was it, but I just wasn’t sure what brand it was.

I went to the shopping bag and tipped it over. Banded bundles of currency tumbled out on the rug. All twenties. I picked one of the bundles up and counted. Ten bills to a bundle. There were a lot of bundles.

“Twenty thousand dollars,” he said, and puffed on his cigarette.

I stood up. “Okay.”

“It’s for you.”

“I don’t want it.”

“My wife comes with it.”

I didn’t say anything. Marcia had warned me how it would be. He’s like a cat, she had said. An old tom full of meanness. He’ll try to make you a mouse.

“So you’re a tennis pro,” he said. “I don’t believe I’ve ever actually seen one before.”

“You mean your detectives didn’t get any pictures?”

“Oh, yes.” He waved the cigarette holder negligently. “Even a motion picture of the two of you in that Bayside Motel. A camera was behind the mirror. But pictures are hardly the same, are they?”

“If you say so.”

He’ll keep changing tacks, Marcia had said. It’s the way he puts people on the defensive. Pretty soon he’ll have you hitting out at where you think he’s going to be, and he’ll get you someplace else. Say as little as possible, Stan. And remember that I love you.

“I invited you up because I thought we should have a little man-to-man chat, Mr. Norris. Just a pleasant conversation between two civilized human beings, one of whom has made off with the other’s wife.”

I started to answer but decided not to.

“Did you enjoy San Quentin?” Cressner said, puffing lazily.

“Not particularly.”

“I believe you passed three years there. A charge of breaking and entering, if I’m correct.”

“Marcia knows about it,” I said, and immediately wished I hadn’t. I was playing his game, just what Marcia had warned against. Hitting soft lobs for him to smash back.

“I’ve taken the liberty of having your car moved,” he said, glancing out the window at the far end of the room. It really wasn’t a window at all: the whole wall was glass. In the middle was a sliding-glass door. Beyond it, a balcony the size of a postage stamp. Beyond that,

a very long drop. There was something strange about the door. I couldn't quite put my finger on it.

"This is a very pleasant building," Cressner said. "Good security. Closed-circuit TV and all that. When I knew you were in the lobby, I made a telephone call. An employee then hot-wired the ignition of your car and moved it from the parking area here to a public lot several blocks away." He glanced up at the modernistic sunburst clock above the couch. It was 8:05. "At 8:20 the same employee will call the police from a public phone booth concerning your car. By 8:30, at the latest, the minions of the law will have discovered over six ounces of heroin hidden in the spare tire of your trunk. You will be eagerly sought after, Mr. Norris."

He had set me up. I had tried to cover myself as well as I could, but in the end I had been child's play for him.

"These things will happen unless I call my employee and tell him to forget the phone call."

"And all I have to do is tell you where Marcia is," I said. "No deal, Cressner, I don't know. We set it up this way just for you."

"My men had her followed."

"I don't think so. I think we lost them at the airport."

Cressner sighed, removed the smoldering cigarette holder, and dropped it into a chromium ashtray with a sliding lid. No fuss, no muss. The used cigarette and Stan Norris had been taken care of with equal ease.

"Actually," he said, "you're right. The old ladies'-room vanishing act. My operatives were extremely vexed to have been taken in by such an ancient ruse. I think it was so old they never expected it."

I said nothing. After Marcia had ditched Cressner's operatives at the airport, she had taken the bus shuttle back to the city and then to the

bus station; that had been the plan. She had two hundred dollars, all the money that had been in my savings account. Two hundred dollars and a Greyhound bus could take you anyplace in the country.

“Are you always so uncommunicative?” Cressner asked, and he sounded genuinely interested.

“Marcia advised it.”

A little more sharply, he said: “Then I imagine you’ll stand on your rights when the police take you in. And the next time you see my wife could be when she’s a little old grandmother in a rocker. Have you gotten that through your head? I understand that possession of six ounces of heroin could get you forty years.”

“That won’t get you Marcia back.”

He smiled thinly. “And that’s the nub of it, isn’t it? Shall I review where we are? You and my wife have fallen in love. You have had an affair ... if you want to call a series of one-nighters in cheap motels an affair. My wife has left me. However, I have you. And you are in what is called a bind. Does that summarize it adequately?”

“I can understand why she got tired of you,” I said.

To my surprise, he threw back his head and laughed. “You know, I rather like you, Mr. Norris. You’re vulgar and you’re a piker, but you seem to have heart. Marcia said you did. I rather doubted it. Her judgment of character is lax. But you do have a certain ... verve. Which is why I’ve set things up the way I have. No doubt Marcia has told you that I am fond of wagering.”

“Yes.” Now I knew what was wrong with the door in the middle of the glass wall. It was the middle of winter, and no one was going to want to take tea on a balcony forty-three stories up. The balcony had been cleared of furniture. And the screen had been taken off the door. Now why would Cressner have done that?

“I don’t like my wife very much,” Cressner said, fixing another cigarette carefully in the holder. “That’s no secret. I’m sure she’s told you as much. And I’m sure a man of your ... experience knows that contented wives do not jump into the hay with the local tennis-club pro at the drop of a racket. In my opinion, Marcia is a prissy, whey-faced little prude, a whiner, a weeper, a bearer of tales, a—”

“That’s about enough,” I said.

He smiled coldly. “I beg your pardon. I keep forgetting we are discussing your beloved. It’s 8:16. Are you nervous?”

I shrugged.

“Tough to the end,” he said, and lit his cigarette. “At any rate, you may wonder why, if I dislike Marcia so much, I do not simply give her her freedom—”

“No, I don’t wonder at all.”

He frowned at me.

“You’re a selfish, grasping, egocentric son of a bitch. That’s why. No one takes what’s yours. Not even if you don’t want it anymore.”

He went red and then laughed. “One for you, Mr. Norris. Very good.”

I shrugged again.

“I’m going to offer you a wager. If you win, you leave here with the money, the woman, and your freedom. On the other hand, if you lose, you lose your life.”

I looked at the clock. I couldn’t help it. It was 8:19.

“All right,” I said. What else? It would buy time, at least. Time for me to think of some way to beat it out of here, with or without the money.

Cressner picked up the telephone beside him and dialed a number.

“Tony? Plan two. Yes.” He hung up.

“What’s plan two?” I asked.

“I’ll call Tony back in fifteen minutes, and he will remove the ... offending substance from the trunk of your car and drive it back here. If I don’t call, he will get in touch with the police.”

“Not very trusting, are you?”

“Be sensible, Mr. Norris. There is twenty thousand dollars on the carpet between us. In this city murder has been committed for twenty cents.”

“What’s the bet?”

He looked genuinely pained. “Wager, Mr. Norris, wager. Gentlemen make wagers. Vulgarians place bets.”

“Whatever you say.”

“Excellent. I’ve seen you looking at my balcony.”

“The screen’s off the door.”

“Yes. I had it taken off this afternoon. What I propose is this: that you walk around my building on the ledge that juts out just below the penthouse level. If you circumnavigate the building successfully, the jackpot is yours.”

“You’re crazy.”

“On the contrary. I have proposed this wager six times to six different people during my dozen years in this apartment. Three of the six were professional athletes, like you—one of them a notorious quarterback more famous for his TV Commercials than his passing game, one a baseball player, one a rather famous jockey who made an extraordinary yearly salary and who was also afflicted with extraordinary alimony problems. The other three were more ordinary

citizens who had differing professions but two things in common: a need for money and a certain degree of body grace.” He puffed his cigarette thoughtfully and then continued. “The wager was declined five times out of hand. On the other occasion, it was accepted. The terms were twenty thousand dollars against six months’ service to me. I collected. The fellow took one look over the edge of the balcony and nearly fainted.” Cressner looked amused and contemptuous. “He said everything down there looked so small. That was what killed his nerve.”

“What makes you think—”

He cut me off with an annoyed wave of his hand. “Don’t bore me, Mr. Norris. I think you will do it because you have no choice. It’s my wager on the one hand or forty years in San Quentin on the other. The money and my wife are only added fillips, indicative of my good nature.”

“What guarantee do I have that you won’t double-cross me? Maybe I’d do it and find out you’d called Tony and told him to go ahead anyway.”

He sighed. “You are a walking case of paranoia, Mr. Norris. I don’t love my wife. It is doing my storied ego no good at all to have her around. Twenty thousand dollars is a pittance to me. I pay four times that every week to be given to police bagmen. As for the wager, however ...” His eyes gleamed. “That is beyond price.”

I thought about it, and he left me. I suppose he knew that the real mark always convinces himself. I was a thirty-six-year-old tennis bum, and the club had been thinking of letting me go when Marcia applied a little gentle pressure. Tennis was the only profession I knew, and without it, even getting a job as a janitor would be tough—especially with a record. It was kid stuff, but employers don’t care.

And the funny thing was that I really loved Marcia Cressner. I had fallen for her after two nine-o’clock tennis lessons, and she had fallen for me just as hard. It was a case of Stan Norris luck, all right.

After thirty-six years of happy bachelorhood, I had fallen like a sack of mail for the wife of an Organization overlord.

The old tom sitting there and puffing his imported Turkish cigarette knew all that, of course. And something else, as well. I had no guarantee that he wouldn't turn me in if I accepted his wager and won, but I knew damn well that I'd be in the cooler by ten o'clock if I didn't. And the next time I'd be free would be at the turn of the century.

"I want to know one thing," I said.

"What might that be, Mr. Norris?"

"Look me right in the face and tell me if you're a welsher or not."

He looked at me directly. "Mr. Norris," he said quietly, "I never welsh."

"All right," I said. What other choice was there?

He stood up, beaming. "Excellent! Really excellent! Approach the door to the balcony with me, Mr. Norris."

We walked over together. His face was that of a man who had dreamed this scene hundreds of times and was enjoying its actuality to the fullest.

"The ledge is five inches wide," he said dreamily. "I've measured it myself. In fact, I've stood on it, holding on to the balcony, of course. All you have to do is lower yourself over the wrought-iron railing. You'll be chest-high. But, of course, beyond the railing there are no handgrips. You'll have to inch your way along, being very careful not to overbalance."

My eye had fastened on something else outside the window ... something that made my blood temperature sink several degrees. It was a wind gauge. Cressner's apartment was quite close to the lake, and it was high enough so there were no higher buildings to act as a

windbreak. That wind would be cold, and it would cut like a knife. The needle was standing at ten pretty steadily, but a gust would send the needle almost up to twenty-five for a few seconds before dropping off.

“Ah, I see you’ve noticed my wind gauge,” Cressner said jovially. “Actually, it’s the other side which gets the prevailing wind; so the breeze may be a little stronger on that side. But actually this is a fairly still night. I’ve seen evenings when the wind has gusted up to eighty-five ... you can actually feel the building rock a little. A bit like being on a ship, in the crow’s nest. And it’s quite mild for this time of year.”

He pointed, and I saw the lighted numerals atop a bank skyscraper to the left. They said it was forty-four degrees. But with the wind, that would have made the chill factor somewhere in the mid-twenties.

“Have you got a coat?” I asked. I was wearing a light jacket.

“Alas, no.” The lighted figures on the bank switched to show the time. It was 8:32. “And I think you had better get started, Mr. Norris, so I can call Tony and put plan three into effect. A good boy but apt to be impulsive. You understand.”

I understood, all right. Too damn well.

But the thought of being with Marcia, free from Cressner’s tentacles and with enough money to get started at something made me push open the sliding-glass door and step out onto the balcony. It was cold and damp; the wind ruffled my hair into my eyes.

“Bon soir,” Cressner said behind me, but I didn’t bother to look back. I approached the railing, but I didn’t look down. Not yet. I began to do deep-breathing.

It’s not really an exercise at all but a form of self-hypnosis. With every inhale-exhale, you throw a distraction out of your mind, until there’s nothing left but the match ahead of you. I got rid of the money

with one breath and Cressner himself with two. Marcia took longer—her face kept rising in my mind, telling me not to be stupid, not to play his game, that maybe Cressner never wshed, but he always hedged his bets. I didn't listen. I couldn't afford to. If I lost this match, I wouldn't have to buy the beers and take the ribbing; I'd be so much scarlet sludge splattered for a block of Deakman Street in both directions.

When I thought I had it, I looked down.

The building sloped away like a smooth chalk cliff to the street far below. The cars parked there looked like those match-box models you can buy in the five-and-dime. The ones driving by the building were just tiny pinpoints of light. If you fell that far, you would have plenty of time to realize just what was happening, to see the wind blowing your clothes as the earth pulled you back faster and faster. You'd have time to scream a long, long scream. And the sound you made when you hit the pavement would be like the sound of an overripe watermelon.

I could understand why that other guy had chickened out. But he'd only had six months to worry about. I was staring forty long, gray, Marcia-less years in the eye.

I looked at the ledge. It looked small, I had never seen five inches that looked so much like two. At least the building was fairly new; it wouldn't crumble under me.

I hoped.

I swung over the railing and carefully lowered myself until I was standing on the ledge. My heels were out over the drop. The floor on the balcony was about chest-high, and I was looking into Cressner's penthouse through the wrought-iron ornamental bars. He was standing inside the door, smoking, watching me the way a scientist watches a guinea pig to see what the latest injection will do.

"Call," I said, holding on to the railing.

“What?”

“Call Tony. I don’t move until you do.”

He went back into the living room—it looked amazingly warm and safe and cozy—and picked up the phone. It was a worthless gesture, really. With the wind, I couldn’t hear what he was saying. He put the phone down and returned. “Taken care of, Mr. Norris.”

“It better be.”

“Goodbye, Mr. Norris. I’ll see you in a bit ... perhaps.”

It was time to do it. Talking was done. I let myself think of Marcia one last time, her light-brown hair, her wide gray eyes, her lovely body, and then put her out of my mind for good. No more looking down, either. It would have been too easy to get paralyzed, looking down through that space. Too easy to just freeze up until you lost your balance or just fainted from fear. It was time for tunnel vision. Time to concentrate on nothing but left foot, right foot.

I began to move to the right, holding on to the balcony’s railing as long as I could. It didn’t take long to see I was going to need all the tennis muscle my ankles had. With my heels beyond the edge, those tendons would be taking all my weight.

I got to the end of the balcony, and for a moment I didn’t think I was going to be able to let go of that safety. I forced myself to do it. Five inches, hell, that was plenty of room. If the ledge were only a foot off the ground instead of 400 feet, you could breeze around this building in four minutes flat, I told myself. So just pretend it is.

Yeah, and if you fall from a ledge a foot off the ground, you just say rats, and try again. Up here you get only one chance.

I slid my right foot farther and then brought my left foot next to it. I let go of the railing. I put my open hands up, allowing the palms to rest

against the rough stone of the apartment building. I caressed the stone. I could have kissed it.

A gust of wind hit me, snapping the collar of my jacket against my face, making my body sway on the ledge. My heart jumped into my throat and stayed there until the wind had died down. A strong enough gust would have peeled me right off my perch and sent me flying down into the night. And the wind would be stronger on the other side.

I turned my head to the left, pressing my cheek against the stone. Cressner was leaning over the balcony, watching me.

“Enjoying yourself?” he asked affably.

He was wearing a brown camel’s-hair overcoat.

“I thought you didn’t have a coat,” I said.

“I lied,” he answered equably. “I lie about a lot of things.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing ... nothing at all. Or perhaps it does mean something. A little psychological warfare, eh, Mr. Norris? I should tell you not to linger overlong. The ankles grow tired, and if they should give way ...” He took an apple out of his pocket, bit into it, and then tossed it over the edge. There was no sound for a long time. Then, a faint and sickening plop. Cressner chuckled.

He had broken my concentration, and I could feel panic nibbling at the edges of my mind with steel teeth. A torrent of terror wanted to rush in and drown me. I turned my head away from him and did deep-breathing, flushing the panic away. I was looking at the lighted bank sign, which now said: 8:46, Time to Save at Mutual!

By the time the lighted numbers read 8:49, I felt that I had myself under control again. I think Cressner must have decided I’d frozen,

and I heard a sardonic patter of applause when I began to shuffle toward the corner of the building again.

I began to feel the cold. The lake had whetted the edge of the wind; its clammy dampness bit at my skin like an auger. My thin jacket billowed out behind me as I shuffled along. I moved slowly, cold or not. If I was going to do this, I would have to do it slowly and deliberately. If I rushed, I would fall.

The bank clock read 8:52 when I reached the corner. It didn't appear to be a problem—the ledge went right around, making a square corner—but my right hand told me that there was a crosswind. If I got caught leaning the wrong way, I would take a long ride very quickly.

I waited for the wind to drop, but for a long time it refused to, almost as though it were Cressner's willing ally. It slapped against me with vicious, invisible fingers, prying and poking and tickling. At last, after a particularly strong gust had made me rock on my toes, I knew that I could wait forever and the wind would never drop all the way off.

So the next time it sank a little, I slipped my right foot around and, clutching both walls with my hands, made the turn. The crosswind pushed me two ways at once, and I tottered. For a second I was sickeningly sure that Cressner had won his wager. Then I slid a step farther along and pressed myself tightly against the wall, a held breath slipping out of my dry throat.

That was when the raspberry went off, almost in my ear.

Startled, I jerked back to the very edge of balance. My hands lost the wall and pinwheeled crazily for balance. I think that if one of them had hit the stone face of the building, I would have been gone. But after what seemed an eternity, gravity decided to let me return to the wall instead of sending me down to the pavement forty-three stories below.

My breath sobbed out of my lungs in a pained whistle. My legs were rubbery. The tendons in my ankles were humming like high-voltage wires. I had never felt so mortal. The man with the sickle was close enough to read over my shoulder.

I twisted my neck, looked up, and there was Cressner, leaning out of his bedroom window four feet above me. He was smiling, in his right hand he held a New Year's Eve noisemaker.

"Just keeping you on your toes," he said.

I didn't waste my breath. I couldn't have spoken above a croak anyway. My heart was thudding crazily in my chest. I sidled five or six feet along, just in case he was thinking about leaning out and giving me a good shove. Then I stopped and closed my eyes and deep-breathed until I had my act back together again.

I was on the short side of the building now. On my right only the highest towers of the city bulked above me. On the left, only the dark circle of the lake, with a few pinpricks of light which floated on it. The wind whooped and moaned.

The crosswind at the second corner was not so tricky, and I made it around with no trouble. And then something bit me.

I gasped and jerked. The shift of balance scared me, and I pressed tightly against the building. I was bitten again. No ... not bitten but pecked. I looked down.

There was a pigeon standing on the ledge, looking up with bright, hateful eyes.

You get used to pigeons in the city; they're as common as cab drivers who can't change a ten. They don't like to fly, and they give ground grudgingly, as if the sidewalks were theirs by squatters' rights. Oh, yes, and you're apt to find their calling cards on the hood of your car. But you never take much notice. They may be occasionally irritating, but they're interlopers in our world.

But I was in his, and I was nearly helpless, and he seemed to know it. He pecked my tired right ankle again, sending a bright dart of pain up my leg.

“Get,” I snarled at it. “Get out.”

The pigeon only pecked me again. I was obviously in what he regarded as his home; this section of the ledge was covered with droppings, old and new.

A muted cheeping from above.

I cricked my neck as far back as it would go and looked up. A beak darted at my face, and I almost recoiled. If I had, I might have become the city’s first pigeon-induced casualty. It was Mama Pigeon, protecting a bunch of baby pigeons just under the slight overhang of the roof. Too far up to peck my head, thank God.

Her husband pecked me again, and now blood was flowing. I could feel it. I began to inch my way along again, hoping to scare the pigeon off the ledge. No way. Pigeons don’t scare, not city pigeons, anyway. If a moving van only makes them amble a little faster, a man pinned on a high ledge isn’t going to upset them at all.

The pigeon backpedaled as I shuffled forward, his bright eyes never leaving my face except when the sharp beak dipped to peck my ankle. And the pain was getting more intense now; the bird was pecking at raw flesh ... and eating it, for all I knew.

I kicked at it with my right foot. It was a weak kick, the only kind I could afford. The pigeon only fluttered its wings a bit and then returned to the attack. I, on the other hand, almost went off the side.

The pigeon pecked me again, again, again. A cold blast of wind struck me, rocking me to the limit of balance; pads of my fingers scraped at the bland stone, and I came to rest with my left cheek pressed against the wall, breathing heavily.

Cressner couldn't have conceived of worse torture if he had planned it for ten years. One peck was not so bad. Two or three were little more. But that damned bird must have pecked me sixty times before I reached the wrought-iron railing of the penthouse opposite Cressner's.

Reaching that railing was like reaching the gates of heaven. My hands curled sweetly around the cold uprights and held on as if they would never let go.

Peck.

The pigeon was staring up at me almost smugly with its bright eyes, confident of my impotence and its own invulnerability. I was reminded of Cressner's expression when he had ushered me out onto the balcony on the other side of the building.

Gripping the iron bars more tightly, I lashed out with a hard, strong kick and caught the pigeon squarely. It emitted a wholly satisfying squawk and rose into the air, wings flapping. A few feathers, dove gray, settled back to the ledge or disappeared slowly down into the darkness, swan-boating back and forth in the air.

Gasping, I crawled up onto the balcony and collapsed there. Despite the cold, my body was dripping with sweat. I don't know how long I lay there, recuperating. The building hid the bank clock, and I don't wear a watch.

I sat up before my muscles could stiffen up on me and gingerly rolled down my sock. The right ankle was lacerated and bleeding, but the wound looked superficial. Still, I would have to have it taken care of, if I ever got out of this. God knows what germs pigeons carry around. I thought of bandaging the raw skin but decided not to. I might stumble on a tied bandage. Time enough later. Then I could buy twenty thousand dollars' worth of bandages.

I got up and looked longingly into the darkened penthouse opposite Cressner's. Barren, empty, un-lived in. The heavy storm screen was

over this door. I might have been able to break in, but that would have been forfeiting the bet. And I had more to lose than money.

When I could put it off no longer, I slipped over the railing and back onto the ledge. The pigeon, a few feathers worse for wear, was standing below his mate's nest, where the guano was thickest, eyeing me balefully. But I didn't think he'd bother me, not when he saw I was moving away.

It was very hard to move away—much harder than it had been to leave Cressner's balcony. My mind knew I had to, but my body, particularly my ankles, was screaming that it would be folly to leave such a safe harbor. But I did leave, with Marcia's face in the darkness urging me on.

I got to the second short side, made it around the corner, and shuffled slowly across the width of the building. Now that I was getting close, there was an almost ungovernable urge to hurry, to get it over with. But if I hurried, I would die. So I forced myself to go slowly.

The crosswind almost got me again on the fourth corner, and I slipped around it thanks to luck rather than skill. I rested against the building, getting my breath back. But for the first time I knew that I was going to make it, that I was going to win. My hands felt like half-frozen steaks, my ankles hurt like fire (especially the pigeon-pecked right ankle), sweat kept trickling in my eyes, but I knew I was going to make it. Halfway down the length of the building, warm yellow light spilled out on Cressner's balcony. Far beyond I could see the bank sign glowing like a welcome-home banner. It was 10:48, but it seemed that I had spent my whole life on those five inches of ledge.

And God help Cressner if he tried to welsh. The urge to hurry was gone. I almost lingered. It was 11:09 when I put first my right hand on the wrought-iron balcony railing and then my left. I hauled myself up, wriggled over the top, collapsed thankfully on the floor ... and felt the cold steel muzzle of a .45 against my temple.

I looked up and saw a goon ugly enough to stop Big Ben dead in its clockwork. He was grinning.

“Excellent!” Cressner’s voice said from within. “I applaud you, Mr. Norris!” He proceeded to do just that. “Bring him in, Tony.”

Tony hauled me up and set me on my feet so abruptly that my weak ankles almost buckled. Going in, I staggered against the balcony door.

Cressner was standing by the living-room fireplace, sipping brandy from a goblet the size of a fishbowl. The money had been replaced in the shopping bag. It still stood in the middle of the burnt-orange rug.

I caught a glimpse of myself in a small mirror on the other side of the room. The hair was disheveled, the face pallid except for two bright spots of color on the cheeks. The eyes looked insane.

I got only a glimpse, because the next moment I was flying across the room. I hit the Basque chair and fell over it, pulling it down on top of me and losing my wind.

When I got some of it back, I sat up and managed: “You lousy welsher. You had this planned.”

“Indeed I did,” Cressner said, carefully setting his brandy on the mantel. “But I’m not a welsher, Mr. Norris. Indeed no. Just an extremely poor loser. Tony is here only to make sure you don’t do anything ... ill-advised.” He put his fingers under his chin and tittered a little. He didn’t look like a poor loser. He looked more like a cat with canary feathers on its muzzle. I got up, suddenly feeling more frightened than I had on the ledge.

“You fixed it,” I said slowly. “Somehow, you fixed it.”

“Not at all. The heroin has been removed from your car. The car itself is back in the parking lot. The money is over there. You may

take it and go.”

“Fine,” I said.

Tony stood by the glass door to the balcony, still looking like a leftover from Halloween. The .45 was in his hand. I walked over to the shopping bag, picked it up, and walked toward the door on my jittery ankles, fully expecting to be shot down in my tracks. But when I got the door open, I began to have the same feeling that I’d had on the ledge when I rounded the fourth corner: I was going to make it.

Cressner’s voice, lazy and amused, stopped me.

“You don’t really think that old lady’s-room dodge fooled anyone, do you?”

I turned back slowly, the shopping bag in my arms. “What do you mean?”

“I told you I never welsh, and I never do. You won three things, Mr. Norris. The money, your freedom, my wife. You have the first two. You can pick up the third at the county morgue.”

I stared at him, unable to move, frozen in a soundless thunderclap of shock.

“You didn’t really think I’d let you have her?” he asked me pityingly. “Oh, no. The money, yes. Your freedom, yes. But not Marcia. Still, I don’t welsh. And after you’ve had her buried—”

I didn’t go near him. Not then. He was for later. I walked toward Tony, who looked slightly surprised until Cressner said in a bored voice: “Shoot him, please.”

I threw the bag of money. It hit him squarely in the gun hand, and it struck him hard. I hadn’t been using my arms and wrists out there, and they’re the best part of any tennis player. His bullet went into the burnt-orange rug, and then I had him.

His face was the toughest part of him. I yanked the gun out of his hand and hit him across the bridge of the nose with the barrel. He went down with a single very weary grunt, looking like Rondo Hatton.

Cressner was almost out the door when I snapped a shot over his shoulder and said, "Stop right there, or you're dead."

He thought about it and stopped. When he turned around, his cosmopolitan world-weary act had curdled a little around the edges. It curdled a little more when he saw Tony lying on the floor and choking on his own blood.

"She's not dead," he said quickly. "I had to salvage something, didn't I?" He gave me a sick, cheese-eating grin.

"I'm a sucker, but I'm not that big a sucker," I said. My voice sounded lifeless, dead. Why not? Marcia had been my life, and this man had put her on a slab.

With a finger that trembled slightly, Cressner pointed at the money tumbled around Tony's feet. "That," he said, "that's chickenfeed. I can get you a hundred thousand. Or five. Or how about a million, all of it in a Swiss bank account? How about that? How about—"

"I'll make you a bet," I said slowly.

He looked from the barrel of the gun to my face. "A—"

"A bet," I repeated. "Not a wager. Just a plain old bet. I'll bet you can't walk around this building on the ledge out there."

His face went dead pale. For a moment I thought he was going to faint. "You ..." he whispered.

"These are the stakes," I said in my dead voice. "If you make it, I'll let you go. How's that?"

"No," he whispered. His eyes were huge, staring.

“Okay,” I said, and cocked the pistol.

“No!” he said, holding his hands out. “No! Don’t! I ... all right.” He licked his lips.

I motioned with the gun, and he preceded me out onto the balcony. “You’re shaking,” I told him. “That’s going to make it harder.”

“Two million,” he said, and he couldn’t get his voice above a husky whine. “Two million in unmarked bills.”

“No,” I said. “Not for ten million. But if you make it, you go free. I’m serious.”

A minute later he was standing on the ledge. He was shorter than I; you could just see his eyes over the edge, wide and beseeching, and his white-knuckled hands gripping the iron rail like prison bars.

“Please,” he whispered. “Anything.”

“You’re wasting time,” I said. “It takes it out of the ankles.”

But he wouldn’t move until I had put the muzzle of the gun against his forehead. Then he began to shuffle to the right, moaning. I glanced up at the bank clock. It was 11:29.

I didn’t think he was going to make it to the first corner. He didn’t want to budge at all, and when he did, he moved jerkily, taking risks with his center of gravity, his dressing gown billowing into the night.

He disappeared around the corner and out of sight at 12:01, almost forty minutes ago. I listened closely for the diminishing scream as the crosswind got him, but it didn’t come. Maybe the wind had dropped. I do remember thinking the wind was on his side, when I was out there. Or maybe he was just lucky. Maybe he’s out on the other balcony now, quivering in a heap, afraid to go any farther.

But he probably knows that if I catch him there when I break into the other penthouse, I’ll shoot him down like a dog. And speaking of the

other side of the building, I wonder how he likes that pigeon.

Was that a scream? I don't know. It might have been the wind. It doesn't matter. The bank clock says 12:44. Pretty soon I'll break into the other apartment and check the balcony, but right now I'm just sitting here on Cressner's balcony with Tony's .45 in my hand. Just on the off chance that he might come around that last corner with his dressing gown billowing out behind him.

Cressner said he's never welshed on a bet.

But I've been known to.

THE LEPRECHAUN

Stephen King

Incomplete novel that King was writing for his son Owen in 1983. King had written several pages of the story in longhand in a notebook and then transcribed them. While on a trip to California, he wrote about 30 more pages of the story in the same notebook, which was lost off the back of his motorcycle (somewhere in coastal New Hampshire) on a trip from Boston to Bangor. He mentioned that he could reconstruct what was lost, but had not gotten around to it (as of June, 1983). The only part that still exists today is the 5 typescript pages that had been transcribed. The 5 pages, plus a 3-page cover letter to a senior editor at Viking are now owned by a King collector.

Once upon a time—which is how all the best stories start— a little boy named Owen was playing outside his big red house. He was pretty bored because his big brother and big sister, who could always think of things to do, were in school. His daddy was working, and his mom was sleeping upstairs. She asked him if he would like a nap, but Owen didn't really like naps. He thought they were boring.

He played with his G.I. Joe men for awhile, and then he went around to the back and swung on the swing for awhile. He gave the tetherball a big hit with his first—ka-bamp!—and watched the rope wind up as the ball went around and around the pole. He saw his big sister's softball bat lying in the grass and wished Chris, the big boy who sometimes came to play with him, was there to throw him a few pitches. But Chris was in school too. Owen walked around the house again. He thought he would pick some flowers for his mother. She liked flowers pretty well.

He got around to the front of the house and that was when he saw Springsteen in the grass. Springsteen was his big sister's new cat. Owen liked most cats, but he didn't like Springsteen much. He was big and black, with deep green eyes that seemed to see everything. Every day Owen had to make sure that Springsteen wasn't trying to eat Butler. Butler was Owen's guinea pig. When Springsteen thought no one was around, he would jump up on the shelf where Butler's big glass cage was and stare in through the screen on top with his hungry green eyes. Springsteen would sit there, all crouched down,

and hardly move at all. Springsteen's tail would wag back and forth a little, and sometimes one of his ears would flick a bit, but that was all. I'll get in there pretty soon, you cruddy little guinea pig, Springsteen seemed to say. And when I get you, I'll eat you! Better believe it! If guinea pigs say prayers, you better say yours!

Whenever Owen saw Springsteen the cat up on Butler's shelf, he would make him get down. Sometimes Springsteen put his claws out (although he knew better than to try to put them in Owen) and Owen imagined the black cat saying, You caught me this time, but so what? Big deal! Someday you won't! And then, yum! yum! dinner is served! Owen tried to tell people that Springsteen wanted to eat Butler, but nobody believed him.

"Don't worry, Owen," Daddy said, and went off to work on a novel that's what he did for work.

"Don't worry, Owen," Mommy said, and went off to work on a novel—because that was what she did for work, too.

"Don't worry, Owen" Big Brother said, and went off to watch The Tomorrow People on TV.

"You just hate my cat!" Big sister said, and went off to play The Entertainer on the piano.

But no matter what they said, Owen knew he'd better keep a good old eye on Springsteen, because Springsteen certainly did like to kill things. Worse, he liked to play with them before he killed them. Sometimes Owen would open the door in the morning and there would be a dead bird on the doorsteo. Then he would look further, and there would be Springsteen crouched on the porch rail, the tip of his tail switching slightly and his big green eyes looking at Owen, as if to say: Ha! I got another one... and you couldn't stop me, could you? Then Owen would ask permission to bury the dead bird. Sometimes his mommy or daddy would help him.

So when Owen saw Springsteen on the grass of the front lawn, all crouched down with his tail twitching, he thought right away that the cat might be playing with some poor, hurt little animal. Owen forgot about picking flowers for his mom and ran over to see what Springsteen had caught.

At first he thought Springsteen didn't have anything at all. Then the cat leaped, and Owen heard a very tiny scream from the grass. He saw something green and blue between Springsteen had was shrieking and trying to get away. And now Owen saw something else—little spots of blood on the grass.

“No!” Owen shouted. “Get away, Springsteen!” The cat flattened his ears back and turned towards the sound of Owen's voice. His big green eyes glared. The green and blue thing between Springsteen paws squiggled and wiggled and got away. I started to run and Owen saw it was a person, a little tiny man wearing a green hat made out of a leaf. The little man looked back over his shoulder, and Owen saw how scared the little guy was. He was no bigger than the mice Springsteen sometimes killed in their big dark cellar. The little man had a cut down one of his cheeks from one of Springsteen's claws.

Springsteen hissed at Owen and Owen could almost hear him say: “Leave me alone, he's mine and I'm going to have him!”

Then Springsteen jumped for the little man again, just as quick as a cat can jump—and if you have a cat of your own, you'll know that is very fast. The little man in the grass tried to dodge away, but he didn't quite make it, Owen saw the back of the little man's shirt tear open as Springsteen's claws ripped it apart. And, I am sorry to say, he saw more blood and heard the little man cry out in pain. He went tumbling in the grass. His little leaf hat went flying. Springsteen got ready to jump again.

“No, Springsteen, no!” Owen cried. “Bad cat!”

He grabbed Springsteen. Springsteen hissed again, and his needle-sharp teeth sank into one of Owen's hands. It hurt worse than a

doctor's shot. "Ow!" Owen yelled, tears coming to his eyes. But he didn't let go of Springsteen. Now Springsteen started clawing at Owen, but Owen would not let go. He ran all the way to the driveway with Springsteen in his hands. Then he put Springsteen down. "Leave him alone, Springsteen!" Owen said, and, trying to think of the very worst thing he could, he added: "Leave him alone or I'll put you in the Oven and bake you like a pizza!"

Springsteen hissed, showing his teeth. His tail switched back and forth—not just the tip now but the whole thing.

"I don't care if you are mad!" Owen yelled at him. He was still crying a little, because his hands hurt as if he had put them in the fire. They were both bleeding, one from Springsteen biting him and one from Springsteen clawing him. "You can't kill people on our lawn even if they are little!"

Springsteen hissed again and backed away. Okay, his mean green eyes seemed to say. Okay for this time. Next time... we'll see! Then he turned and ran away. Owen hurried back to see if the little man was all right.

At first he thought the little man was gone. Then he saw the blood on the grass, and the little leaf hat. The little man was nearby, lying on his side. The reason Owen hadn't been able to see him at first was the little man's shirt was the exact color of the grass. Owen touched him gently with his finger. He was terribly afraid the little man was dead. But when Owen touched him, the little man groaned and sat up.

"Are you all right?" Owen asked.

The fellow in the grass made a face and clapped his hands to his ears. For a moment Owen thought Springsteen must have hurt the little guy's head as well as his back, and then he realized that his voice must sound like thunder to such a small person. The little man in the grass was not much longer than Owen's thumb. This was Owen's first good look at the little fellow he had rescued, and he saw

right away why the little man had been so hard to find again. His green shirt was not just the color of grass; it was grass. Carefully woven blades of green grass. Owen wondered how come they didn't turn brown.

LISEY AND THE MADMAN

Stephen King

For Nan Graham

I

THE SPOUSES OF WELL-KNOWN WRITERS are almost invisible; no one knows better than Lisey Landon, who has given only one actual interview in her life. This was for the well-known women's magazine that publishes the column "Yes, I'm Married to Him!" She spent roughly half of its five-hundred-word length explaining that her name (actually short for Lisa) rhymes with "CeeCee." Most of the other half had to do with her recipe for slow-cooked roast beef. Her sister Amanda, who can be mean, said that the accompanying photograph made Lisey look fat.

There was another photograph, one that first appeared in the Nashville American and then in newspapers around the world, mostly under the headline HEROIC GRADUATE STUDENT SAVES FAMOUS WRITER, or variations thereof. This one shows a man in his early twenties holding the handle of a shovel that looks almost small enough to be a toy. The young fellow is peering at it, and by his fozzled expression the viewer might infer he has no idea at all of what he's looking at. It could be an artillery shell, a bonsai tree, a radiation detector, or a china pig with a slot in its back for nickel. It could be a whang-dang-doodle, a cloche hat made out of coyote fur, or a phylactery testifying to the pompatus of love. A man ill what looks like a faux highway patrolman's uniform (no gun, but you got your Sam Browne belt running across the chest and I good-sized badge, as well) is shaking the dazed young man's free hand. The cop-he has to be a cop of some kind, gun or not-has a huge oh-thank-God grin on his kisser, the kind that says, Son, you will never have to buy yourself another drink-in a bar where I am, as long as we both shall lire, so help me God, amen. In the background, mostly out of focus, are staring people with dismayed what-the-hell-just-happened expressions on their faces.

And although thousands, perhaps even millions, of people have seen this photo, which has over the years become almost as famous as the one of the mortally wounded Lee Harvey Oswald clutching his belly, no one has ever noticed that the writer's wife is also in it. Yes. Indeed she is. A part of her, anyway.

On the far right-hand side. Not quite halfway up.

If you look closely (a magnifying glass helps in this regard) you'll see half a shoe. Half a brown loafer. Half a cordovan loafer, 11 to be exact, with a quarter-heel. Eighteen years later Lisey Landon can still remember how comfortable those shoes were, and how fast she moved in them that day. Faster than the award-winning photographer, certainly, and she'd not seen the dazed campus cop or the dazed young man-Tony, his name had been-at all. Not then, she hadn't. But she had earlier, and certainly later, in this picture, she knew how it had made her laugh. How it makes her laugh still. Because the spouses of well-known writers are almost always invisible.

But I got a shoe in there, she sometimes thinks. I poked in a loafer. I did that much. Didn't I, Scott?

Her position was always behind him at those ceremonial things, behind him and slightly to the right, with her hands demurely clasped before her. She remembers that very well.

She remembers it all very well, probably better than the rest of them. Probably better than any of them.

II

Lisey stands behind and slightly to Scott's right with her hands clasped demurely before her, watching her husband balance on one foot, the other on the silly little shovel which is half-buried in loose dirt that has clearly been brought in for the occasion. The day is hot, maddeningly humid, almost sickeningly muggy, and the considerable crowd that has gathered only makes matters worse. Unlike the dignitaries in attendance for the groundbreaking, the lookieloo-come-'n'-see folk are not dressed in anything approaching their best, and while their jeans and shorts and pedal pushers may not exactly make them comfortable in the wet-blanket air, Lisey envies them just the same as she stands here at the crowd's forefront in the suck-oven heat of the Tennessee afternoon. Just standing pat, dolled up in her hot-weather best, is stressful: worrying that she'll soon be sweating big dark circles in the light-brown linen top she's wearing over the blue rayon shell blouse. She's got on a great bra for hot weather and still it's biting into the undersides of her boobs. Happy days, babyluv.

Scott, meanwhile, continues balancing on one foot while his hair, too long in back-he needs it cut badly, she knows that he looks in the mirror and sees a rock star but she looks at him and sees a dolled-up hobo out of a Woody Guthrie song-blows in the occasional hot puff of breeze. He's being a good sport while the photographer circles. Damn good sport. He's flanked on the left by a fellow named Tony Eddington, who is going to write up all this happy crappy for the something-or-other (campus newspaper? surely the campus newspaper goes on hiatus at least during the month of August, if not for the entire summer?), and on the right by their standin host, an English department stalwart named

Roger Dashmiel, one of those men who seem older than they are not only because they have lost so much hair and gained so much belly so soon but because they insist upon drawing an almost stifling

gravitas around themselves. Even their witticisms felt like oral readings of insurance policy clauses to Lisey.

Making matters worse in this case is the fact that Roger Dashmiel does not like her husband. Lisey has sensed this at once (it's easy, because most men do like him), and it's given her something upon which to focus her unease. For she is uneasy-profoundly so. She has tried to tell herself that it is no more than the humidity and the gathering clouds in the west presaging strong afternoon thunderstorms or maybe even tornadoes: a low-barometer thing, only that and nothing more. But the barometer wasn't low in Maine when she got out of bed this morning at quarter to seven; it had been a beautiful summer morning already, with the newly risen sun sparkling on a trillion points of dew in the field between the house and the barn which housed Scott's study. What her father, old Dandy Debusher, would have called "a real ham 'n' egger of a day." Yet the instant her feet touched the oak on her side of the bed and her thoughts turned to the trip to Nashville-leave for the Portland jetport at eight, fly out on Delta at nine thirty-her heart dipped with dread and her morning-empty stomach, usually sweet, foamed with unmotivated fear. She'd greeted these sensations with surprised dismay, because she ordinarily liked to travel, especially with Scott: the two of them sitting companionably side by side, he with his book open, she with hers. Sometimes he'd read her a bit of his and sometimes she'd vice him a little versa. Sometimes she'd feel him and look up and find his eyes-his solemn regard. As though she were a mystery to him still. Yes, and sometimes there would be turbulence, and she liked that, too. It was like the rides at the Topsham Fair when she and her sisters had been young. Scott never minded the turbulence, either. She remembered one particularly crazy approach into Denver-strong winds, thunderheads, little prop-job commuter-plane all over the sky and how she'd looked over to see him actually pogo-ing up and down in his seat like a little kid who needs to go to the bathroom, with this crazy grin on his face. No, the rides that scared Scott were the smooth downbound ones he took in the middle of his wakeful nights. Sometimes he talked (lucidly-smiling, even) about things you could see only if you looked through

the fingerprints on a water glass. It scared her to hear him talk like that. Because it was crazy, and because she sort of knew what he meant and didn't want to.

So it wasn't low barometer that had been bothering her-not then-and it certainly hadn't been the prospect of getting on one more airplane or eating one more airline snack (these days she brought their own, anyway, usually homemade trail mix). And then, in the bathroom, reaching for the light over the sink-something she had done without incident or accident day in and out for the entire eight years they'd lived here, which came to approximately three thousand days, less time spent on the road-she smacked the toothglass with the back of her hand and sent it tumbling to the floor, where it shattered into approximately one million stupid pieces.

"Shitfire, save your smuckin' matches!" she cried, lips drawn back from her teeth, frightened and irritated to find herself so: for she did not believe in omens, not she, not Lisey Landon the writer's wife; not little Lisey Debusher, either. Omens were for the shanty Irish. Scott, who had just come back into the bedroom with two cups of coffee and a plate of buttered toast on a tray, stopped dead. "Whadja break, babyluv?"

"Nothing that came out of the dog's ass," Lisey said savagely, and was then sort of astounded with herself. That was one of Granny Debusher's sayings, and Granny D certainly had believed in omens, but that old Irish highpockets had gone on the cooling board when Lisey was only four. Was it even possible Lisey could remember her? It seemed so, for as she stood there, looking down at the stupid shards of toothglass, the actual articulation of the omen came to her, came in Granny D's tobacco-strapped voice ... and comes back now, as she stands watching her husband be a good sport in his lightest-weight summer sport coat (which he will soon be sweating through under the arms nevertheless): Broken glass in the morning, broken hearts at night. That was Granny D's scripture, a11 right, handed down and remembered by at least one little girl before

Granny D pitched down dead in the chicken yard with an apronful of feed and a sack of Bull Durham tied up inside her sleeve.

It isn't the heat, it isn't the trip, and it isn't Dashmiel, who ended up doing the meet'n'greet job only because the head of the English department, with whom Scott had corresponded, is in the hospital following an emergency gall-bladder removal the day before. It is a broken ... smucking ... toothglass at ten minutes to seven in the morning combined with the saying of a long-dead Irish granny. And the joke of it is, Scott will later point out, it's just enough to put her on edge, just enough to get her either strapped or at least semistrapped.

Sometimes, he will tell her not long hence, speaking from a hospital bed (ah, but he could so easily have been on the cooling board himself, all his wakeful, too-thoughtful nights over) in his new high whistling and effortful voice, sometimes just enough is just enough. As the saying is.

And she knew exactly what he meant.

III

Roger Dashmiel has his share of headaches today, Lisey knows that. It doesn't make her like him any better, but sure, she knows. If there was ever an actual script for the ceremony, Professor Hegstrom (he of the emergency gall-bladder attack) has been too muddled to tell Dashmiel what or where it is. Dashmiel has consequently been left with little more than a time of day and a cast of characters featuring a writer to whom he has taken an instant dislike. When the little party of dignitaries left Inman Hall, temporary home of the library sciences staff, for the short but exceedingly warm walk to the site of the forthcoming Shipman Library, Dashmiel told Scott they'd have to more or less play it by ear. Scott shrugged goodnaturedly and nodded. He was absolutely comfortable with that. For Scott Landon, ear was a way of life.

"Ah'll introduce you," Dashmiel said as they walked toward the baked and shimmering plot of land where the new library would stand. The photographer in charge of immortalizing all of this danced restlessly back and forth, hither and yon, snapping and snapping, busy as a gnat. Lisey could see a rectangle of fresh brown earth not far ahead, about nine feet by five, she judged, and pickup-trucked in that morning by the just-starting-to-fade look of it. No one had thought to put up an awning, and already the surface of the fresh dirt had acquired a grayish glaze.

"Somebody better do it," Scott said.

Dashmiel had frowned as if wounded by some undeserved canard. Then, with a sigh, he pressed on. "Applause follows introduction-"

"As day follows night," Scott murmured.

"-and then yew'll say a woid or tew," Dashmiel finished. Beyond the baked tract of land awaiting the library, a freshly paved parking lot shimmered in the sunlight, all smooth tar and staring yellow lines. Lisey saw fantastic ripples of nonexistent water on its far side.

“My pleasure,” Scott said.

The unvarying good nature of his responses seemed to worry Dashmiel rather than reassure him. “Ah hope yew won’t want to say tew much at the groundbreakin’,” he told Scott rather severely as they approached the roped-off area. This had been kept clear, but there was a crowd big enough to stretch almost to the parking lot waiting beyond it. An even larger one had trailed Dashmiel and the Landons from Inman Hall. Soon the two would merge, and Lisey—who ordinarily did not mind crowds any more than she minded turbulence at twenty thousand feet—didn’t like this, either. It occurred to her that so many people on a day this hot might suck all the air out of the air. Totally dopey idea, but—

“It’s mahty hot, even for Naishveel in August, wouldn’t you say so, Toneh?”

Tony Eddington—who would be rahtin’ all this up for something called the U-Tenn Review—nodded obligingly but said nothing. His only comment so far had been to identify the tirelessly dancing photographer as Stefan Queensland, U-Tenn Nashville, class of ‘83, currently of the Nashville American. “Hope y’all will h’ep him out if y’can,” Tony Eddington had said softly to Scott as they began their walk over here. Eddington was carrying a little wire notebook in which he had so far written absolutely nothing, so far as Lisey could see.

“Yew’ll finish yoah remarks,” Dashmiel said, “and there’ll be anotheuh round of applause. Then, Mistuh Landon—”

“Scott.”

Dashmiel had flashed a rictus grin, there for just a moment, then gone. “Then, Scott, yew’ll go on and toin that all-impawtant foist shovelful of oith.” Toin? Foist? Oith? Lisey mused, and then it came to her that Dashmiel was saying turn that all-important first shovelful of earth in his only semibelievable Louisiana drawl. “Followin’ that,

we'll proceed on across yonduh parkin' lot to Nelson Hall-which is mercifully air-conditioned, Ah might add."

"All sounds fine to me," Scott replied, and that was all he had time for, because they had arrived.

IV

Perhaps it's a holdover from the broken toothglass-that omenish feeling-but the plot of trucked-in dirt looks like a grave to Lisey: XL size, as if for a giant. The two crowds collapse in around it in a circle, becoming one and creating that breathless suck-over feel at the center. A campus security guard now stands at each corner of the ornamental velvet-rope barrier, beneath which Dashmiel, Scott, and "Toneh" Eddington have ducked. Queensland, the photographer, dances relentlessly, his old-fashioned Speed Graphic held up in front of his face. There are big patches of darkness under his arms and a sweat-tree growing up the back of his shirt. Paging Weegee, Lisey thinks, and realizes she envies him. He is so free, flitting gnatlike in the heat; he is twenty-five and all his shit still works. Dashmiel, however, is looking at him with growing impatience which Stefan Queensland affects not to see until he has exactly the shot he wants. Lisey has an idea it's one of Scott alone, his foot on the silly silver spade, his hair blowing back in the breeze. In any case, Weegee junior at last lowers his big old box of a camera and steps back to the edge of the crowd's far curve. And here, following him with her somewhat wistful regard, Lisey first sees the madman, a graduate student with long blond hair named Gerd Allen Cole. He has the look, one local reporter will later write, "of John Lennon recovering from his romance with heroin-hollow eyes at odd and disquieting contrast to his puffy child's cheeks."

At that moment, beyond noting all that tumbled blond hair, Lisey thinks nothing of Gerd Allen Cole, omens or no omens. She just wants this to be over so she can find a bathroom stall in the bowels of the English department across the way and pull her rebellious underwear out of the crack of her ass. She has to make water, too, but right now that's pretty much secondary.

"Ladies and gentlemen!" Dashmiel says in the carrying but somehow artificial voice of a carnival barker. "It is mah distinct pleasure to introduce Mr. Scott Landon, authuh of the Pulitzer prize winnin'

Relic, and the National Book Awardwinnin' The Coaster's Daughter. He's come all the way from Maine with his loveleh wife to inauguarate construction-yes, at long last-on our vereh own Shipman Lah-brey! Scott Landon, folks! Let's hear it!"

The crowd applauds at once, and enthusiastically. The loveleh wife joins in, patting her palms together automatically, looking at Dashmiel and thinking, He won the NBA for The Coaster's Daughter. That's Coaster, not Coster. And I sort of think you knew it. Why don't you like him, you petty man?

Then she happens to glance beyond him and this time she really does notice Gerd Allen Cole. He is just standing there with Al-that fabulous blond hair tumbled down to his eyebrows and the sleeves of a white shirt hr too big for him-he's all but floating in it-rolled up to his biceps. The tails of this shirt are out and dangling almost to the whitened knees of the old jeans he wears. Instead of applauding Blondie has got his hands clasped rather prissily together in front of him and there's a spooky-sweet smile on his face and his lips are moving, as if he's saying a prayer ... but he's looking straight at Scott. As the wife of a public man (some of the time, at least), Lisey at once pegs Blondie as a potential problem. She thinks of guys like this as "deep-space fans," although she'd never say so out loud and has never even told Scott this. Deep-space fans always have a lot to say. They want to grab Scott by the arm and tell him that that they understand the secret messages in his books; deep-space fans know the books are really secret guides to God, Satan, or possibly the Coptic Gospels. They might be on about Scientology or numerology. Sometimes they want to talk about other worlds-secret worlds. Two years ago a deep-space fan hitchhiked all the way from Texas to Maine to talk to Scott about Bigfoot. That guy made Lisey a little nervous-there was a certain walleyed look of absence about him, and a knife (sheathed, thank Christ) in one of the loops of his backpack-but Scott talked to him a little, gave him a beer, took a couple of his pamphlets, signed the kid a paperback copy of Instructions to Be Left in Earth, clapped him on the back, and sent

him on his way, happy. Sometimes-when he's got it strapped on nice and tight-Scott is amazing. No other word will do.

The thought of actual violence does not now occur to Lisey certainly not the idea that Blondie means to pull a Mark David Chapman on her husband. My mind just doesn't run that way, she might have said.

Scott acknowledges the applause-and a few raucous rebel yells-with the Scott Landon grin which has been caricatured in the Wall Street Journal (it will later appear on any number of Barnes & Noble shopping bags), all the time continuing to balance on one foot while the other holds its place on the shoulder of the silly shovel.

He lets the applause run for ten or fifteen seconds, whatever his intuition tells him is right (and his intuition is rarely wrong), then raises one hand, waving it off. And it goes. When he speaks, his voice seems nowhere near as loud as Dashmiel's, but Lisey knows that even with no mike or battery-powered bullhorn-and the lack of either here this afternoon is probably someone's oversight-it will carry to the very back rows of the crowd. And the crowd helps out. It's gone absolutely silent, straining to hear him: every golden word. A Famous Man has come among them. A Thinker and a Writer. He will now scatter pearls of wisdom before them.

Pearls before swine, Lisey thinks. Sweaty swine, at that. But didn't her father once tell her that pigs don't sweat? She can't exactly remember, and it's sort of an odd train of thought anyway, isn't it?

Across from her, Blondie carefully pushes his tumbled hair back from a fine white brow with his left hand. Then he clasps the left with his right again. His hands are as white as his brow and Lisey thinks: There's one piggy who stays inside a lot. A stay-at-home swine, and why not? He looks like he's got all sorts of strange deep-space ideas to catch up on.

She shifts from one foot to the other, and the silk of her underwear all but squeaks in the crack of her ass. Oh, maddening! She forgets

Blondie again in trying to calculate if she might not ... while Scott's making his remarks ...very surreptitiously, mind you ...

Her dead mother speaks up. Dour. Three words. Brooking no argument. No. Lisey. Wait.

"Ain't gonna sermonize, me," Scott says, and she recognizes the patois of Gully Foyle, the main character in his all-time favorite novel, Alfred Bester's *The Stars My Destination*. "Too hot for sermons."

"Beam us up, Scotty!" someone in the fifth or sixth row on the parking-lot side of the crowd yells exuberantly. The crowd laughs and cheers.

"Can't do it, brother," Scott says, "transporters are broken and we're all out of lithium crystals."

The crowd, being new to the riposte as well as the sally (Lisey has heard both at least fifty times; maybe as many as a hundred), roars its approval and applauds. Across the way, Blondie smiles thinly, sweatlessly, and continues to grip his left hand with his right. And now Scott does take his foot off the spade, not as if he's grown impatient with it but as if he has, for the moment, found another use for the tool. She watches, not without fascination, for this is Scott at his best, not reading scripture but strutting showtime.

"It's nineteen-eighty-six and the world has grown dark," he says. He slips the three feet or so of the little spade's wooden handle easily through his cupped hand, so that his fingers rest near the thing's business end. The scoop winks sun in Lisey's eyes once, and then it is mostly hidden by the sleeve of Scott's lightweight jacket. With the scoop and the blade hidden, he uses the slim wooden handle as a pointer, ticking off trouble and tragedy in the air in front of him.

"In January, the Challenger shuttle explodes, killing all seven on board. Bad call on a cold morning, folks. They never should have tried to launch.

“In February, at least thirty die on Election Day in the Philippines. Ferdinand and Imelda Marcos, meanwhile, responsible for the deaths of a hundred times that number-maybe four hundred times that number-leave for Guam and, eventually, Hawaii. No one knows how many pairs of shoes babyluv takes with her.” There’s a ripple of laughter from the crowd. Not much. Tony Eddington is finally taking notes. Roger Dashmiel looks hot and put out with this unexpected current-events lesson.

“The nuclear reactor accident at Chernobyl kills thousands, sickens tens of thousands.

“The AIDS epidemic kills thousands, sickens tens of thousands. “The world grows dark. Discordia rises. Mr. Yeats’s blood-tide is still undimmed.”

He looks down, looks fixedly at nil but graying earth, and Lisey is suddenly terrified that he is seeing it, his private monster. the thing with the endless patchy piebald side, that he is going to go off, perhaps even come to the break she knows he is afraid of (in truth she is as afraid of it as he is) in front of all these people. Then, before her heart can do more than begin to speed up, he raises his head, grins like a boy at the county fair, and shoots the handle of the spade through his fist to the halfway point. It’s a showy move, a pool shark’s move, and the folks at the front of the crowd go oooh. But Scott’s not done. Holding the spade out before him, he rotates the handle nimbly in his fingers, accelerating it into an unlikely spin. It’s a baton twirler’s move, as dazzling-because of the silver scoop swinging in the sun, mostly-as it is unexpected. She’s been married to him since ‘77-almost nine years now-and had no idea he had such a sublimely cool move in his repertoire. (How many years does it take, she’ll wonder later, lying in bed alone in her substandard motel room and listening to dogs bark beneath a hot orange Nashville moon, before the simple stupid weight of time finally sucks all the wow out of a marriage?) The silver bowl of the rapidly swinging spade sends a Wake up! Wake up! sunflash running across the heat-dazed, sweat-sticky surface of the crowd. Lisey’s husband is

suddenly Scott the Pitchman, grinning, and she has never been so relieved to see that totally untrustworthy honey, l'rrr hip huckster's grin on her husband's face. lie has bummed them out; now he will sell them the doubtful good cheer with which he hopes to send them home. And she thinks they will buy, hot August afternoon or not. When he's like this, Scott could sell Frigidaires to Inuits, as the saying is ... and God bless the language pool where we all go first to drink our fill and then to strap on our business.

“But if every book is a little light in that darkness-and so I believe, so I believe, so I must believe, for I write the goddamn things, don't I?- then every library is a grand bonfire around which ten thousand people come to stand and warm themselves each cold day and night. We celebrate the laying of such a fire this afternoon, and I'm honored to be a part of it. Here is where we spit in the eye of chaos and kick murder right in his wrinkled old cojones. Hey, photographer!”

Stefan Queensland snaps to, but smiling.

Scott, also smiling, says: “Now-get one of this. The powers that be may not want to use it, but you'll like it in your portfolio, I'll bet.”

Scott holds the ornamental tool out as if he intends to twirl it again, and the crowd gives a little hopeful gasp, but he's only teasing them. He slides his left hand back down to the spade's collar, his right to a position on the handle about a foot from the top. Then he bends, digs in, and drives the spade-blade deep, dousing its hot glitter in earth. He brings it up, tosses its dark load aside, and cries: “I declare the Shipman Library Construction site open!”

The applause that greets this makes the previous rounds sound like the sort of polite patter you might hear at a prep-school tennis match. Lisey doesn't know if young Mr. Queensland caught the ceremonial first scoop, not for sure (she wasn't looking), but when Scott pumps the silly little silver spade at the sky like an Olympic hero, Queensland catches that one for sure, laughing as he snaps it. Scott holds the pose for a moment (Lisey happens to glance at Dashmiel

and catches that gentleman in the act of rolling his eyes at Mr. Eddington-Toneh). Then he lowers the spade to port arms and holds it that way, grinning. Sweat has popped on his cheeks and brow in fine beads. The applause begins to taper off. The crowd thinks he's done. Lisey, who can read him like a book (as the saying is), knows better.

When they can hear him again, Scott bends down for an encore scoop. "This one's for Yeats!" he calls. Another scoop. "This one's for Poe!" Yet another scoop. "This one's for Alfred Bester, and if you haven't read him, you ought to be ashamed!" He's starting to sound out of breath, and Lisey, although mostly still amused, is starting to feel a bit alarmed, as well. It's so hot. She's trying to remember what he ate for lunch-was it heavy or light?

"And this one ..." He dives the spade into what is now a fairly respectable little divot (Queensland documenting each fresh foray) one last time and holds up the final dip of earth. The front of his shirt has darkened with sweat. "Well, why don't you think of whoever wrote your favorite book? The one that, in a perfect world, you'd check out first when the Shipman Library finally opens its doors to you? Got it? Okay-this one's for him, or her, or them." He tosses the dirt aside, gives the spade a final valedictory shake, then turns to Dashmiel ... who should be pleased with Scott's showmanship, Lisey thinks-asked to play by ear, Scott has played brilliantly and who instead only looks hot and pissed off. "I think we're done here," he says, and makes as if to hand Dashmiel the spade.

"No, that's yoahs," Dashmiel says. "As a keepsake, and a token of ouah thanks. Along with yoah check, of co'se." His smile-the rictus, not the real one-comes and goes in a fitful cramp. "Shall we go and grab ow'sefs a little air-conditionin'?"

"By all means," Scott says, looking bemused, and then hands the spade to Lisey-as he has handed her so many other mostly unwanted mementos over the past twelve years of his celebrity: everything from ceremonial oars and Boston Red Sox hats encased in Lucite cubes to the masks of comedy and tragedy ... but mainly

pen-and-pencil sets. So many pen-and-pencil sets. Waterman, Scripto, Schaeffer, Montblanc, you name it. She looks at the spade's glittering silver scoop, as bemused as her beloved (he is still her beloved, and she's come to believe he always will be). Every last speck of dirt has slid off, it seems; even the Made is clean. There are a few flecks in the incised letters reading COMMENCEMENT, SHIPMAN LIBRARY, and Lisey blows them Off. Then she looks at this unlikely prize again. Where will such an artifact end up? She'd say Scott's study over the barn, but in this summer of 1986 the study is still under construction and probably won't be ready for occupancy until October ... although the address works and he has already begun to store stuff in the musty stalls of the barn below. Across many of the cardboard boxes he had scrawled SCOTT! THE EARLY YEARS! Most likely the silver spade will wind up with this stuff, wasting its gleams in the gloom. The one depressing surety is that it'll wind up in a place where one of them will stumble across it twenty years from now and try to remember just what in the blue smuck-Meanwhile, Dashmiel is on the move. Without another word as if he's disgusted with this whole business and determined to pm it behind him as soon as possible-he starts across the rectangle of fresh earth, detouring around the divot which Scott's last big shovelful of earth has almost succeeded in promoting to a hole. The heels of Dashmiel's shiny black I'm-an-assistant-professor-on-myway-up-and-you're-not shoes sink deep into the earth with every step. Dashmiel has to fight for balance, and Lisey guesses this does nothing to improve his mood. Tony Jddington falls in beside him. Scott pauses a moment, as if not quite sure what's going on, and then also starts to move, slipping himself in between Dashmiel and Eddington. He delighted her into forgetting her omenish feeling

(broken glass in the morning)

for a little while, but now it's back

(broken hearts at night)

and with a vengeance. She thinks it must be why all these details look so big to her. She is sure the world will come back into more

normal focus once she has, in Dashmiel's words, grabbed herself a little air-conditioning. And once she's gotten that pesty swatch of cloth out of her butt.

This really is almost over, she reminds herself, and-how funny life can be-it is at this precise moment that the day begins to derail. A campus security cop who is older than the others on this detail (she will later identify him from Stefan Queensland's news photo as Captain S. Heffernan) holds up the rope barrier on the far side of the ceremonial rectangle of earth. All she notices about him is that he's wearing what her husband might have called a puffickly huh-yooge batch of orifice on his khaki shirt. Her husband and his two flanking escorts-Dashmiel on Scott's left, C. Anthony Eddington on Scott's right-duck beneath the rope in a move so synchronized it almost could have been choreographed.

The crowd is moving toward the parking lot with the principals ... with one exception. Blondie is not heading toward the parking lot. Blondie is still standing on the parking-lot side of the commencement patch. A few people bump him, and he's forced a few steps backward after all, onto the baked dead earth where the Shipman Library will stand come 1989 (if the chief contractor's promises can be believed, that is). Then he's actually stepping forward against the tide, his hands coming unclasped so he can push first a girl out of his way to his left and then a guy out of his way on his right. His mouth is moving. At first Lisey again thinks he's mouthing a silent prayer, and then she hears the broken gibberishlike something a bad James Joyce imitator might write-and for the first time she becomes actively alarmed. Blondie's somehow weird blue eyes are fixed on her husband, but Lisey understands that he does not want to discuss Bigfoot or the hidden religious subtexts of Scott's novels. This is no mere deep-space boy.

"The church bells came down Angel Street thick as falling oak trees," says Blondie-says Gerd Allen Cole-who, it will turn out, spent most of his seventeenth year in an expensive Virginia mental institution and was released as cured and good to go, thanks very much, and these

words Lisey gets in the clear. They cut through the rising chatter of the crowd, that hum of conversation, like a knife through some light, sweet cake. “That rungut sound, ar! Like rain on a tin roof! Dirty flowers! Ya, dirty and sweet! This is how the church bells sound in the basement!”

A right hand that seems made entirely of long pale fingers goes to the tails of the white shirt, and Lisey suddenly understands

(George Wallace oh Christ - Wallaceand Bremmer)

exactly what’s going on here, although it comes to her in a series of shorthand TV images from her childhood. She looks at Scott and sees Scott is speaking to Dashmiel. Dashmiel is looking at Stefan Queensland, the irritated frown on Dashmiel’s face saying he’s had Quite! Enough! Photographs! For one day! Thank! You! Queensland himself is looking down at his camera, making some adjustment, and C. Anthony “Toneh” Eddington is making a note on his pad.

She even spies the older campus security cop, he of the khaki uniform and the puffickly huh-yooge batch of orifice; this worthy is looking at the crowd, but it is the wrong part of the crowd. It’s impossible that she can see all these folks and Blondie too, but she can, she does; she can even see Scott’s lips forming the words think, that went pretty well, which is a testing comment he often makes after events like this ... and oh Jesus Mary and JoJo the Carpenter, she tries to scream out Scott’s name and warn him but her throat locks up, dry and spitless, she can’t say anything, and Blondie’s got the tails of that lolloping big white shirt all the way up, and underneath are empty belt loops and a flat hairless belly and lying against his white skin is the butt of a gun which he now lays hold of and she hears him say, closing in on Scott a little from the right, “If it closes the lips of the bells, it will have done the job. I’m sorry, Papa.”

I’m sorry, Papa.

She's running forward, or trying to, but oh God she's got such a puffickly huh-yooge case of gluefoot and someone shoulders in front of her, a coed with her hair tied up in a wide white silk ribbon with NASHVILLE printed on it in blue (see how she sees everything?), and Lisey pushes her with one hand, the hand not holding the silver spade, and the coed caws "Hey!" except it sounds slower and draggier than that, like the word hey recorded at 45 RPM and then played back at 33.3 or maybe even 16 RPM. The whole world has gone to hot tar and for an eternity Scott and Dashmiel are blocked from her view; she can see only Tony Eddington, making more of his idiotic notes-a slow starter, but once he gets going ... whooo! Boy takes notes like a house afire! Then the coed with the NASHVILLE ribbon stumbles clear of Lisey's field of vision -finally!-and as Dashmiel and her husband come into view again, Lisey sees Dashmiel's body language go from a drone to a startled cry of fear. It happens in the space of an instant.

Lisey sees what Dashmiel sees. She sees Blondie now with the gun (it will prove to be a Ladysmith .22, made in Korea and bought at a pawn-and-loan in South Nashville for thirty-seven dollars) pointed at her husband, who has at last seen his danger and stopped. In Lisey-time, all of this happens very, very slowly. She doesn't actually see the bullet fly out of the .22's muzzle-not quite-but she hears Scott say, very mildly, seeming to drawl the words over the course of ten or even fifteen seconds: "Let's talk about it, son, right?" And then she sees fire bloom from the gun's nickel-plated muzzle in a yellow-white corsage. She hears a pop-stupid, insignificant: the sound of someone breaking a paper lunch sack with the palm of his hand. She sees Dashmiel, that chickenshit southern-fried asshole, turn and plunge away to his immediate left. She sees Scott buck backward on his heels. At the same time his chin thrusts forward. The combination is weirdly graceful, like a dance-floor move. A black hole opens in the right side of his summer sport coat. "Son, you honest-to-God don't want to do that," he says, and even in Lisey-time she hears the way his voice thins a little more on every word until he sounds like a test pilot in a high-altitude chamber. Yet Lisey is almost positive he doesn't know he has been shot. His sport coat swings open as he

puts his hand out in a commanding stop-this-shit gesture, and she realizes two things simultaneously: that she can see gouts of blood soaking into the front of his shirt and that she has at last-oh thank God for small favors-broken into some semblance of a run.

“I got to end all this ding-dong for the freesias,” says Gerd Allen Cole with perfect fretful clarity, and Lisey is suddenly sure that once Scott is dead, once the damage is done, Blondie will either kill himself or pretend to try. For the time being, however, he has this first business to finish. The business of the author. Blondie turns his wrist slightly so that the smoking and somehow cuntish muzzle of the Ladysmith .22 points at the left side of Scott’s chest; in Lisey-time the move is smooth and slow. Blondie lies done the lung; his second bullet will be a heart shot, she chinks, and knows she can’t allow that to happen. If her husband is to have any chance at all, this loony tune must not be allowed to put any more lead into him.

As if hearing her, repudiating her, Gerd Allen Cole says, “It never ends until you are. You’re responsible for all these repetitions, old boy. You are hell, and you are a monkey, and now you are my monkey!”

This speech is the closest he comes to making sense, and making it gives Lisey just enough time to first wind up with the silver spade-her hands, somehow knowing their business in their own way, have already found their position near the top of the thing’s forty-inch handle-and then swing it. Still, it’s close. If it had been a horse race, the tote board would undoubtedly have flashed the HOLD TICKETS WAIT FOR PHOTO message. But when the race is between a man with a gun and a woman with a shovel, you don’t need a photo. And in slowed-down Lisey-time there’s no chance of a missed perception, anyway. She sees it all. She sees the spade’s silver scoop strike the gua, driving it upward, just as that corsage blooms again (she can see only part of the flame and none of the muzzle; the muzzle is hidden by the blade of the spade). She sees the spade carry on forward and upward as the second shot goes harmlessly into the hot August sky. She sees the gun fly loose, and there is time to think,

Holy smuck! I really put a charge into this one! before the commemorative spade connects with the blond fruitcake's face. His hand is still in there (three of those slim long fingers will be broken and Lisey could give Shit One about Monsieur Deep-Space Fruitcake Cole's fingers), but all the hand ends up protecting is his forehead. The spade's silver bowl connects solidly with the lower part of the wouldbe assassin's face, breaking his nose, shattering his right cheekbone and the bony orbit around his staring right eye, mashing his lips back against his teeth (and pretty well exploding the upper lip), breaking nine teeth, as well-the four in front will prove to be shattered right down to the gum line. All in all, it's quite a job. A Mafia goon with a set of brass knucks couldn't have done better.

Now-still slow, still in Lisey-time-the elements of Stefan Queensland's awardwinning photograph are assembling themselves.

Captain S. Heffernan has seen what's happening only a second or two after Lisey, but he has also had to deal with the bystander problem, in his case a fat bepimpled fella wearing baggy Bermuda shorts and a T-shirt with Scott Landon's smiling face on the front. Captain Heffernan first grapples with this young fe11a and then shunts him aside with one muscular shoulder. The young fella goes flying with a dismayed what-the-fuck:) expression on the speckled moon face beneath his crew cut.

By then Lisey has administered the silver spade to the wouldbe assassin. Gerd Allen Cole, aka Blondie, is sinking to the ground (and out of the photo's field) with a dazed expression in one eye and blood pouring from the other one. Blood is also gushing from the hole that was his mouth. Heffernan completely misses the actual hit. Roger Dashmiel, suddenly remembering that he is supposed to be the master of ceremonies and not a jackrabbit, turns back toward Eddington, his protege, and Landon, his troublesome guest of honor, just in time to take his place as a staring, slightly blurred face in the photo's background.

Scott Landon, meanwhile, shock-walks right out of the awardwinning photo. He walks as though unmindful of the heat, striding toward the

parking lot and Nelson Hall beyond, Nelson Hall which is home of the English department, and air-conditioned. He walks with surprising briskness, at least to begin with, and a goodly part of the crowd moves with him. The crowd seems for the most part unaware that anything has happened. Lisey is both infuriated and unsurprised. After all, how many of them actually saw Blondie with that cuntish little pistol in his hand? How many of them recognized the burst-paper-bag sounds as gunshots? The hole in Scott's coat could be a smudge of dirt from his shoveling chore, and the blood which has soaked his shirt is as yet invisible to the outside world. He's now making a strange and horrible whistling noise each time he inhales, but how many of them hear that? No, it's her they're looking at-some of them, anyway-the daffy dame who has just inexplicably hauled off and smacked some guy in the face with the ceremonial silver spade. A lot of them are grinning about it, actually grinning, as if they believe it's all part of a show being put on for their benefit; the Scott Landon Road Show. Probably they believe exactly that. Well, fuck them, and fuck Dashmiel, and fuck the day-late-and-dollar-short campus cop with his Sam Browne belt and oversize badge. All she cares about now is Scott. She thrusts the shovel out not quite blindly to her right and Eddington, their Boswell-for-a-day, takes it. It's either that or get smacked in the nose with it. Then, still in that dreadful slowtime, Lisey runs after her husband, whose briskness evaporates as soon as he reaches the suck-oven heat of the parking lot. He begins to stagger and weave; his upper body begins to curl into a shrimp shape. She sees this and tries to run faster and still it feels like she's running in glue. Behind her, Tony Eddington is peering at the silver spade like a man who has no idea what he's gotten hold of; it might be an artillery shell, a radiation detector, or the Great Lost Whang-Dang-Doodle of the Egyptian pharaohs. To him comes Captain S. Heffernan, and although Captain Heffernan will later in his secret heart doubt that it was really Eddington who laid the gun-toting nutjob low, the captain is not (even at one in the morning, even to himself, over bourbon and branch water), able to swear it was not Eddington but the wife who stopped the nutjob's clock before said nutjob could fire a second shot-the kill shot, most likely-into the writer. The mind is a monkey; the mind is a monster. The mind is sort

of a madman, actually. Captain S. Heffernan knows these things, knows it's why so-called "eyeball witnesses" are never to be trusted, and that includes so-called professionals like himself. Besides, he tells himself, that fat kid with the zits and the crew art was in my way.

In any case, the nutjob is down, the nutjob is puling through the hole that used to be his mouth, the nutjob is toast, and Stan Heffernan seizes the Eddington kid's free left hand and pumps it, feeling a large relieved grin spread across his face as he realizes he may just get out of this mess with his skin on and his job intact.

Lisey runs toward her husband, who has just gone down on his hands and knees in the parking hot. And Queensland snaps his picture as she goes, catching just half of one shoe on the far right-hand side of the frame ... something not even he will realize, then or ever.

V

He goes down, the Pulitzer prize winner goes down., Scott Landon goes down, and Lisey makes the supreme effort to break out of that slow and terrible Lisey-time. She must succeed because she has heard the cry of alarm from the part of the crowd that's been moving with Scott and now she hears-in the maddening slow-speak of Lisey-time-someone saying Heeeeeee's hurrrrt! She must break free because if she doesn't get to him before the crowd surrounds him and shuts her out, they will very likely kill him with their concern. With smotherlove.

She screams at herself in her own head

(strap it on RIGHT NOW!)

and that does it. Suddenly she is knifing forward; all the world is noise and heat and sweat, but she blesses the speedy reality of it even as she uses her left hand to grab the left cheek of her ass and pull, raking the goddamn underwear out of the crack of her ass, there, at least one thing about this wrong and broken day is now mended.

A coed in a shell top, the kind of top where the straps tie on rite shoulders in big floppy bows, threatens to block her narrowing path to Scott, but Lisey ducks beneath her and hits the hot-top. She will not be aware of her scraped and blistered knees until much later-until the hospital, in fact, where a kindly paramedic will notice and put lotion on them, something so cool and soothing, it will make her cry with relief. But that is for later. Now it might well be just her and Scott alone here on the edge of this hot parking lot, this terrible black-and-yellow ballroom floor which must be a hundred and thirty degrees at least, maybe a hundred and fifty. Maybe more. Her mind tries to present her with the image of an egg frying sunny-side up in her Ma's old black iron spider and she thrusts it away. Scott looks up at her and now his face is waxy pale except for the black

triangles forming beneath his eyes and the blood which has begun running from the right side of his mouth and down his chin in a scarlet stream.

“Lisey!” His voice is thin, whooping. “Did he ... shoot me?” “Don’t try to talk,” she tells him, and puts a hand on his chest. His shirt, oh dear God, it is not wet with blood but soaked with blood, and beneath it she can feel his heart running along so fast and light; it is not the heartbeat of a human being, she thinks, but that of a bird. Pigeon-ssrrlse, she thinks, and that is when the girl with the floppy bows tied on her shoulders falls on top of her. She would land on Scott but Lisey instinctively shields him, taking the brunt of the girl’s weight (“Hey, shit! FUCK!” the startled girl cries out) with her back ... it is there for a moment and then gone. Lisey sees the girl shoot her hands out to break her fall-oh, the divine reflexes of the young, she thinks-and the girl is successful ... but then she is crying, “Ow! Ow!OW!” This makes Lisey look at her own hands. They aren’t blistered, not yet, but they have gone the deep red of a perfectly cooked Maine lobster.

“Lisey,” Scott whispers, and oh Christ how his breath screams when he pulls it in.

“Who pushed me?” the girl with the bows on her shoulders is demanding. She is a-hunker, hair from a busted ponytail in her eyes, crying with surprise, pain, and embarrassment.

Lisey leans close to Scott. The heat of him terrifies her and fills her with pity deeper than any she has ever felt, deeper than she thought it was possible to feel. He is actually shivering with the heat. Awkwardly, using only one arm, she strips off her jacket. “Scott, don’t try to talk. You’re right, you’ve been sh-”

“I’m so hot,” he says, and begins to shiver harder. What comes next-convulsions? His hazel eyes stare up into her blue ones. Blood runs from the corner of his mouth. She can smell it. It stinks. Now the collar of his shirt is filling in red. “I’m so hot, please give me ice.”

“I will,” she says, and puts her jacket under his head and neck.

“I will, Scott.” Thank God for his sport coat, she thinks, not quite incoherent, and then has an idea. She grabs the hunkering, crying girl by the arm. “What’s your name?”

The girl stares at her as if she were mad, but answers the question. “Lisa Lemke.”

Same as mine, small world, Lisey thinks, but does not say. What she says is, “My husband has been shot, Lisa. Can you go over there to”-she cannot remember the name of the building, only its function-“to the English department and call an ambulance? Dial 911-”

“Ma’am? Mrs. Landon, is it?” This is the campus security cop, making his way through the crowd with a lot of help from his meaty elbows. He squats beside her and his knees pop loudly. His knees are louder than Blondies pistol. Lisey marvels. He’s holding his walkietalkie, which was previously clipped to his Sam Browne belt in the place where a regular cop would wear his gun. When he speaks, he does so slowly and carefully, as though to a distressed child. “Mrs. Landon, I have called the campus infirmary. They are rolling their ambulance, which will take your husband to Nashville Memorial. Nashville ... Memorial ... Hospital. Do you understand me?”

She does, and her gratitude to this man is almost as deep as the pity she feels for her husband, lying on the simmering pavement and bleeding from his chest and mouth, shuddering in the heat like a distempered dog. She nods, weeping the first of what will be many tears before she gets Scott back to Maine-not on a Delta flight but on a private jet, and with a private nurse, and with another ambulance and another private nurse to meet them at the Portland .Jetport’s Civil Air Terminal. And all that is later. Now she turns back to the Lemke girl and says, “Lisey, he’s burning up-is there ice, honey? Can you think of anywhere there might be ice?”

She says this without much hope, and is therefore amazed when Lisa Lemke nods at once. "There's a soda machine and two snack machines over there." She points in the direction of Nelson Hall, which Lisey can't see. All she can see is a crowding forest of bare legs, some hairy, some smooth, some tanned, some sunburned. She realizes they are completely hemmed in, that she's tending her fallen husband in a slot the shape of a large vitamin pill or cold capsule, and feels a touch of crowd-panic. Is the word for that agoraphobia? Scott would know.

"If you can get him some ice, please do," Lisey says. "And hurry." She looks at the campus security cop, who has gone to kneel on Scott's other side and appears to be taking his pulse—a completely useless activity, in Lisey's opinion. "Can't you make them move back?" she almost pleads. "It's so hot—"

He doesn't give her time to finish, but is up like Jack from his box, yelling, "Move it back! Let this girl through! Move it back! Let this girl through! Let him breathe, folks, let him breathe, all right, what do you say?"

The crowd shuffles back ... very reluctantly, Lisey thinks. They want to see all the blood, it seems to her.

The heat bakes relentlessly up from the pavement. She has half expected to get used to it, the way you get used to a hot shower, but that isn't happening. She listens for the approaching howl of the promised ambulance and hears nothing. Then she hears Scott, croaking her name. At the same time he twitches weakly at the side of the sweat-soaked shell top she's wearing (her bra now stands out against the silk as stark as a swollen tattoo). She looks down at him and sees something she does not like: Scott is smiling. The blood has coated his lips a rich candy red, top to bottom, side to side, and consequently the smile looks like the grin of a clown. No one lover a clown at rrrtidrtight, she thinks, and wonders where that came from. It will only be much later that night—that long and mostly sleepless night, listening to the August dogs howl at the hot moon—that she'll realize it was Lon Chaney. She knows because the line was the

epigram of Scott's third novel, the only one she has hated, Empty Devils. The one that's sort of a riff on Romero's Living Dead movies.

"Lisey."

"Scott, don't try to talk-"

But he is relentless, twitching at her blue silk top, his eyes dear God, they are so deep in their sockets now, but still so brilliant and fevery. He has something to say. And as always when he has something to say, he will find an audience if he can. This time he has her.

Reluctantly, she leans down.

For a moment he says nothing, but she can hear him getting ready to. He pulls air in a little at a time, in half gasps. The smell of blood is even stronger up close. A mineral smell. Or maybe it's detergent. Or

It's death, Lisey, that's all. Just the smell of death.

As if he needs to ratify this, Scott says: "It's very close, honey. I can't see it, but I ..." Another long, screaming intake of breath. "I hear it taking its meal. And grunting." Smiling as he says it. "Scott, I don't know what you're tal-"

The hand which has been tugging at her top now pinches her side, and cruelly-when she takes the top off much later, in the motel room, she'll see the bruise: a true lover's knot.

"You ..." Screamy breath. "Know ..." Screamy breath, deeper. And still grinning, as if they share some horrible secret. Do they? "So ... don't ... insult my ... intelligence. Or ... your own."

Yes. She knows. It. The long boy, he calls it. Or just the thing. Or sometimes the thing with the endless piebald side. Once she meant to look up piebald in the dictionary-she is not bright about words, not like Scott is-she really did, but then she got sidetracked. And actually, it's more than just a few times he's spoken of that thing.

Especially just lately. He says you can see it if you look through dirty water glasses. If you look through them just the right way, and in the hours after midnight.

He lets go of her, or maybe just loses the strength to hold on. Lisey pulls back a little-not far. His eyes regard her from their deep and blackened sockets. They are as brilliant as ever-as aware, as full of pain-but she sees they are also full of terror and (this is what frightens her the most) some wretched amusement. As if what's happened to him is in some way funny.

Still speaking low-perhaps so only she can hear, maybe because it's the best he can manage, probably both-Scott says, "Listen. Listen, Lisey. I'll make how it sounds when it looks around."

"Scott, no-you have to stop."

He pays no attention. He draws in another of those screaming lung-shot breaths, then purses his wet red lips in a tight O, as if to whistle. Instead of whistling he makes a low, indescribably nasty chuffing noise that drives a spray of blood up his clenched throat, through his lips, and into the sweltering air. A girl sees this gusher of fine ruby droplets and cries out in revulsion. This time the crowd doesn't need the voice of authority to tell them to move back; they do so on their own, leaving the three of them-Lisey, Scott, and the cop-a perimeter of at least four feet all the way around.

The sound-dear God, it is a kind of grunting-is mercifully short. Scott coughs, his chest heaving, the wound spilling more blood in rhythmic pulses, then beckons her back down with one finger. She comes, leaning on her burning hands. His socketed eyes compel her; his mortal grin compels her.

He turns his head to the side, spits a wad of blood onto the hot tar. Then he turns back to her. "I ... could ... call it that way," he whispers. "It would come. You'd ... be ... rid of me. My everlasting ... quack."

She understands he means it, and for a moment (surely it is the power of his eyes) she believes it's true. He will make the sound again, only a little louder this time, and somewhere the long boy-that lord of sleepless nights-will turn its unspeakable hungry head. A moment later, in this world, Scott Landon will simply shiver on the pavement and die. The death certificate will say something sane, but she will know. His dark thing finally saw him and came for him and ate him alive.

So now come the things they will never speak of later, not to others nor between themselves. Too awful. Each long marriage has two hearts, one light and one dark. This is the dark heart of theirs, the one mad true secret. She will ponder it that night in the terri

ble moonlight while the dogs bark. Now she leans close to him on the baking pavement, sure he is dying, nonetheless determined to hold on to him if she can. If it means fighting the long boy for him-with nothing but her fingernails, come it to that-she will. "Well ... Lisey? What ... do ... you ... say?"

Leaning even closer. Leaning into the shivering heat of him, the sweat-and blood-stink of him. Leaning in until she can smell the last palest ghost of the Foamy he shaved with that morning and the Prell he shampooed with. Leaning in until her lips touch his ear. She whispers: "Be quiet, Scott. Just be quiet." She pauses, then adds, louder-loud enough to make him jerk his head on the pavement: "Leave that fucking thing alone and it will go away."

When she looks at him again, his eyes are different-saner, somehow, but also weaker. "Have ... you seen...? Do ... You know ...?"

"I know you," she says. "Don't you ever make that noise again." He licks at his lips. She sees the blood on his tongue and it turns her stomach, but she doesn't pull away from him.

"I'm so hot," he says. "If only I had a piece of ice to suck ..." "Soon," Lisey says, not knowing if she's promising rashly and not caring. "I'm getting it for you." At last she can hear the ambulance howling its

way toward them. That's something. Yet she is still in her heart convinced it will be too late. That sound he made, that chuffing sound, has almost shot her nerve.

And then, a kind of miracle. The girl with the bows on her shoulders and the new scrapes on her palms fights her way through to the front of the crowd. She is gasping like someone who has just run a race and sweat coats her cheeks and neck ... but she's holding two big waxed paper cups in her hands. "I spilled half the shitting Cokes getting back here," she says, throwing a brief, baleful backward glance at the crowd, "but I got the ice okay. Ice is ni-" Then her eyes roll up almost to the whites and she reels backward, all loosey-goosey in her sneakers. The campus cop-bless him, oh bless him with many blessings, huh-yooge batch of orifice and all-grabs her, steadies her, and takes one of the cups. He hands it down to Lisey, then urges the other Lisa, coed Lisa, to drink from the remaining cup. Lisey Landon pays no attention. Later, replaying all this, she'll be a little in awe of her own single-mindedness. Now she only thinks, Jurt keep her from falling on top of me again if she faints, and turns back to Scott.

He's shivering worse than ever, and his eyes are dulling out. And still he tries. "Lisey ... so hot ... ice ..."

"I have it, Scott. Now will you for once just shut your everlasting mouth?"

And for a wonder, he does. A Scott Landon first. Maybe, she thinks, he's just out of wind.

Lisey drives her hand deep into the cup, sending Coke all the way to the top and splashing over the edge. The cold is shocking and utterly wonderful. She clutches a good handful of ice chips, thinking how ironic this is: whenever she and Scott stop at a turnpike rest area and she uses a machine that dispenses cups of soda instead of cans or bottles, she always hammers on the NO ICE button, feeling righteous-others may allow the evil soft-drink companies to shortchange them by dispensing half a cup of ice and half a cup of

soda, but not Lisa Landon! What was Good Ma Debusher's saying? I didn't fall off a hay truck yesterday.'

His eyes are half-closed now, but he opens his mouth and when she first rubs his lips with her handful of ice and then pops one of the melting shards onto his bloody tongue, his shivering suddenly stops. God, it's magic. Emboldened, she rubs her freezing, leaking hand along his right cheek, his left cheek, and then across his forehead, where drops of Coke-colored water drip into his eyebrows.

"Oh, Lisey, that's heaven," he says, and although still screamly, his voice sounds more rational to her ... more with-it, more there. The ambulance has pulled up on the left side of the crowd and she can hear an impatient male voice shouting, "Paramedics! Let us through! Paramedics! C'mon, people, let us through!"

"Lisey," he whispers.

"Scott, you need to be quiet."

But he means to have his say; as always, and until death closes his mouth sixteen years later, Scott Landon will have his say. "Take ... a motel room ... close to ... hospital."

"You don't need to tell me th-"

He gives her hand an impatient squeeze, stopping her. "It may ... have heard you ... seen you."

"Scott, I don't know what you're-"

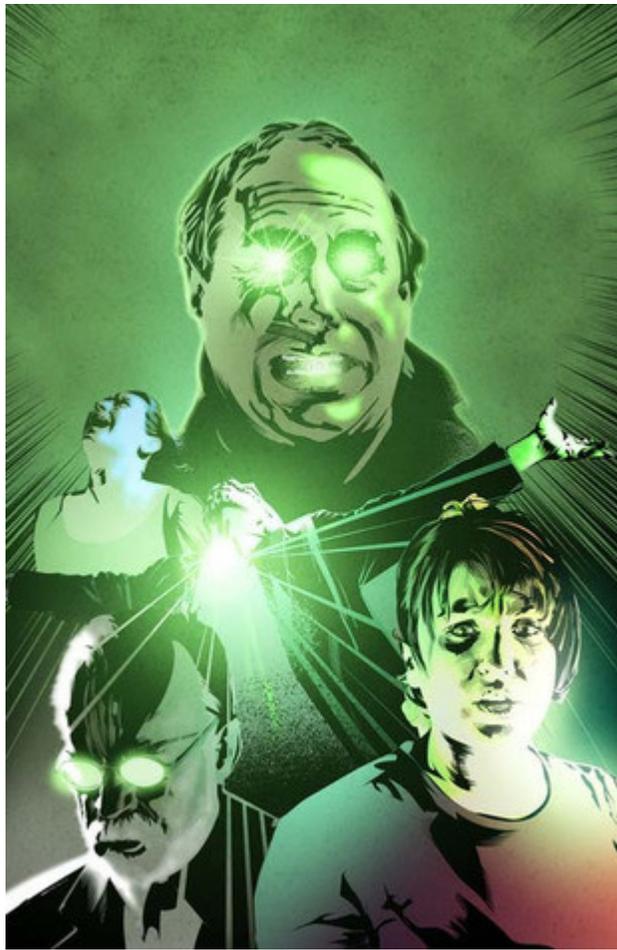
The paramedics come shouldering through the crowd. She and Scott are down to only seconds now, and Scott knows it. He looks at her urgently.

"First thing ... You do ... water glasses ..." He can say no more. Luckily, he doesn't need to.

VI

After checking in at the Greenview Motel and before walking to the hospital half a mile away to visit her husband, Lisey Landon goes into the bathroom. There are two glasses on the shelf over the sink, and they are the real kind, not plastic. She puts both of them in her purse, careful not to look at either one as she does so. On her walk to the hospital she takes them out one at a time, still not looking at them, and throws them into the gutter. The sound of them breaking comforts her even more than the sound of the little shovel's scoop, connecting first with the pistol and then with Blondie's face.

(scanned from McSweeney's Enchanted Chamber of Astonishing Stories)



THE LITTLE GREEN GOD OF AGONY

Stephen King

WAS IN AN ACCIDENT,' Newsome said.

Katherine MacDonald, sitting beside the bed and attaching one of the four TENS units to his scrawny thigh just below the basketball shorts he now always wore, did not look up. Her face was carefully blank. She was a piece of human furniture in this big house - in this big bedroom where she now spent most of her working life - and that was the way she liked it. Attracting Mr Newsome's attention was usually a bad idea, as any of his employees knew. But her thoughts ran on, just the same. *Now you tell them that you actually caused the accident. Because you think taking responsibility makes you look like a hero.*

'Actually,' Newsome said, 'I caused the accident. Not so tight, Kat, please.'

She could have pointed out, as she did at the start, that the TENS lost their efficacy if they weren't tight to the outraged nerves they were supposed to soothe, but she was a fast learner. She loosened the Velcro strap a little, thinking: *The pilot told you there were thunderstorms in the Omaha area.*

'The pilot told me there were thunderstorms in the area,' Newsome continued. The two men listened closely. Jensen had heard it all before, of course, but you always listened closely when the man doing the talking was the sixth-richest man not just in America but in the world. Three of the other five mega-rich guys were dark-complected fellows who wore robes and drove places in armoured Mercedes-Benzes.

She thought: *But I told him it was imperative that I make that meeting.*

'But I told him it was imperative that I make that meeting,' Newsome carried on.

The man sitting next to Newsome's personal assistant was the one who interested her - in an anthropological sort of way. His name was Rideout. He was tall and very thin, maybe sixty, wearing plain grey pants and a white shirt buttoned all the way to his scrawny neck, which was red with overshaving. Kat supposed he'd wanted to get a close one before meeting the sixth-richest man in the world. Beneath his chair was the only item he'd carried into this meeting, a long black lunchbox with a curved top meant to hold a Thermos. A working man's lunchbox, although what he claimed to be was a minister. So far Rideout hadn't said a word, but she didn't need her ears to know what he was. The whiff of charlatan was strong about him. In fifteen years as a nurse specialising in pain patients, she had met her share. At least this one wasn't wearing any crystals.

Now tell them about your revelation, she thought as she carried her stool around to the other side of the bed. It was on casters, but Newsome didn't like the sound when she rolled on it. She might have told another patient that carrying the stool wasn't in her contract, but when you were being paid five thousand dollars a week for what were essentially human caretaking services, you kept your smart remarks to yourself. Nor did you tell the patient that emptying and washing out bedpans wasn't in your contract. Although lately her silent compliance was wearing a little thin. She felt it happening. Like the fabric of a shirt that had been worn and washed too many times.

Newsome was speaking primarily to the fellow in the farmer-goes-to-town get-up. 'As I lay on the runway in the rain among the burning pieces of a fourteen-million-dollar aircraft, most of the clothes torn off my body - that'll happen when you hit pavement and roll fifty or sixty feet - I had a revelation.'

Actually, two of them, Kat thought as she strapped a second TENS unit on his other wasted, flabby, scarred leg.

‘Actually, two of them,’ Newsome said. ‘One was that it was very good to be alive, although I understood - even before the pain that’s been my constant companion for the last two years started to eat through the shock - that I had been badly hurt. The second was that the word *imperative* is used very loosely by most people, including my former self. There are only two imperative things. One is life itself, the other is freedom from pain. Do you agree, Reverend Rideout?’ And before Rideout could agree (for surely he would do nothing else), Newsome said in his waspy, hectoring, old man’s voice: ‘Not so goddam *tight*, Kat! How many times do I have to tell you?’

‘Sorry,’ she murmured, and loosened the strap. *Why do I even try?*

Melissa, the housekeeper, looking trim in a white blouse and high-waisted white slacks, came in with a coffee tray. Jensen accepted a cup, along with two packets of artificial sweetener. The new one, the bottom-of-the-barrel so-called reverend, only shook his head. Maybe he had some kind of holy coffee in his lunchbox Thermos. Kat didn’t get an offer. When she took coffee, she took it in the kitchen with the rest of the help. Or in the summerhouse ... only this wasn’t summer. It was November, and wind-driven rain lashed the windows.

‘Shall I turn you on, Mr Newsome, or would you prefer that I leave now?’

She didn’t want to leave. She’d heard the whole story many times before - the imperative meeting, the crash, how Andrew Newsome had been ejected from the burning plane, about the broken bones, chipped spine and dislocated neck, most of all about the twenty-four months of unrelieved suffering, which he would soon get to - and it bored her. But Rideout didn’t. Other charlatans would undoubtedly follow, now that all reputable relief resources had been exhausted, but Rideout was the first, and Kat was interested to see how the farmer-looking fellow would go about separating Andy Newsome from a large chunk of his cash. Or how he would try. Newsome hadn’t amassed his obscene piles of cash by being stupid, but of

course he wasn't the same man he had been, no matter how real his pain might be. On that subject, Kat had her own opinions, but this was the best job she'd ever had. At least in terms of money. And if Newsome wanted to continue suffering, wasn't that his choice?

'Go ahead, honey, turn me on.' He waggled his eyebrows at her. Once the lechery might have been real (Kat thought Melissa might have information on that subject), but now it was just a pair of shaggy eyebrows working on muscle memory.

Kat plugged the cords into the control unit and flicked the switch. Properly attached, the TENS units would have sent a weak electrical current into Newsome's muscles, a therapy that seemed to have some ameliorative effects... although no one could say exactly why, or if they were entirely of the placebo variety. Be that as it might, they would do nothing for Newsome tonight. Hooked up as loosely as they were, they had been reduced to the equivalent of joy-buzzers. Expensive ones.

'Shall I—?'

'Stay!' he said. 'Therapy!'

The lord wounded in battle commands, she thought, and I obey.

She bent over to pull her chest of goodies out from under the bed. It was filled with tools many of her past clients referred to as implements of torture. Jensen and Rideout paid no attention to her. They continued to look at Newsome, who might (or might not) have been granted revelations that had changed his priorities and outlook on life, but who still enjoyed holding court.

He told them about awakening in a cage of metal and mesh. There were steel gantries called fixators on both legs and one arm to immobilise joints that had been repaired with 'about a hundred' steel pins (actually seventeen; Kat had seen the X-rays). The fixators were anchored in the outraged and splintered femurs, tibiae, fibulae,

humerus, radius, ulna. His back was encased in a kind of chain-mail girdle that went from his hips to the nape of his neck. He talked about sleepless nights that seemed to go on not for hours but for years. He talked about the crushing headaches. He told them about how even wiggling his toes caused pain all the way up to his jaw, and the shrieking agony that bit into his legs when the doctors insisted that he move them, fixators and all, so he wouldn't entirely lose their function. He told them about the bedsores, and how he bit back howls of hurt and outrage when the nurses attempted to roll him on his side so the sores could be flushed out.

'There have been another dozen operations in the last two years,' he said with a kind of dark pride. Actually, Kat knew, there had been five, two of those to remove the fixators when the bones were sufficiently healed. Unless you included the minor procedure to re-set his broken fingers, that was. Then you could say there were six, but she didn't consider surgical stuff necessitating no more than local anaesthetic to be 'operations'. If that were the case she'd had a dozen herself, most of them while listening to Muzak in a dentist's chair.

Now we get to the false promises, she thought as she placed a gel pad in the crook of Newsome's right knee and laced her hands together on the hanging hot-water bottles of muscle beneath his right thigh. *That comes next.*

'The doctors promised me the pain would abate,' Newsome said. 'That in six weeks I'd only need the narcotics before and after my physical therapy sessions with the Queen of Pain here. That I'd be walking again by the summer of 2010. *Last* summer.' He paused for effect. 'Reverend Rideout, those were false promises. I have almost no flexion in my knees at all, and the pain in my hips and back is beyond description. The doctors— *Ah! Oh! Stop, Kat, stop!*'

She had raised his right leg to a ten-degree angle, perhaps a little more. Not even enough to hold the cushioning pad in place.

'Let it go down! Let it *down*, goddammit!'

Kat relaxed her hold on his knee and the leg returned to the hospital bed. Ten degrees. Possibly twelve. Whoop-de-do. Sometimes she got it all the way to fifteen - and the left leg, which was a little better, to twenty degrees of flex - before he started hollering like a kid who sees a hypodermic needle in a school nurse's hand. The doctors guilty of false promises had not been guilty of false advertising; they had told him the pain was coming. Kat had been there as a silent onlooker during several of those consultations. They had told him he would swim in pain before those crucial tendons, shortened by the accident and frozen in place by the fixators, stretched out and once again became limber. He would have plenty of pain before he was able to get the bend in his knees back to ninety degrees. Before he would be able to sit in a chair or behind the wheel of a car, that was. The same was true of his back and his neck. The road to recovery led through the Land of Pain, that was all.

These were true promises Andrew Newsome had chosen not to hear. It was his belief - never stated baldly, in words of one syllable, but undoubtedly one of the stars he steered by - that the sixth-richest man in the world should not have to visit the Land of Pain under any circumstances, only the Costa del Sol of Full Recovery. Blaming the doctors followed as day follows night. And of course he blamed fate. Things like this were not supposed to happen to guys like him.

Melissa came back with cookies on a tray. Newsome waved a hand - twisted and scarred in the accident - at her irritably. 'No one's in the mood for baked goods, 'Lissa.'

Here was another thing Kat MacDonald had discovered about the mega-rich, those dollar-babies who had amassed assets beyond ordinary comprehension: they felt very confident about speaking for everyone in the room.

Melissa gave her little Mona Lisa smile, then turned (almost pirouetted) and left the room. *Glided* from the room. She had to be at

least forty-five, but looked younger. She wasn't sexy; nothing so vulgar. Rather there was an ice-queen glamour about her that made Kat think of Ingrid Bergman. Icy or not, Kat supposed men would wonder how that chestnut hair would look freed from its clips, and lying all mussed up on a pillow. How her coral lipstick would look smeared on her teeth and up one cheek. Kat, who considered herself dumpy, told herself at least once a day that she wasn't jealous of that smooth, cool face. Or that heart-shaped bottom.

Kat returned to the other side of the bed and prepared to lift Newsome's left leg until he yelled at her again to stop, goddammit, did she want to kill him? *If you were another patient, I'd tell you the facts of life, she thought. I'd tell you to stop looking for shortcuts, because there are none. Not even for the sixth-richest man in the world. You have me - I'd help you if you'd let me - but as long as you keep looking for a way to pay yourself out of the shit, you're on your own.*

She placed the pad under his knee. Grasp the hanging bags that should have been turning back into muscle by now. Began to bend the leg. Waited for him to scream at her to stop. And she would. Because five thousand dollars a week added up to a cool quarter-million a year. Did he know that part of what he was buying was her silence? How could he not?

Now tell them about the doctors - Geneva, London, Madrid, Mexico City, et cetera, et cetera.

'I've been to doctors all over the world,' he told them, speaking primarily to Rideout now. Rideout still hadn't said a word, just sat there with the red wattles, his overshaved neck hanging over his buttoned-to-the-neck country preacher shirt. He was wearing big yellow work boots. The heel of one almost touched his black lunchbox. 'Teleconferencing would be the easier way to go, given my condition, but of course that doesn't cut it in cases like mine. So I've gone in person, in spite of the pain it causes me. We've been everywhere, haven't we, Kat?'

'Indeed we have,' she said, very slowly continuing to bend the leg. On which he would have been walking by now, if he weren't such a child about the pain. Such a spoiled baby. On crutches, yes, but walking. And in another year, he would have been able to throw the crutches away. Only in another year he would still be here in this two-hundred-thousand-dollar state-of-the-art hospital bed. And she would still be with him. Still taking his hush-money. How much would be enough? Two million? She told herself that now, but she'd told herself half a million would be enough not so long ago, and had since moved the goalposts. Money was wretched that way.

'We've seen specialists in Mexico, Geneva, London, Rome, Paris . . . where else, Kat?'

'Vienna,' she said. 'And San Francisco, of course.'

Newsome snorted. 'Doctor there told me I was manufacturing my own pain. "To keep from doing the hard work of rehabilitation," he said. But he was a Paki. And a queer. A queer Paki, how's that for a combo?' He gave a brief bark of laughter, then peered at Rideout. 'I'm not offending you, am I, Reverend?'

Rideout rotated his head side-to-side in a negative gesture. Twice. Very slowly.

'Good, good. Stop, Kat, that's enough.'

'A little more,' she coaxed.

'Stop, I said. That's all I can take.'

She let the leg subside and began to manipulate his left arm. That he allowed. He often told people both of his arms had also been broken, but this wasn't true. The left one had only been sprained. He also told people he was lucky not to be in a wheelchair, but the all-the-bells-and-whistles hospital bed suggested strongly that this was luck

he had no intention of capitalising on in the near future. The all-the-bells-and-whistles hospital bed was his wheelchair. It rolled. He had ridden all over the world in it.

Neuropathic pain, Kat thought. It's a great mystery. Perhaps insoluble. The drugs no longer work.

'The consensus is that I'm suffering from neuropathic pain.' *And cowardice.*

'It's a great mystery.'

Also a good excuse.

'Perhaps insoluble.'

Especially when you don't try.

'The drugs no longer work and the doctors can't help me. That's why I've brought you here, Reverend Rideout. Your references in the matter of...er...healing ... are very strong.'

Rideout stood up. Kat hadn't realised how tall he was. His shadow scared up behind him on the wall even higher. Almost to the ceiling. His eyes, sunken deep in their sockets, regarded Newsome solemnly. He had charisma, of that there could be no doubt. It didn't surprise her; the charlatans of the world couldn't get along without it, but she hadn't realised how much or how strong it was until he got to his feet and towered over them. Jensen was actually craning his neck to see him. There was movement in the corner of Kat's eye. She looked and saw Melissa standing in the doorway. So now they were all here except for Tonya, the cook.

Outside, the wind rose to a shriek. The glass in the windows rattled.

'I don't heal,' Rideout said. He was from Arkansas, Kat believed - that was where Newsome's latest Gulfstream IV had picked him up,

at least - but his voice was accentless. And flat.

'No?' Newsome looked disappointed. Petulant. Maybe, Kat thought, a little scared. 'I sent a team of investigators, and they assure me that in many cases—'

'I *expel*.'

Up went the shaggy eyebrows. 'I beg your pardon?'

Rideout came to the bed and stood there with his long-fingered hands laced loosely together at the level of his flat crotch. His deep-set eyes looked sombrely down at the man in the bed. 'I exterminate the pest from the wounded body it's feeding on, just as a bug exterminator would exterminate pests - termites, for instance - feeding on a house.'

Now, Kat thought, I have heard absolutely everything. But Newsome was fascinated. *Like a kid watching a three-card monte expert on a street corner,* she thought.

'You've been possessed, sir.'

'Yes,' Newsome said. 'That's what it feels like. Especially at night. The nights are ... very long.'

'Every man or woman who suffers pain is possessed, of course, but in some unfortunate people - you are one - the problem goes deeper. The possession isn't a transient thing but a permanent condition. One that worsens. Doctors don't believe, because they are men of science. But *you* believe, don't you? Because you're the one who's suffering.'

'You bet,' Newsome breathed. Kat, sitting beside him on her stool, had to restrain herself from rolling her eyes.

'In these unfortunates, pain opens the way for a demon god. It's small, but dangerous. It feeds on a special kind of hurt produced only by certain special people.'

Genius, Kat thought, *he's going to love that.*

'Once the god finds its way in, pain becomes agony. It feeds just as termites feed on wood. And it will eat until you are all used up. Then it will cast you aside, sir, and move on.'

Kat surprised herself by saying, 'What god would that be? Certainly not the one you preach about. That one is the God of love. Or so I grew up believing.'

Jensen was frowning at her and shaking his head. He clearly expected an explosion from the boss...but a little smile had touched the corners of Newsome's lips. 'What do you say to that, Rev?'

'I say that there are many gods. The fact that our Lord, the Lord God of Hosts, rules them all - and on the Day of Judgment will *destroy* them all - does not change that. These little gods have been worshipped by people both ancient and modern. They have their powers, and our God sometimes allows those powers to be exercised.'

As a test, Kat thought.

'As a test of our strength and faith.' Then he turned to Newsome and said something that surprised her. Jensen, too; his mouth actually dropped open. 'You are a man of much strength and little faith.'

Newsome, although not used to hearing criticism, nevertheless smiled. 'I don't have much in the way of Christian faith, that's true, but I have faith in myself. I also have faith in money. How much do you want?'

Rideout returned the smile, exposing teeth that were little more than tiny eroded gravestones. If he had ever seen a dentist, it had been many moons ago. Also, he was a tobacco-chewer. Kat's father, who had died of mouth cancer, had had the same discoloured teeth.

'How much would you pay to be free of your pain, sir?'

'Ten million dollars,' Newsome replied promptly. Kat heard Melissa gasp. 'But I didn't get to where I am by being a sucker. If you do whatever it is you do - expelling, exterminating, exorcising, call it what you want - you get the money. In cash, if you don't mind spending the night. Fail, and you get nothing - except your first and only round trip on a private jet. For that there will be no charge. After all, *I* reached out to *you*.'

'No.' Rideout said it mildly, standing there beside the bed, close enough to Kat so she could smell the mothballs that had been recently keeping his dress pants (maybe his only pair, unless he had another to preach in) whole. She could also smell some strong soap.

'No?' Newsome looked frankly startled. 'You tell me no?' Then he began to smile again. This time it was the secretive and rather unpleasant smile he wore when he made his phone calls and did his deals. 'I get it. Now comes the curveball. I'm disappointed, Reverend Rideout. I really hoped you were on the level.' He turned to Kat, causing her to draw back a bit. 'You, of course, think I've lost my mind. But I haven't shared the investigators' reports with you, have I?'

'No,' she said.

'There's no curveball,' Rideout said. 'I haven't performed an expulsion in five years. Did your investigators tell you that?'

Newsome didn't reply. He was looking up at the thin, towering man with a certain unease.

Jensen said, 'Is it because you've lost your powers? If that's the case, why did you come?'

'It's God's power, sir, not mine, and I haven't lost it. But an expulsion takes great energy and great strength. Five years ago I suffered a major heart attack shortly after performing one on a young girl who had been in a terrible car accident. We were successful, she and I, but the cardiologist I consulted in Jonesboro told me that if I ever exerted myself in such a way again, I might suffer another attack. This one fatal.'

Newsome raised a gnarled hand - not without effort - to the side of his mouth and spoke to Kat and Melissa in a comic stage-whisper. 'I think he wants twenty million.'

'What I want, sir, is seven hundred and fifty thousand.'

Newsome just stared at him. It was Melissa who asked, 'Why?'

'I am pastor of a church in Titusville. The Church of Holy Faith, it's called. Only there's no church any more. We had a dry summer in my part of the world. There was a wildfire, probably started by campers. And probably drunk. That's usually the case. My church is now just a concrete footprint and a few charred beams. I and my parishioners have been worshipping in an abandoned gas station/convenience store on the Jonesboro Pike. It is not satisfactory during the winter months, and there are no homes large enough to accommodate us. We are many but poor.'

Kat listened with interest. As conman stories went, this was a good one. It had the right sympathy-hooks.

Jensen, who still had the body of a college athlete (he also served as Newsome's bodyguard) and the mind of a Harvard MBA, asked the obvious question. 'Insurance?'

Rideout once more shook his head in that deliberate way: left, right, left, right, back to centre. He still stood towering over Newsome's state-of-the-art bed like some country-ass guardian angel. 'We trust in God.'

'In this case, you might have been better off with Allstate,' Melissa said.

Newsome was smiling. Kat could tell from the stiff way he held his body that he was in serious discomfort - his pills were now half an hour overdue - but he was ignoring it because he was interested. That he *could* ignore it was something she'd known for quite a while now. He could battle the pain if he chose to. He had resources. She had thought she was merely irritated with this, but now, probably prompted by the appearance of the charlatan from Arkansas, she discovered she was actually infuriated. It was so *wasteful*.

'I have consulted with a local builder - not a member of my flock, but a man of good repute who has done repairs for me in the past and quotes a fair price - and he tells me that it will cost approximately six hundred and fifty thousand dollars to rebuild. I have taken the liberty of adding one hundred thousand dollars, just to be on the safe side.'

Uh-huh, Kat thought.

'We don't have such monetary resources, of course. But then, not even a week after speaking with Mr Kiernan, your letter came, along with the video-disc. Which I watched with great interest, by the way.'

I'll bet you did, Kat thought. *Especially the part where the doctor from San Francisco says the pain associated with his injuries can be greatly alleviated by physical therapy. Stringent physical therapy.*

It was true that nearly a dozen other doctors on the DVD had claimed themselves at a loss, but Kat believed Dr Dilawar was the only one with the guts to talk straight. She had been surprised that Newsome had allowed the disc to go out with that interview on it, but

since his accident, the sixth-richest man in the world had slipped a few cogs.

‘Will you pay me enough to rebuild my church, sir?’

Newsome studied him. Now there were small beads of sweat just below his receding hairline. Kat would give him his pills soon, whether he asked for them or not. The pain was real enough; it wasn’t as though he were faking or anything, it was just . . .

‘Would you agree not to ask for more? Gentleman’s agreement. We don’t need to sign anything.’

‘Yes.’ Rideout said it with no hesitation.

‘Although if you’re able to remove the pain - *expel* the pain -I might well make a contribution of some size. Some *considerable* size. What I believe you people call a love offering.’

‘That would be your business, sir. Shall we begin?’

‘No time like the present. Do you want everyone to leave?’

Rideout shook his head again: left to right, right to left, back to centre. ‘I will need assistance.’

Magicians always do, Kat thought. It’s part of the show.

Outside, the wind shrieked, rested, then shrieked again. The lights flickered. Behind the house, the generator (also state-of-the-art) burped to life, then stilled.

Rideout sat on the edge of the bed. ‘Mr Jensen there, I think. He looks strong and quick.’

‘He’s both,’ Newsome said. ‘Played football in college. Running back. Hasn’t lost a step since.’

'Well ... a few,' Jensen said modestly.

Rideout leaned towards Newsome. His dark, deeply socketed eyes studied the billionaire's scarred face solemnly. 'Answer a question for me, sir. What colour is your pain?'

'Green,' Newsome replied. He was looking back at the preacher with fascination. 'My pain is green.'

Rideout nodded: up, down, up, down, back to centre. Eye-contact never lost. Kat was sure he would have nodded with exactly the same look of grave confirmation if Newsome had said his pain was blue, or as purple as the fabled Purple People-Eater. She thought, with a combination of dismay and real amusement: *I could lose my temper here. I really could. It would be the most expensive tantrum of my life, but still - I could.*

'And where is it?'

'Everywhere.' It was almost a moan. Melissa took a step forward, giving Jensen a look of concern. Kat saw him shake his head a little and motion her back to the doorway.

'Yes, it likes to give that impression,' Rideout said, 'but it's not so. Close your eyes, sir, and concentrate. Look for the pain. Look past the false shouts it gives - ignore the cheap ventriloquism - and locate it. You can do this. You *must* do it, if we're to have any success.'

Newsome closed his eyes. For a space of ninety seconds there was no sound but the wind and the rain spattering against the windows like handfuls of fine gravel. Kat's watch was the old-fashioned wind-up kind, a nursing school graduation present from her father many years ago, and when the wind lulled, the room was quiet enough for her to hear its self-important ticking. And something else: at the far end of the big house, elderly Tonya Andrews singing softly as she

neatened up the kitchen at the end of another day: *Froggy went a-courtin' and he did ride, mmm-hm.*

At last Newsome said, 'It's in my chest. High in my chest. Or at the bottom of my throat, just below the windpipe.'

'Can you see it? Concentrate!'

Vertical lines appeared on Newsome's forehead. Scars from the skin that had been flayed open during the accident wavered through these grooves of concentration. 'I see it. It's pulsing in time to my heartbeat.' His lips pulled down in an expression of distaste. 'It's nasty.'

Rideout leaned closer. 'Is it a ball? It is, isn't it? A green ball.'

'Yes. Yes! A little green ball that *breathes!*'

Like the rigged-up tennis ball you undoubtedly have either up your sleeve or in that big black lunchbox of yours, Rev, she thought.

And, as if she were controlling him with her mind (instead of just deducing where this sloppy little playlet would go next), Rideout said: 'Mr Jensen, sir. There's a lunchbox under the chair I was sitting in. Get it and open it and stand next to me. You need to do no more than that for the moment. Just—'

Kat MacDonald snapped. It was a snap she actually heard in her head. It sounded like Roger Miller snapping his fingers during the intro to 'King of the Road'.

She stepped up beside Rideout and shouldered him aside. It was easy. He was taller, but she had been turning and lifting patients for nearly half her life, and she was stronger. 'Open your eyes, Andy. Open them right now. Look at me.'

Startled, Newsome did as she said. Melissa and Jensen (now with the lunchbox in his hands) looked alarmed. One of the facts of their working lives - and Kat's own, at least until now - was that you didn't command the boss. The boss commanded you. You most certainly did not startle him.

But she'd had quite enough, thank you. In another twenty minutes she might be crawling after her headlights along stormy roads to the only motel in the vicinity, a place that looked like the avatar of all roach-traps, but it didn't matter. She simply couldn't do this any longer.

'This is bullshit, Andy,' she said. Are you hearing me? Bullshit.'

'I think you better stop right there,' Newsome said, beginning to smile - he had several smiles, and this wasn't one of the good ones. 'If you want to keep your job, that is. There are plenty of other nurses in Vermont who specialise in pain therapy.'

She might have stopped there, but Rideout said, 'Let her speak, sir.' It was the gentleness in his tone that drove her over the edge.

She leaned forward, into his space, and the words spilled out in a torrent.

'For the last sixteen months - ever since your respiratory system improved enough to allow meaningful physiotherapy - I've watched you lie in this goddamned expensive bed and insult your own body. It makes me sick. Do you know how lucky you are to be alive, when everyone else on that airplane was killed? What a miracle it is that your spine wasn't severed, or your skull crushed into your brain, or your body burned - no, *baked*, baked like an apple - from head to toe? You would have lived four days, maybe even two weeks, in hellish agony. Instead you were thrown clear. You're not a vegetable. You're not a quadriplegic, although you choose to act like one. You won't do the work. You look for some easier way. You want to pay

your way out of your situation. If you died and went to Hell, the first thing you'd do is look for a tollgate.'

Jensen and Melissa were staring at her in horror. Newsome's mouth hung open. If he had ever been talked to in such a fashion, it had been long ago. Only Rideout looked at ease. *He* was the one smiling now. The way a father would smile at his wayward four-year-old. It drove her crazy.

'You could have been *walking* by now. God knows I've tried to make you understand that, and God knows I've told you - over and over - the kind of work it would take to get you up out of that bed and back on your feet. Dr Dilawar in San Francisco had the guts to tell you - he was the only one - and you rewarded him by calling him a faggot.'

~ * ~

'He *was* a faggot,' Newsome said pettishly. His scarred hands had balled themselves into fists.

'You're in pain, yes. Of course you are. It's manageable, though. I've seen it managed, not once but many times. But not by a lazy rich man who tries to substitute his sense of entitlement for the plain old hard work and tears it takes to get better. You refuse. I've seen that, too, and I know what always happens next. The quacks and confidence men come, the way leeches come when a man with a cut leg wades into a stagnant pond. Sometimes the quacks have magic creams. Sometimes they have magic pills. The healers come with trumped-up claims about God's power, the way this one has. Usually the marks get partial relief. Why wouldn't they, when half the pain is in their heads, manufactured by lazy minds that only understand it will hurt to get better?'

She raised her voice to a wavering, childlike treble and bent close to him. 'Daddy, it *hurr-rrrts!* But the relief never lasts long, because the muscles have no tone, the tendons are still slack, the bones haven't thickened enough to accommodate weight-bearing. And when you

get this guy on the phone to tell him the pain's back - if you can - do you know what he'll say? That you didn't have *faith* enough. If you used your brains on this the way you did on your manufacturing plants and various investments, you'd know there's no little living tennis-ball sitting at the base of your throat. You're too fucking old to believe in Santa Claus, Andy.'

Tonya had come into the doorway and now stood beside Melissa, staring with wide eyes and a dishwiper hanging limp in one hand.

'You're fired,' Newsome said, almost genially.

'Yes,' Kat said. 'Of course I am. Although I must say that this is the best I've felt in almost a year.'

'Don't fire her,' Rideout said. 'If you do, I'll have to take my leave.'

Newsome's eyes rolled to the Reverend. His brow was knitted in perplexity. His hands now began to knead his hips and thighs, as they always did when his pain medication was overdue.

'She needs an education, praise God's Holy Name.' Rideout leaned towards Newsome, his own hands clasped behind his back. He reminded Kat of a picture she'd seen once of Washington Irving's schoolteacher, Ichabod Crane. 'She's had her say. Shall I have mine?'

Newsome was sweating more heavily, but he was smiling again. 'Have at her, Rideout. I believe I want to hear this.'

Kat faced him. Those dark, socketed eyes were unsettling, but she met them. 'So do I.'

Hands still clasped behind his back, pink skull shining mutedly through his thin hair, long face solemn, Rideout examined her. Then he said: 'You've never suffered yourself, have you, miss?'

Kat felt an urge to flinch at that, or look away, or both. She suppressed it. 'I fell out of a tree when I was eleven and broke my arm.'

Rideout rounded his thin lips and whistled: one tuneless, almost toneless note. 'Broke an *arm* while you were *eleven*. Yes, that must have been excruciating.'

She flushed. She felt it and hated it but couldn't stop the heat. 'Belittle me all you want. I based what I said on years of experience dealing with pain patients. It is a *medical* opinion.'

Now he'll tell me he's been expelling demons, or little green gods, or whatever they are, since I was in rompers.

But he didn't.

'I'm sure,' he soothed. 'And I'm sure you're good at what you do. I'm sure you've seen your share of fakers and posers. You know their kind. And I know yours, miss, because I've seen it many times before. They're usually not as pretty as you—' Finally a trace of accent, *pretty* coming out as *purty*. '—but their condescending attitude towards pain they have never felt themselves, pain they can't even conceive of, is always the same. They work in sickrooms, they work with patients who are in varying degrees of distress, from mild pain to deepest, searing agony. And after awhile, it all starts to look either overdone or outright fake to them, isn't that so?'

'That's not true at all,' Kat said. What was happening to her voice? All at once it was small.

'No? When you bend their legs and they scream at fifteen degrees - or even at ten - don't you think, first in the back of your mind, then more and more towards the front, that they are lollygagging? Refusing to do the hard work? Perhaps even fishing for sympathy? When you enter the room and their faces go pale, don't you think, 'Oh, now I have to deal with *this* lazy thing again?' Haven't you - who

once fell from a tree and broke your *arm*, for the Lord's sake - become more and more disgusted when they beg to be put back into bed and be given more morphine or whatever?'

'That's so unfair,' Kat said ... but now her voice was little more than a whisper.

'Once upon a time, when you were new at this, you knew agony when you saw it,' Rideout said. 'Once upon a time you would have believed in what you are going to see in just a few minutes, because you knew in your heart that malignant outsider god was there. I want you to stay so I can refresh your memory . . . and the sense of compassion that's gotten lost somewhere along the way.'

'Some of my patients *are* whiners,' Kat said, and looked defiantly at Rideout. 'I suppose that sounds cruel, but sometimes the truth *is* cruel. Some *are* malingerers. If you don't know that, you're blind. Or stupid. I don't think you're either.'

He bowed as if she had paid him a compliment - which, in a way, she supposed she had. 'Of course I know. But now, in your secret heart, you believe *all* of them are malingerers. You've become inured, like a soldier who's spent too long in battle. Mr Newsome here has been infested, I tell you, *invaded*. There's a demon inside him so strong it has become a god, and I want you to see it when it comes out. It will improve matters for you considerably, I think. Certainly it will change your outlook on pain.' To Newsome: 'Can she stay, sir?'

Newsome considered. 'If you want her to.'

'And if I choose to leave?' Kat challenged him.

Rideout smiled. 'No one will hold you here, Miss Nurse. Like all of God's creatures, you have free will. I would not ask others to constrain it, or constrain it myself. But I don't believe you're a coward, merely calloused. Case-hardened.'

'You're a fraud,' Kat said. She was furious, on the verge of tears.

'No,' Rideout said, once more speaking gently. 'When we leave this room - with you or without you - Mr Newsome will be relieved of the agony that's been feeding on him. There will still be pain, but once the agony is gone, he'll be able to deal with the pain. Perhaps even with your help, miss, once you've had the necessary lesson in humility. Do you still intend to leave?'

'I'll stay,' she said, then said: 'Give me the lunchbox.'

'But—' Jensen began.

'Give it over,' Rideout said. 'Let her inspect it, by all means. But no more talk. If I am meant to do this, it's time to begin.'

Jensen gave her the long black lunchbox. Kat opened it. Where a workman's wife might have packed her husband's sandwiches and a little Tupperware container of fruit, she saw an empty glass bottle with a wide mouth. Inside the domed lid, held by a wire clamp meant to secure a Thermos, was a green aerosol can. There was nothing else. Kat turned to Rideout. He nodded. She took the aerosol out and looked at the label, nonplussed. 'Pepper spray?'

'Pepper spray,' Rideout agreed. 'I don't know if it's legal in Vermont - probably not would be my guess - but where I come from, most hardware stores stock it.' He turned to Tonya. 'You are—?'

'Tonya Marsden. I cook for Mr Newsome.'

'Very nice to make your acquaintance, ma'am. I need one more thing before we begin. Do you have a baseball bat? Or any sort of club?'

Tonya shook her head. The wind gusted again; once more the lights flickered and the generator burped in its shed behind the house.

'What about a broom?'

'Oh, yes, sir.'

'Fetch it, please.'

Tonya left. There was silence except for the wind. Kat tried to think of something to say and couldn't. Droplets of clear perspiration were trickling down Newsome's narrow cheeks, which had also been scarred in the accident. He had rolled and rolled, while the wreckage of the Gulfstream burned in the rain behind him. *I never said he wasn't in pain, she told herself. Just that he could manage it, if he'd only muster half the will he showed during the years he spent building his empire.*

But what if she was wrong?

That still doesn't mean there's some sort of living tennis ball inside him, sucking his pain the way a vampire sucks blood.

There were no vampires, and no gods of agony ... but when the wind blew hard enough to make the big house shiver in its bones, such ideas almost seemed plausible.

Tonya came back with a broom that looked like it had never swept so much as a single pile of floor-dirt into a dustpan. The bristles were bright blue nylon. The handle was painted wood, about four feet long. She held it up doubtfully. 'This what you want?'

'I think it will do,' Rideout said, although to Kat he didn't sound entirely sure. It occurred to her that Newsome might not be the only one in this room who had slipped a few cogs lately. 'I think you'd better give it to our sceptical nurse. No offence to you, Mrs Marsden, but younger folks have quicker reflexes.'

Looking not offended in the slightest - looking relieved, in fact - Tonya held out the broom. Melissa took it and handed it to Kat.

'What am I supposed to do with it?' Kat asked. 'Ride it?'

Rideout smiled, briefly showing the stained and eroded pegs of his teeth. 'You'll know when the time comes, if you've ever had a bat or raccoon in the room with you. Just remember: first the bristles. Then the stick.'

'To finish it off, I suppose. Then you put it in the specimen bottle.'

'As you say.'

'So you can put it on a shelf somewhere with the rest of your dead gods, I suppose.'

He smiled without humour. 'Hand the spray-can to Mr Jensen, please.'

Kat did so. Melissa asked, 'What do I do?'

'Watch. And pray, if you know how. On my behalf, as well as Mr Newsome's. For my heart to be strong.'

Kat, who saw a fake heart attack coming, said nothing. She simply moved away from the bed, holding the handle of the broom in both hands. Rideout sat down beside Newsome with a grimace. His knees popped like pistol-shots. 'You, Mr Jensen.'

'Yes?'

'You'll have time - it will be stunned - but be quick, just the same. As quick as you were on the football field, all right?'

'You want me to Mace it?'

Rideout once more flashed his brief smile, but now there was sweat on his brow as well as his client's. 'It's not Mace - that *is* illegal where I come from - but that's the idea, yes. Now I'd like silence, please.'

'Wait a minute.' Kat propped the broom against the bed and ran her hands first up Rideout's left arm, then his right. She felt only plain cotton cloth and the man's scrawny flesh beneath.

'Nothing up my sleeve, Miss Kat, I promise you.'

'Hurry *up*,' Newsome said. 'This is bad. It always is, but the goddam stormy weather makes it worse.'

'Hush,' Rideout said. 'All of you, hush.'

They hushed. Rideout closed his eyes. His lips moved silently. Twenty seconds ticked past on Kat's watch, then thirty. Her hands were damp with perspiration. She wiped them one at a time on her sweater, then took hold of the broom again. *We look like people gathered at a deathbed*, she thought.

Outside, the wind howled along the gutters.

Rideout said, 'For Jesus' sake I pray,' then opened his eyes and leaned close to Newsome.

'God, there is an evil outsider in this man. An outsider feeding on his flesh and bones. Help me cast it out, as Your Son cast out the demons from the possessed man of the Gadarenes. Help me speak to the little green god of agony inside Andrew Newsome in your own voice of command.'

He leaned closer. He curled the long fingers of one arthritis-swollen hand around the base of Newsome's throat, as if he intended to strangle him. He leaned closer still, and inserted the first two fingers of his other hand into the billionaire's mouth. He curled them, and pulled down the jaw.

'Come out,' he said. He had spoken of command, but his voice was soft. Silky. Almost cajoling. It made the skin on Kat's back and arms

prickle. 'Come out in the name of Jesus. Come out in the names of all the saints and martyrs. Come out in the name of God, who gave you leave to enter and now commands you to leave. Come out into the light. Leave off your meal and come out.'

There was nothing. He began again.

'Come out in the name of Jesus. Come out in the names of the saints and martyrs.' His hand flexed slightly, and Newsome's breath began to rasp. 'No, don't go deeper. You can't hide, thing of darkness. Come out into the light. Jesus commands you. The saints and martyrs command you. God commands you to leave your meal and come out.'

A cold hand gripped Kat's upper arm and she almost screamed. It was Melissa. Her eyes were huge. Her mouth hung open. In Kat's ear, the housekeeper's whisper was as harsh as bristles. '*Look.*'

A bulge like a goitre had appeared in Newsome's throat just above Rideout's loosely grasping hand. It began to move slowly mouthwards. Kat had never seen anything like it in her life.

'That's right,' Rideout almost crooned. His face was streaming with sweat; the collar of his shirt had gone limp and dark. 'Come out. Come out into the light. You've done your feeding, thing of darkness.'

The wind rose to a scream. Rain that was now half-sleet blasted the windows like shrapnel. The lights flickered and the house creaked.

'The God that let you in commands you to leave. Jesus commands you to leave. All the saints and martyrs—'

He let go of Newsome's mouth, pulling his hand back the way a man does when he's touched something hot. But Newsome's mouth stayed open. More: it began to widen, first into a gape and then into a soundless howl. His eyes rolled back in his head and his feet

began to jitter. His urine let go and the sheet over his crotch went as dark as Rideout's collar.

'Stop,' Kat said, starting forward. 'He's having a seizure. You have to st—'

Jensen yanked her back. She turned to him and saw his normally ruddy face had gone as pale as a linen napkin.

Newsome's jaw had dropped all the way to his breastbone. The lower half of his face disappeared into a mighty yawn. Kat heard temporomandibular tendons creak as knee-tendons did during strenuous physical therapy: a sound like dirty hinges. The lights in the room stuttered off, on, off, then on again.

'Come out!' Rideout shouted. 'Come out!'

In the darkness behind Newsome's teeth, a bladderlike thing rose like water in a plugged drain. It was pulsing. There was a rending, splintering crash and the window across the room shattered. Coffee cups fell to the floor and broke. Suddenly there was a branch in the room with them. The lights went out. The generator started up again. No burp this time but a steady roar. When the lights came back, Rideout was lying on the bed with Newsome, his arms flung out and his face planted on the wet patch in the sheet. Something was oozing from Newsome's gaping mouth, his teeth dragging grooves in its shapeless body, which was stippled with stubby green spikelets.

Not a tennis ball, Kat thought. More like one of those Kooshes the kids play with.

Tonya saw it and fled back down the hall with her head hunched forward, her hands locked at the nape of her neck, and her forearms over her ears.

The green thing tumbled onto Newsome's chest.

'Spray it!' Kat screamed at Jensen. *'Spray it before it can get away!'* Yes. Then they would put it in the specimen bottle and screw the lid down tight. *Very tight.*

Jensen's eyes were huge and glassy. He looked like a sleepwalker. Wind blew through the room. It swirled his hair. A picture fell from the wall. Jensen pistoned out the hand holding the can of pepper spray and triggered the plastic nub. There was a hiss, then he leaped to his feet, screaming. He tried to turn, probably to flee after Tonya, but stumbled and fell to his knees. Although Kat felt too dumbfounded to move - to even stir a hand - part of her brain must still have been working, because she knew what had happened. He had gotten the can turned around. Instead of pepper-spraying the thing that was now oozing through the unconscious Reverend Rideout's hair, Jensen had sprayed himself.

'Don't let it get me!' Jensen shrieked. He began to crawl blindly away from the bed. *'I can't see, don't let it get me!'*

The wind gusted. Dead leaves lifted from the tree-branch that had come through the window and swirled around the room. The green thing dropped from the nape of Rideout's creased and sunburned neck onto the floor. Feeling like a woman underwater, Kat swiped at it with the bristle end of the broom. She missed. The thing disappeared under the bed, not rolling but slithering.

Jensen crawled headfirst into the wall beside the doorway. *'Where am I? I can't see!'*

Newsome was sitting up, looking bewildered. 'What's going on? What happened?' He pushed Rideout's head off him. The reverend slid bonelessly from the bed to the floor.

Melissa bent over him.

'Don't do that!' Kat shouted, but it was too late.

She didn't know if the thing was truly a god or just some weird kind of leech, but it was fast. It came out from under the bed, rolled along Rideout's shoulder, onto Melissa's hand, and up her arm. Melissa tried to shake it off and couldn't. *Some kind of sticky stuff on those stubby little spikes*, the part of Kat's brain that would still work told the part - the much larger part - that still wouldn't. *Like the glue on a fly's feet*.

Melissa had seen where the thing came from and even in her panic was wise enough to cover her own mouth with both hands. The thing skittered up her neck, over her cheek, and squatted on her left eye. The wind screamed and Melissa screamed with it. It was the cry of a woman drowning in the kind of pain the charts in the hospitals can never describe. The charts go from one to ten; Melissa's agony was well over one hundred - that of someone being boiled alive. She staggered backwards, clawing at the thing on her eye. It was pulsing faster now, and Kat could hear a low, liquid sound as the thing resumed feeding. It was a *slushy* sound.

It doesn't care who it eats, she thought, just as if this made sense. Kat realised she was walking towards the screaming, flailing woman, and observed this phenomenon with interest.

'Hold still! *Melissa, HOLD STILL!*'

Melissa paid no attention. She continued to back up. She struck the thick branch now visiting the room and went sprawling. Kat went to one knee beside her and brought the broom handle smartly down on Melissa's face. Down on the thing that was feeding on Melissa's eye.

There was a splatting sound, and suddenly the thing was sliding limply down the housekeeper's cheek, leaving a wet trail of slime behind. It moved across the leaf-littered floor, intending to hide under the branch the way it had hidden under the bed. Kat sprang to her feet and stepped on it. She felt it splatter beneath her sturdy New Balance walking shoe. Green stuff shot out in both directions, as if she had stepped on a small balloon filled with snot.

Kat went down again, this time on both knees, and took Melissa in her arms. At first Melissa struggled, and Kat felt a fist graze her ear. Then Melissa subsided, breathing harshly. 'Is it gone? Kat, is it gone?'

'I feel better,' Newsome said wonderingly from behind them, in some other world.

'Yes, it's gone,' Kat said. She peered into Melissa's face. The eye the thing had landed on was bloodshot, but otherwise it looked all right. 'Can you see?'

'Yes. It's blurry, but clearing. Kat ... the pain ... it was all through me. It was like the end of the world.'

'Somebody needs to flush my eyes!' Jensen yelled. He sounded indignant.

'Flush your own eyes,' Newsome said cheerily. 'You've got two good legs, don't you? I think I might, too, once Kat throws them back into gear. Somebody check on Rideout. I think the poor sonofabitch might be dead.'

Melissa was staring up at Kat, one eye blue, the other red and leaking tears. 'The pain...Kat, you have no idea of the pain.'

'Yes,' Kat said. 'Actually, I do. Now.' She left Melissa sitting by the branch and went to Rideout. She checked for a pulse and found nothing, not even the wild waver of a heart that is still trying its best. Rideout's pain, it seemed, was over.

The generator went out.

'Fuck,' Newsome said, still sounding cheery. 'I paid seventy thousand dollars for that Jap piece of shit.'

'I need someone to flush my eyes!' Jensen bellowed. *'Kat!'*

Kat opened her mouth to reply, then didn't. In the new darkness, something had crawled onto the back of her hand.



STEPHEN KING is the world's most famous and successful horror writer. His first novel, *Carrie*, appeared in 1974, and since then he has published a phenomenal string of bestsellers, including *Salem's Lot*, *The Shining*, *The Stand*, *Dead Zone*, *Firestarter*, *Cujo*, *Pet Sematary*, *Christine*, *It*, *Misery*, *The Dark Half*, *Needful Things*, *Rose Madder*, *The Green Mile*, *Bag of Bones*, *The Colorado Kid*, *Lisey's Story*, *Duma Key* and *Under the Dome*, to name only a few.

The author's short fiction and novellas have been collected in *Night Shift*, *Different Seasons*, *Skeleton Crew*, *Four Past Midnight*, *Nightmares and Dreamscapes*, *Hearts in Atlantis*, *Everything's Eventual*, *The Secretary of Dreams* (two volumes), *Just After Sunset: Stories* and *Stephen King Goes to the Movies*. *Full Dark, No Stars* is a recent collection of four novellas, and his latest novel is *11/22/63*, about a man who travels back in time to try to prevent the assassination of President John F. Kennedy.

The winner of numerous awards, including both the Horror Writers' Association and World Fantasy Lifetime Achievement Awards, and a Medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters from the National Book Foundation, King lives with his wife in Bangor, Maine.

'The Little Green God of Agony' is a tribute to the classic monster and old dark house stories. This is its first publication anywhere.

'Monsters are real,' says King, 'and ghosts are real too. They live inside us, and sometimes, they win.'

LUCKEY QUARTER

Stephen King

In the fall of 1996, I crossed the United States from Maine to California on my Harley-Davidson motorcycle, stopping at independent bookstores to promote a novel called *Insomnia*. It was a great trip. The high point was probably sitting on the stoop of an abandoned general store in Kansas, watching the sun go down in the west as the full moon rose in the east. I thought of a scene in Pat Conroy's *The Prince of Tides* where the same thing happens, and an enraptured child cries out, "Oh, Mama, do it again!" Later, in Nevada, I stayed in a ramshackle hotel where the turn-down maids left two-dollar slots chips on the pillow. Beside each chip was a little card that said something like, "Hi, I'm Marie, Good Luck!" This story came to mind. I wrote it longhand, on hotel stationery.

"Oh you cheap son of a bitch!" she cried in the empty hotel room, more in surprise than in anger.

Then—it was the way she was built—Darlene Pullen started to laugh. She sat down in the chair beside the rumpled, abandoned bed with the quarter in one hand and the envelope it had fallen out of in the other, looking back and forth between them and laughing until tears spilled from her eyes and rolled down her cheeks. Patsy, her older kid, needed braces. Darlene had absolutely no idea how she was going to pay for them, she had been worried about it all week, and if this wasn't the final straw, what was? And if you couldn't laugh, what could you do? Find a gun and shoot yourself?

Different girls had different places to leave the all-important envelope, which they called "the honeypot." Gerda, the Swede who'd been a downtown corner-girl before finding Jesus the previous summer at a revival meeting in Tahoe, propped hers up against one of the bathroom glasses; Melissa put hers under the TV controller. Darlene always leaned hers against the telephone, and when she came in this morning and found 322's on the pillow instead, she had known he'd left something for her.

Yes, he certainly had. A little copper sandwich, one quarter-dollar, In God We Trust.

Her laughter, which had been tapering off to giggles, broke out in full spate again.

There was printed matter on the front of the honeypot, plus the hotel's logo: the silhouettes of a horse and rider on top of a bluff, enclosed in a diamond shape.

Welcome to Carson City, the friendliest town in Nevada! [said the words below the logo]. And welcome to The Rancher's Hotel, the friendliest lodging in Carson City! Your room was made up by Darlene. If anything's wrong, please dial 0 and we'll put it right "pronto." This envelope is provided should you find everything right and care to leave a little "extra something" for this chambermaid.

Once again, welcome to Carson, and welcome to the Rancher's.

William Avery

Trail-Boss

Quite often the honeypot was empty—she had found envelopes torn up in the wastebasket, crumpled up in the corner (as if the idea of tipping the chambermaid actually infuriated some guests), floating in the toilet bowl—but sometimes there was a nice little surprise in there, especially if the slot machines or the gaming tables had been kind to a guest. And 322 had certainly used his; he'd left her a quarter, by God! That would take care of Patsy's braces and get that Sega game system Paul wanted with all his heart. He wouldn't even have to wait until Christmas, he could have it as a ... a ...

"A Thanksgiving present," she said. "Sure, why not? And I'll pay off the cable people, so we won't have to give it up after all, we'll even add the Disney Channel, and I can finally go see a doctor about my back ... shit, I'm rich. If I could find you, mister, I'd drop down on my knees and kiss your fucking feet."

No chance of that; 322 was long gone. The Rancher's probably was the best lodging in Carson City, but the trade was still almost entirely

transient. When Darlene came in the back door at seven A.M., they were getting up, shaving, taking their showers, in some cases medicating their hangovers; while she was in Housekeeping with Gerda, Melissa, and Jane (the head housekeeper, she of the formidable gunshell tits and set, red-painted mouth), first drinking coffee, then filling her cart and getting ready for the day, the truckers and cowboys and salesmen were checking out, their honeypot envelopes either filled or unfilled.

322, that gent, had dropped a quarter in his. And probably left her a little something on his sheets as well, not to mention a souvenir or two in the unflushed toilet. Because some people couldn't seem to stop giving. It was just their nature.

Darlene sighed, wiped her wet cheeks with the hem of her apron, and squeezed open the envelope—322 had actually gone to the trouble of sealing it, and she'd ripped off the end in her eagerness to see what was inside. She meant to drop the quarter back into it, then saw there was something inside: a scrawled note written on a sheet from the desk-pad. She fished it out.

Below the horse-and-rider logo and the words JUST A NOTE FROM THE RANCH, 322 had printed nine words, working with a blunt-tipped pencil:

This is a lucky quarter! Its true! Luckey you!

“Good deal!” Darlene said. “I got a couple of kids and a husband five years late home from work and I could use a little luck. Honest to God I could.” Then she laughed again—a short snort—and dropped the quarter into the envelope. She went into the bathroom and peeped into the toilet. Nothing there but clean water, and that was something.

*

She went about her chores, and they didn't take long. The quarter was a nasty dig, she supposed, but otherwise, 322 had been polite

enough. No streaks or spots on the sheets, no unpleasant little surprises (on at least four occasions in her five years as a chambermaid, the five years since Deke had left her, she had found drying streaks of what could only have been semen on the TV screen and once a reeking puddle of piss in a bureau drawer), nothing stolen. There was really only the bed to make, the sink and shower to rinse out, and the towels to replace. As she did these things, she speculated about what 322 might have looked like, and what kind of a man left a woman who was trying to raise two kids on her own a twenty-five-cent tip. One who could laugh and be mean at the same time, she guessed; one who probably had tattoos on his arms and looked like the character Woody Harrelson had played in that movie *Natural Born Killers*.

He doesn't know anything about me, she thought as she stepped into the hall and pulled the door closed behind her. Probably he was drunk and it seemed funny, that's all. And it was funny, in a way; why else did you laugh?

Right. Why else had she laughed?

Pushing her cart across to 323, she thought she would give the quarter to Paul. Of the two kids, Paul was the one who usually came up holding the short end of the stick. He was seven, silent, and afflicted with what seemed to be a perpetual case of the sniffles. Darlene also thought he might be the only seven-year-old in the clean air of this high-desert town who was an incipient asthmatic.

She sighed and used her passkey on 323, thinking that maybe she'd find a fifty—or even a hundred—in this room's honeypot. It was almost always her first thought on entering a room. The envelope was just where she had left it, however, propped against the telephone, and although she checked it just to be sure, she knew it would be empty, and it was.

323 had left a little something for her in the toilet, though.

“Look at this, the luck’s starting to flow already,” Darlene said, and began to laugh as she flushed the john—it was just the way she was built.

*

There was a one-armed bandit—just that single one—in the lobby of the Rancher’s, and although Darlene had never used it during her five years of work here, she dropped her hand into her pocket on her way to lunch that day, felt the envelope with the torn-off end, and swerved toward the chrome-plated foolcatcher. She hadn’t forgotten her intention to give the quarter to Paul, but a quarter meant nothing to kids these days, and why should it? You couldn’t even get a lousy bottle of Coke for a quarter. And suddenly she just wanted to be rid of the damned thing. Her back hurt, she had unaccustomed acid indigestion from her ten o’clock cup of coffee, and she felt savagely depressed. Suddenly the shine was off the world, and it all seemed the fault of that lousy quarter ... as if it were sitting there in her pocket and sending out little batches of rotten vibes.

Gerda came out of the elevator just in time to see Darlene plant herself in front of the slot machine and dump the quarter out of the envelope and into her palm.

“You?” Gerda said. “You? No, never—I don’t believe it.”

“Just watch me,” Darlene said, and dropped the coin into the slot which read USE 1 2 OR 3 COINS. “That baby is gone.”

She started to walk off, then, almost as an afterthought, turned back long enough to yank the bandit’s lever. She turned away again, not bothering to watch the drums spin, and so did not see the bells slot into place in the windows—one, two, and three. She paused only when she heard quarters begin to shower into the tray at the bottom of the machine. Her eyes widened, then narrowed suspiciously, as if this was another joke ... or maybe the punchline of the first one.

“You vin!” Gerda cried, her Swedish accent coming out more strongly in her excitement. “Darlene, you vin!”

She darted past Darlene, who simply stood where she was, listening to the coins cascade into the tray. The sound seemed to go on forever. Luckey me, she thought. Luckey, luckey me.

At last the quarters stopped falling.

“Oh, goodness!” Gerda said. “Goodness me! And to think this cheap machine never paid me anything, after all the quarters I’m stuffing it with! Vut luck is here! There must be fifteen dollars, Darl! Imagine if you’d put in tree quarters!”

“That would have been more luck than I could have stood,” Darlene said. She felt like crying. She didn’t know why that should be, but it was; she could feel the tears burning the backs of her eyeballs like weak acid. Gerda helped her scoop the quarters out of the tray, and when they were all in Darlene’s uniform pocket, that side of her dress sagged comically. The only thought to cross her mind was to think that she ought to get Paul something nice, some toy. Fifteen dollars wasn’t enough for the Sega system he wanted, not by a long shot, but it might buy one of the electronic things he was always looking at in the window of Radio Shack at the mall, not asking, he knew better, he was sickly but that didn’t make him stupid, just staring with eyes that always seemed to be inflamed and watering.

The hell you will, she told herself. You’ll put it toward a pair of shoes, is what you’ll do ... or Patsy’s goddam braces. Paul wouldn’t mind that, and you know it.

No, Paul wouldn’t mind, and that was the hell of it, she thought, sifting her fingers through the weight of quarters in her pocket and listening to them jingle. You minded things for them. Paul knew the radio-controlled boats and cars and planes in the store window were as out of reach as the Sega system and all the games you could play on it; to him that stuff existed to be appreciated in the imagination

only, like pictures in a gallery or sculptures in a museum. To her, however ...

Well, maybe she would get him something silly with her windfall. Something silly and nice. Surprise him.

Surprise herself.

*

She surprised herself, all right.

Plenty.

That night she decided to walk home instead of taking the bus. Halfway down North Street, she turned into the Silver City Casino, where she had never been before in her life. She had changed the quarters—there had been eighteen dollars' worth in all—into bills at the hotel desk, and now, feeling like a visitor inside her own body, she approached the roulette wheel and held these bills out to the croupier with a hand entirely void of feeling. Nor was it just her hand; every nerve below the surface of her skin seemed to have gone dead, as if this sudden, aberrant behavior had blown them out like overloaded fuses.

It doesn't matter, she told herself as she put all eighteen of the unmarked pink dollar chips on the space marked ODD. It's just a quarter, that's really all it is no matter what it looks like on that runner of felt, it's only someone's bad joke on a chambermaid he'd never actually have to look in the eye. It's only a quarter and you're still just trying to get rid of it, because it's multiplied and changed its shape, but it's still sending out bad vibes.

"No more bets, no more bets," the wheel's minder chanted as the ball revolved counterclockwise to the spinning wheel. The ball dropped, bounced, caught, and Darlene closed her eyes for a moment. When she opened them, she saw the ball riding around in the slot marked 15.

The croupier pushed eighteen more pink chips—to Darlene they looked like squashed Canada Mints—over to her. Darlene picked them up and put them all back down on the red. The croupier looked at her, eyebrows raised, asking without saying a word if she was sure. She nodded that she was, and he spun. When red came up, she shifted her growing pile of chips to the black.

Then the odd.

Then the even.

She had five hundred and seventy-six dollars in front of her after that last one, and her head had gone to some other planet. It was not black and green and pink chips she saw in front of her, not precisely; it was braces and a radio-controlled submarine.

Luckey me, Darlene Pullen thought. Oh luckey, luckey me.

She put the chips down again, all of them, and the crowd that always forms behind and around sudden hot-streak winners in gambling towns, even at five o'clock in the afternoon, groaned.

“Ma’am, I can’t allow that bet without the pit-boss’s okay,” the roulette wheel’s minder said. He looked considerably more awake now than he had when Darlene walked up in her blue-and-white-striped rayon uniform. She had put her money down on the second triple—the numbers from 13 to 24.

“Better get him over here then, hon,” Darlene said, and waited, calm, her feet on Mother Earth here in Carson City, Nevada, seven miles from where the first big silver mine opened up in 1878, her head somewhere deep in the deluminum mines of the Planet Chumpadiddle, as the pit-boss and the minder conferred and the crowd around her murmured. At last the pit-boss came over to her and asked her to write down her name and address and telephone number on a piece of pink memo paper. Darlene did it, interested to see that her handwriting hardly looked like her own. She felt calm, as

calm as the calmest deluminum miner who had ever lived, but her hands were shaking badly.

The pit-boss turned to Mr. Roulette Minder and twirled his finger in the air—spin it, son.

This time the rattle of the little white ball was clearly audible in the area around the roulette table; the crowd had fallen entirely silent, and Darlene's was the only bet on the felt. This was Carson City, not Monte Carlo, and for Carson, this was a monster bet. The ball rattled, fell into a slot, jumped, fell into another, then jumped again. Darlene closed her eyes.

Luckey, she thought, she prayed. Luckey me, luckey mom, luckey girl.

The crowd moaned, either in horror or ecstasy. That was how she knew the wheel had slowed enough to read. Darlene opened her eyes, knowing that her quarter was finally gone.

Except it wasn't.

The little white ball was resting in the slot marked 13 Black.

"Oh my God, honey," a woman behind her said. "Give me your hand, I want to rub your hand." Darlene gave it, and felt the other one gently taken as well—taken and fondled. From some distance far, far away from the deluminum mines where she was having this fantasy, she could feel first two people, then four, then six, then eight, gently rubbing her hands, trying to catch her luck like a cold-germ.

Mr. Roulette was pushing piles and piles of chips over to her.

"How much?" she asked faintly. "How much is that?"

"Seventeen hundred and twenty-eight dollars," he said.
"Congratulations, ma'am. If I were you—"

“But you’re not,” Darlene said. “I want to put it all down on one number. That one.” She pointed. “25.” Behind her, someone screamed softly, as if in sexual rapture. “Every cent of it.”

“No,” the pit-boss said.

“But—”

“No,” he said again, and she had been working for men most of her life, enough of it to know when one of them meant exactly what he was saying. “House policy, Mrs. Pullen.”

“All right,” she said. “All right, you chickenshit.” She pulled the chips back toward her, spilling some of the piles. “How much will you let me put down?”

“Excuse me,” the pit-boss said.

He was gone for almost five minutes. During that time the wheel stood silent. No one spoke to Darlene, but her hands were touched repeatedly, and sometimes chafed as if she were a fainting victim. When the pit-boss came back, he had a tall bald man with him. The tall bald man was wearing a tuxedo and gold-rimmed glasses. He did not look at Darlene so much as through her.

“Eight hundred dollars,” he said, “but I advise against it.” His eyes dropped down the front of her uniform, then back up at her face. “I think you should cash in your winnings, madam.”

“I don’t think you know jack shit in a backyard outhouse,” Darlene said, and the tall bald man’s mouth tightened in distaste. She shifted her gaze to Mr. Roulette. “Do it,” she said.

*

Mr. Roulette put down a plaque with \$800 written on it, positioning it fussily so it covered the number 25. Then he spun the wheel and dropped the ball. The entire casino had gone silent now, even the

persistent ratchet-and-ding of the slot machines. Darlene looked up, across the room, and wasn't surprised to see that the bank of TVs which had previously been showing horse races and boxing matches were now showing the spinning roulette wheel ... and her.

I'm even a TV star. Luckey me. Luckey me. Oh so luckey me.

The ball spun. The ball bounced. It almost caught, then spun again, a little white dervish racing around the polished wood circumference of the wheel.

"Odds!" she suddenly cried. "What are the odds?"

"Thirty to one," the tall bald man said. "Twenty-four thousand dollars should you win, madam."

Darlene closed her eyes ...

*

... and opened them in 322. She was still sitting in the chair, with the envelope in one hand and the quarter that had fallen out of it in the other. Her tears of laughter were still wet on her cheeks.

"Luckey me," she said, and squeezed the envelope so she could look into it.

No note. Just another part of the fantasy, misspellings and all.

Sighing, Darlene slipped the quarter into her uniform pocket and began to clean up 322.

*

Instead of taking Paul home as she normally did after school, Patsy brought him to the hotel. "He's snotting all over the place," she explained to her mother, her voice dripping with disdain which only a thirteen-year-old could muster in such quantities. "He's, like, choking on it. I thought maybe you'd want to take him to the Doc in the Box."

Paul looked at her silently from his watering, patient eyes. His nose was as red as the stripe on a candy cane. They were in the lobby; there were no guests checking in currently, and Mr. Avery (Tex to the maids, who unanimously hated the little prick) was away from the desk. Probably back in the office, choking his chicken. If he could find it.

Darlene put her palm on Paul's forehead, felt the warmth simmering there, and sighed. "Suppose you're right," she said. "How are you feeling, Paul?"

"Ogay," Paul said in a distant, foghorning voice.

Even Patsy looked depressed. "He'll probably be dead by the time he's sixteen," she said. "The only case of, like, spontaneous AIDS in the history of the world."

"You shut your dirty little mouth!" Darlene said, much more sharply than she had intended, but Paul was the one who looked wounded—he winced and looked away from her.

"He's a baby, too," Patsy said hopelessly. "I mean, really."

"No, he's not. He's sensitive, that's all. And his resistance is low." She fished in her uniform pocket. "Paul? Want this?"

He looked back at her, saw the quarter, and smiled a little.

"What are you going to do with it, Paul?" Patsy asked him as he took it. "Take Deirdre McCausland out on a date?" She snickered.

"I'll thing of subething," Paul said.

"Leave him alone," Darlene said. "Don't bug him for a little while, could you do that?"

"Yeah, but what do I get?" Patsy asked her. "I walked him over here safe, I always walk him safe, so what do I get?"

Braces, Darlene thought, if I can ever afford them. And she was suddenly overwhelmed by unhappiness, by a sense of life as some vast cold junkpile—deluminum slag, if you liked—that was always looming over you, always waiting to fall, cutting you to screaming ribbons even before it crushed the life out of you. Luck was a joke. Even good luck was just bad luck with its hair combed.

“Mom? Mommy?” Patsy sounded suddenly concerned. “I don’t want anything, I was just kidding around, you know.”

“I’ve got a Sassy for you, if you want,” Darlene said. “I found it in one of my rooms and put it in my locker.”

“This month’s?” Patsy sounded suspicious.

“Actually this month’s. Come on.”

They were halfway across the room when they heard the drop of the coin and the unmistakable ratchet of the handle and whir of the drums as Paul pulled the handle of the slot machine beside the desk and then let it go.

“Oh you dumb hoser, you’re in trouble now!” Patsy cried. She did not sound exactly unhappy about it. “How many times has Mom told you not to throw your money away on stuff like that? Slots’re for the tourists!”

But Darlene didn’t even turn around. She stood looking at the door that led back to the maid’s country, where the cheap cloth coats from Ames and Wal-Mart hung in a row like dreams that have grown seedy and been discarded, where the time-clock ticked, where the air always smelled of Melissa’s perfume and Jane’s Ben-Gay. She stood listening to the drums whir, she stood waiting for the rattle of coins into the tray, and by the time they began to fall she was already thinking about how she could ask Melissa to watch the kids while she went down to the casino. It wouldn’t take long.

Lucky me, she thought, and closed her eyes. In the darkness behind her lids, the sound of the falling coins seemed very loud. It sounded like metal slag falling on top of a coffin.

It was all going to happen just the way she had imagined, she was somehow sure that it was, and yet that image of life as a huge slagheap, a pile of alien metal, remained. It was like an indelible stain that you know will never come out of some favorite piece of clothing.

Yet Patsy needed braces, Paul needed to see a doctor about his constantly running nose and constantly watering eyes, he needed a Sega system the way Patsy needed some colorful underwear that would make her feel funny and sexy, and she needed ... what? What did she need? Deke back?

Sure, Deke back, she thought, almost laughing. I need him back like I need puberty back, or labor pains. I need ... well ...

(nothing)

Yes, that was right. Nothing at all, zero, empty, adios. Black days, empty nights, and laughing all the way.

I don't need anything because I'm lucky, she thought, her eyes still closed. Tears, squeezing out from beneath her closed lids, while behind her Patsy was screaming at the top of her lungs. "Oh shit! Oh shit-a-booger, you hit the jackpot, Paulie! You hit the damned jackpot!"

Lucky, Darlene thought. So lucky, oh lucky me.

INGO RADEMACHER

JULIE SANDS

CULLEN DOUGLAS

STEPHEN KING'S

GOTHAM
CAFÉ



DEATH DU JOUR

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LUNCH AT THE GOTHAM CAFE

Stephen King

One day when I was in New York, I walked past a very nice-looking restaurant. Inside, the maitre d' was showing a couple to their table. The couple was arguing. The maitre d' caught my eye and tipped me what may have been the most cynical wink in the universe. I went back to my hotel and wrote this story. For the three days it was in work, I was totally possessed by it. For me what makes it go isn't the crazy maitre d' but the spooky relationship between the divorcing couple. In their own way, they're crazier than he is. By far.

One day I came home from the brokerage house where I worked and found a letter—more of a note, actually—from my wife on the dining room table. It said she was leaving me, that she was pursuing a divorce, that I would hear from her lawyer. I sat on the chair at the kitchen end of the table, reading this communication over and over again, not able to believe it. After awhile I got up, went into the bedroom, and looked in the closet. All her clothes were gone except for one pair of sweatpants and a joke sweatshirt someone had given her, with the words RICH BLONDE printed on the front in spangly stuff.

I went back to the dining room table (which was actually at one end of the living room; it was only a four-room apartment) and read the six sentences over again. It was the same, but looking into the half-empty bedroom closet had started me on the way to believing what it said. It was a chilly piece of work, that note. There was no “Love” or “Good luck” or even “Best” at the bottom of it. “Take care of yourself” was as warm as it got. Just below that she had scratched her name, Diane.

I walked into the kitchen, poured myself a glass of orange juice, then knocked it onto the floor when I tried to pick it up. The juice sprayed onto the lower cabinets and the glass broke. I knew I would cut myself if I tried to pick up the glass—my hands were shaking—but I picked it up anyway, and I cut myself. Two places, neither deep. I kept thinking that it was a joke, then realizing it wasn't. Diane wasn't much of a joker. But the thing was, I didn't see it coming. I didn't have a clue. I didn't know if that made me stupid or insensitive. As

the days passed and I thought about the last six or eight months of our two-year marriage, I realized I had been both.

That night I called her folks in Pound Ridge and asked if Diane was there. "She is, and she doesn't want to talk to you," her mother said. "Don't call back." The phone went dead in my ear.

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Two days later I got a call at work from Diane's lawyer, who introduced himself as William Humboldt, and, after ascertaining that he was indeed speaking to Steven Davis, began calling me Steve. I suppose that's a little hard to believe, but it's what happened. Lawyers are so bizarre.

Humboldt told me I would be receiving "preliminary paperwork" early the following week, and suggested I prepare "an account overview prefatory to dissolving your domestic corporation." He also advised me not to make any "sudden fiduciary movements" and suggested that I keep all receipts for items purchased, even the smallest, during this "financially difficult passage." Last of all, he suggested that I find myself a lawyer.

"Listen a minute, would you?" I asked. I was sitting at my desk with my head down and my left hand curled around my forehead. My eyes were shut so I wouldn't have to look into the bright gray socket of my computer screen. I'd been crying a lot, and my eyes felt like they were full of sand.

"Of course," he said. "Happy to listen, Steve."

"I've got two things for you. First, you mean 'preparatory to ending your marriage,' not 'prefatory to dissolving your domestic corporation' ... and if Diane thinks I'm going to try and cheat her out of what's hers, she's wrong."

"Yes," Humboldt said, not indicating agreement but that he understood my point.

“Second, you’re her lawyer, not mine. I find you calling me by my first name patronizing and insensitive. Do it again on the phone and I’ll hang up on you. Do it to my face and I’ll probably try to punch your lights out.”

“Steve ... Mr. Davis ... I hardly think—”

I hung up on him. It was the first thing I’d done that gave me any pleasure since finding that note on the dining room table, with her three apartment keys on top of it to hold it down.

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That afternoon I talked to a friend in the legal department, and he recommended a friend of his who did divorce work. The divorce lawyer was John Ring, and I made an appointment with him for the following day. I went home from the office as late as I could, walked back and forth through the apartment for awhile, decided to go out to a movie, couldn’t find anything I wanted to see, tried the television, couldn’t find anything there to look at, either, and did some more walking. And at some point I found myself in the bedroom, standing in front of an open window fourteen floors above the street, and chucking out all my cigarettes, even the stale old pack of Viceroy’s from the very back of my top desk drawer, a pack that had probably been there for ten years or more—since before I had any idea there was such a creature as Diane Coslaw in the world, in other words.

Although I’d been smoking between twenty and forty cigarettes a day for twenty years, I don’t remember any sudden decision to quit, nor any dissenting interior opinions—not even a mental suggestion that maybe two days after your wife walks out is not the optimum time to quit smoking. I just stuffed the full carton, the half carton, and the two or three half-used packs I found lying around out the window and into the dark. Then I shut the window (it never once occurred to me that it might have been more efficient to throw the user out instead of the product; it was never that kind of situation), lay down on my bed, and closed my eyes. As I drifted off, it occurred to me that tomorrow was probably going to be one of the worst days of my life. It further

occurred to me that I would probably be smoking again by noon. I was right about the first thing, wrong about the second.

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The next ten days—the time during which I was going through the worst of the physical withdrawal from nicotine—were difficult and often unpleasant, but perhaps not as bad as I had thought they would be. And although I was on the verge of smoking dozens—no, hundreds—of times, I never did. There were moments when I thought I would go insane if I didn't have a cigarette, and when I passed people on the street who were smoking I felt like screaming Give that to me, motherfucker, that's mine! at them, but I didn't.

For me, the worst times were late at night. I think (but I'm not sure; all my thought processes from around the time Diane left are very blurry in my mind) I had an idea that I would sleep better if I quit, but I didn't. I lay awake some mornings until three, hands laced together under my pillow, looking up at the ceiling, listening to sirens and to the rumble of trucks headed downtown. At those times I would think about the twenty-four-hour Korean market almost directly across the street from my building. I would think about the white fluorescent light inside, so bright it was almost like a Kubler-Ross near-death experience, and how it spilled out onto the sidewalk between the displays which, in another hour, two young Korean men in white paper hats would begin to fill with fruit. I would think about the older man behind the counter, also Korean, also in a paper hat, and the formidable racks of cigarettes behind him, as big as the stone tablets Charlton Heston brought down from Mount Sinai in *The Ten Commandments*. I would think about getting up, dressing, going over there, getting a pack of cigarettes (or maybe nine or ten of them), and sitting by the window, smoking one Marlboro after another as the sky lightened to the east and the sun came up. I never did, but on many early mornings I went to sleep counting cigarette brands instead of sheep: Winston ... Winston 100s ... Virginia Slims ... Doral ... Merit ... Merit 100s ... Camels ... Camel Filters ... Camel Lights.

Later—around the time I was starting to see the last three or four months of our marriage in a clearer light, as a matter of fact—I began to understand that my decision to quit smoking when I did was perhaps not so unconsidered as it at first seemed, and a very long way from ill-considered. I'm not a brilliant man, not a brave one, either, but that decision might have been both. It's certainly possible; sometimes we rise above ourselves. In any case, it gave my mind something concrete to pitch upon in the days after Diane left; it gave my misery a vocabulary it would not otherwise have had.

Of course I have speculated that quitting when I did may have played a part in what happened at the Gotham Cafe that day, and I'm sure there's some truth to that. But who can foresee such things? None of us can predict the final outcomes of our actions, and few of us even try; most of us just do what we do to prolong a moment's pleasure or to stop the pain. And even when we act for the noblest reasons, the last link of the chain all too often drips with someone's blood.

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Humboldt called me again two weeks after the evening when I'd bombed West Eighty-third Street with my cigarettes, and this time he stuck with Mr. Davis as a form of address. He thanked me for the copies of various documents forwarded him through Mr. Ring and said that the time had come for "all four of us" to sit down to lunch. All four of us meant Diane. I hadn't seen her since the morning of the day she'd left, and even then I hadn't really seen her; she'd been sleeping with her face buried in her pillow. I hadn't even talked to her. My heart speeded up in my chest, and I could feel a pulse tapping away in the wrist of the hand holding the telephone.

"There are a number of details to be worked out, and a number of pertinent arrangements to be discussed, and this seems to be the time to put that process in work," Humboldt said. He chuckled fatly in my ear, like a repulsive adult giving a child some minor treat. "It's always best to let some time pass before bringing the principals

together, a little cooling-off period, but in my judgement a face-to-face meeting at this time would facilitate—”

“Let me get this straight,” I said. “You’re talking about—”

“Lunch,” he said. “The day after tomorrow? Can you clear that on your schedule?” Of course you can, his voice said. Just to see her again ... to experience the slightest touch of her hand. Eh, Steve?

“I don’t have anything on for lunch Thursday anyhow, so that’s not a problem. And I should bring my lawyer?”

The fat chuckle came again, shivering in my ear like something just turned out of a Jell-O mold. “I imagine Mr. Ring would like to be included, yes.”

“Did you have a place in mind?” I wondered for a moment who would be paying for this lunch, and then had to smile at my own naivete. I reached into my pocket for a cigarette and poked the tip of a toothpick under my thumbnail instead. I winced, brought the pick out, checked the tip for blood, saw none, and stuck it in my mouth.

Humboldt had said something, but I had missed it. The sight of the toothpick had reminded me all over again that I was floating smokeless on the waves of the world.

“Pardon me?”

“I asked if you know the Gotham Cafe on Fifty-third Street,” he said, sounding a touch impatient now. “Between Madison and Park.”

“No, but I’m sure I can find it.”

“Noon?”

“Noon’s fine,” I said, and thought of telling him to tell Diane to wear the green dress with the little black speckles and the slit up the side. “I’ll just check with my lawyer.” It occurred to me that that was a pompous, hateful little phrase, one I couldn’t wait to stop using.

“Do that, and call me back if there’s a problem.”

I called John Ring, who hemmed and hawed enough to justify his retainer (not outrageous, but considerable) and then said he supposed a meeting was in order “at this time.”

I hung up, settled back in front of my computer terminal, and wondered how I was possibly going to be able to meet Diane again without at least one cigarette beforehand.

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On the morning of our scheduled lunch, John Ring called and told me he couldn’t make it, and that I would have to cancel. “It’s my mother,” he said, sounding harried. “She fell down the damned stairs and broke her hip. Out in Babylon. I’m leaving now for Penn Station. I’ll have to take the train.” He spoke in the tone of a man saying he’ll have to go by camel across the Gobi.

I thought for a second, jiggling a fresh toothpick between my fingers. Two used ones lay beside my computer terminal, the ends frayed. I was going to have to watch that; it was all too easy to imagine my stomach filling up with sharp little splinterettes. The replacement of one bad habit with another seems almost inevitable, I’ve noticed.

“Steven? Are you there?”

“Yes,” I said. “I’m sorry about your mother, but I’m going to keep the lunch-date.”

He sighed, and when he spoke he sounded sympathetic as well as harried. “I understand that you want to see her, and that’s the reason why you have to be very careful, and make no mistakes. You’re not Donald Trump and she’s not Ivana, but this isn’t a no-fault we got here, either, where you get your decree by registered mail. You’ve done very well for yourself, Steven, especially in the last five years.”

“I know, but—”

“And for thuh-ree of those years,” Ring overrode me, now putting on his courtroom voice like an overcoat, “Diane Davis was not your wife, not your live-in companion, and not by any stretch of the imagination your helpmate. She was just Diane Coslaw from Pound Ridge, and she did not go before you tossing flower-petals or blowing a cornet.”

“No, but I want to see her.” And what I was thinking would have driven him mad: I wanted to see if she was wearing the green dress with the black speckles, because she knew damned well it was my favorite.

He sighed again. “I can’t have this discussion, or I’m going to miss my train. There isn’t another one until one-oh-one.”

“Go and catch your train.”

“I will, but first I’m going to make one more effort to get through to you. A meeting like this is like a joust. The lawyers are the knights; the clients are reduced, for the time being, to no more than squires with Sir Barrister’s lance in one hand and the reins of his horse in the other.” His tone suggested that this was an old image, and well-loved. “What you’re telling me is that, since I can’t be there, you’re going to hop on my nag and go galloping at the other guy with no lance, no armor, no faceplate, probably not even a jockstrap.”

“I want to see her,” I said. “I want to see how she is. How she looks. Hey, without you there, maybe Humboldt won’t even want to talk.”

“Oh, wouldn’t that be nice,” he said, and came out with a small, cynical laugh. “I’m not going to talk you out of it, am I?”

“No.”

“All right, then I want you to follow certain instructions. If I find out you haven’t, and that you’ve gummed up the works, I may decide it would be simpler to just resign the case. Are you hearing me?”

“I’m hearing you.”

“Good. Don’t yell at her, Steven. That’s big number one. Are you hearing that?”

“Yes.” I wasn’t going to yell at her. If I could quit smoking two days after she had walked out—and stick to it—I thought I could get through a hundred minutes and three courses without calling her a bitch.

“Don’t yell at him, that’s number two.”

“Okay.”

“Don’t just say okay. I know you don’t like him, and he doesn’t like you much, either.”

“He’s never even met me. How can he have an opinion about me one way or another?”

“Don’t be dense,” he said. “He’s being paid to have an opinion, that’s how. So say okay like you mean it.”

“Okay like I mean it.”

“Better.” But he didn’t say it like he really meant it; he said it like a man who is checking his watch.

“Don’t get into substantive matters,” he said. “Don’t discuss financial-settlement issues, not even on a ‘What would you think if I suggested this’ basis. If he gets pissed off and asks why you kept the lunch-date if you weren’t going to discuss nuts and bolts, tell him just what you told me, that you wanted to see your wife again.”

“Okay.”

“And if they leave at that point, can you live with it?”

“Yes.” I didn’t know if I could or not, but I thought I could, and I knew that Ring wanted to catch his train.

“As a lawyer—your lawyer—I’m telling you that this is a bullshit move, and that if it backfires in court, I’ll call a recess just so I can pull you out into the hall and say I told you so. Now have you got that?”

“Yes. Say hello to your mother.”

“Maybe tonight,” Ring said, and now he sounded as if he were rolling his eyes. “I won’t get a word in until then. I have to run, Steven.”

“Okay.”

“I hope she stands you up.”

“I know you do.”

He hung up and went to see his mother, out in Babylon. When I saw him next, a few days later, there was something between us that didn’t quite bear discussion, although I think we would have talked about it if we had known each other even a little bit better. I saw it in his eyes and I suppose he saw it in mine, as well—the knowledge that if his mother hadn’t fallen down the stairs and broken her hip, he might have wound up as dead as William Humboldt.

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I walked from my office to the Gotham Cafe, leaving at eleven-fifteen and arriving across from the restaurant at eleven-forty-five. I got there early for my own peace of mind—to make sure the place was where Humboldt had said it was, in other words. That’s the way I am, and pretty much the way I’ve always been. Diane used to call it my “obsessive streak” when we were first married, but I think that by the end she knew better. I don’t trust the competence of others very easily, that’s all. I realize it’s a pain-in-the-ass characteristic, and I know it drove her crazy, but what she never seemed to realize was that I didn’t exactly love it in myself, either. Some things take longer to change than others, though. And some things you can never change, no matter how hard you try.

The restaurant was right where Humboldt had said it would be, the location marked by a green awning with the words GOTHAM CAFE on it. A white city skyline was traced across the plate-glass windows. It looked New York-trendy. It also looked pretty unamazing, just one of the eight hundred or so pricey restaurants crammed together in midtown.

With the meeting-place located and my mind temporarily set at rest (about that, anyway; I was tense as hell about seeing Diane again and craving a cigarette like mad), I walked up to Madison and browsed in a luggage store for fifteen minutes. Mere window-shopping was no good; if Diane and Humboldt came from uptown, they might see me. Diane was liable to recognize me by the set of my shoulders and the hang of my topcoat even from behind, and I didn't want that. I didn't want them to know I'd arrived early. I thought it might look needy. So I went inside.

I bought an umbrella I didn't need and left the shop at straight up noon by my watch, knowing I could step through the door of the Gotham Cafe at twelve-oh-five. My father's dictum: If you need to be there, show up five minutes early. If they need you to be there, show up five minutes late. I had reached a point where I didn't know who needed what or why or for how long, but my father's dictum seemed like the safest course. If it had been just Diane alone, I think I would have arrived dead on time.

No, that's probably a lie. I suppose if it had just been Diane, I would have gone in at eleven-forty-five, when I first arrived, and waited for her.

I stood under the awning for a moment, looking in. The place was bright, and I marked that down in its favor. I have an intense dislike for dark restaurants where you can't see what you're eating or drinking. The walls were white and hung with vibrant Impressionist drawings. You couldn't tell what they were, but that didn't matter; with their primary colors and broad, exuberant strokes, they hit your eyes like visual caffeine. I looked for Diane and saw a woman that might be her, seated about halfway down the long room and by the wall. It

was hard to say, because her back was turned and I don't have her knack of recognition under difficult circumstances. But the heavysset, balding man she was sitting with certainly looked like a Humboldt. I took a deep breath, opened the restaurant door, and went in.

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There are two phases of withdrawal from tobacco, and I'm convinced that it's the second that causes most cases of recidivism. The physical withdrawal lasts ten days to two weeks, and then most of the symptoms—sweats, headaches, muscle twitches, pounding eyes, insomnia, irritability—disappear. What follows is a much longer period of mental withdrawal. These symptoms may include mild to moderate depression, mourning, some degree of anhedonia (emotional flat-line, in other words), forgetfulness, even a species of transient dyslexia. I know all this stuff because I read up on it. Following what happened at the Gotham Cafe, it seemed very important that I do that. I suppose you'd have to say that my interest in the subject fell somewhere between the Land of Hobbies and the Kingdom of Obsession.

The most common symptom of phase-two withdrawal is a feeling of mild unreality. Nicotine improves synaptic transferral and improves concentration—widens the brain's information highway, in other words. It's not a big boost, and not really necessary to successful thinking (although most confirmed cigarette junkies believe differently), but when you take it away, you're left with a feeling—a pervasive feeling, in my case—that the world has taken on a decidedly dreamy cast. There were many times when it seemed to me that people and cars and the little sidewalk vignettes I observed were actually passing by me on a moving screen, a thing controlled by hidden stagehands turning enormous cranks and revolving enormous drums. It was also a little like being mildly stoned all the time, because the feeling was accompanied by a sense of helplessness and moral exhaustion, a feeling that things had to simply go on the way they were going, for good or for ill, because

you (except of course it's me I'm talking about) were just too damned busy not-smoking to do much of anything else.

I'm not sure how much all this bears on what happened, but I know it has some bearing, because I was pretty sure something was wrong with the maitre d' almost as soon as I saw him, and as soon as he spoke to me, I knew.

He was tall, maybe forty-five, slim (in his tux, at least; in ordinary clothes he probably would have looked skinny), mustached. He had a leather-bound menu in one hand. He looked like battalions of maitre d's in battalions of fancy New York restaurants, in other words. Except for his bow-tie, which was askew, and something on his shirt that was a splotch just above the place where his jacket buttoned. It looked like either gravy or a glob of some dark jelly. Also, several strands of his hair stuck up defiantly in back, making me think of Alfalfa in the old Little Rascals one-reelers. That almost made me burst out laughing—I was very nervous, remember—and I had to bite my lips to keep it in.

“Yes, sir?” he asked as I approached the desk. It came out sounding like *Yais sair?* All maitre d's in New York City have accents, but it is never one you can positively identify. A girl I dated in the mid-eighties, one who did have a sense of humor (along with a fairly large drug habit, unfortunately), told me once that they all grew up on the same little island and hence all spoke the same language.

“What language is it?” I asked her.

“Snooti,” she said, and I cracked up.

This thought came back to me as I looked past the desk to the woman I'd seen while outside—I was now almost positive it was Diane—and I had to bite the insides of my lips again. As a result, Humboldt's name came out of me sounding like a half-smothered sneeze.

The maitre d's high, pale brow contracted in a frown. His eyes bored into mine. I had taken them for brown as I approached the desk, but now they looked black.

"Pardon, sir?" he asked. It came out sounding like Pahdun, sair and looking like Fuck you, Jack. His long fingers, as pale as his brow—concert pianist's fingers, they looked like—tapped nervously on the cover of the menu. The tassel sticking out of it like some sort of half-assed bookmark swung back and forth.

"Humboldt," I said. "Party of three." I found I couldn't take my eyes off his bow-tie, so crooked that the left side of it was almost brushing the shelf under his chin, and that blob on his snowy-white dress shirt. Now that I was closer, it didn't look like either gravy or jelly; it looked like partially dried blood.

He was looking down at his reservations book, the rogue tuft at the back of his head waving back and forth over the rest of his slicked-down hair. I could see his scalp through the grooves his comb had laid down, and a speckle of dandruff on the shoulders of his tux. It occurred to me that a good headwaiter might have fired an underling put together in such sloppy fashion.

"Ah, yes, monsieur." (Ah yais, messoo.) He had found the name. "Your party is—" He was starting to look up. He stopped abruptly, and his eyes sharpened even more, if that was possible, as he looked past me and down. "You cannot bring that dog in here," he said sharply. "How many times have I told you you can't bring that dog in here!"

He didn't quite shout, but spoke so loudly that several of the diners closest to his pulpit-like desk stopped eating and looked around curiously.

I looked around myself. He had been so emphatic I expected to see somebody's dog, but there was no one behind me and most certainly no dog. It occurred to me then, I don't know why, that he was talking about my umbrella, that perhaps on the Island of the Maitre D's, dog

was a slang term for umbrella, especially when carried by a patron on a day when rain did not seem likely.

I looked back at the maitre d' and saw that he had already started away from his desk, holding my menu in his hands. He must have sensed that I wasn't following, because he looked back over his shoulder, eyebrows slightly raised. There was nothing on his face now but polite enquiry—Are you coming, messoo?—and I came. I knew something was wrong with him, but I came. I could not take the time or effort to try to decide what might be wrong with the maitre d' of a restaurant where I had never been before today and where I would probably never be again; I had Humboldt and Diane to deal with, I had to do it without smoking, and the maitre d' of the Gotham Cafe would have to take care of his own problems, dog included.

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Diane turned around and at first I saw nothing in her face and in her eyes but a kind of frozen politeness. Then, just below it, I saw anger, or thought I did. We'd done a lot of arguing during our last three or four months together, but I couldn't recall ever seeing the sort of concealed anger I sensed in her now, anger that was meant to be hidden by the makeup and the new dress (blue, no speckles, no slit up the side) and the new hairdo. The heavysset man she was with was saying something, and she reached out and touched his arm. As he turned toward me, beginning to get to his feet, I saw something else in her face. She was afraid of me as well as angry with me. And although she hadn't said a single word, I was already furious at her. Everything on her face and in her eyes was negative; she might as well have been wearing a CLOSED UNTIL FURTHER NOTICE sign on her forehead. I thought I deserved better.

"Monsieur," the maitre d' said, pulling out the chair to Diane's left. I barely heard him, and certainly any thought of his eccentric behavior and crooked bow-tie had left my head. I think that even the subject of tobacco had briefly vacated my head for the first time since I'd quit smoking. I could only consider the careful composure of her face and marvel at how I could be angry with her and still want her so much it

made me ache to look at her. Absence may or may not make the heart grow fonder, but it certainly freshens the eye.

I also found time to wonder if I had really seen all I'd surmised. Anger? Yes, that was possible, even likely. If she hadn't been angry with me to at least some degree, she never would have left in the first place, I supposed. But afraid? Why in God's name would Diane be afraid of me? I'd never laid a single finger on her. Yes, I suppose I had raised my voice during some of our arguments, but so had she.

"Enjoy your lunch, monsieur," the maitre d' said from some other universe—the one where service people usually stay, only poking their heads into ours when we call them, either because we need something or to complain.

"Mr. Davis, I'm Bill Humboldt," Diane's companion said. He held out a large hand that looked reddish and chapped. I shook it briefly. The rest of him was as big as his hand, and his broad face wore the sort of flush habitual drinkers often get after the first one of the day. I put him in his mid-forties, about ten years away from the time when his sagging cheeks would turn into jowls.

"Pleasure," I said, not thinking about what I was saying any more than I was thinking about the maitre d' with the blob on his shirt, only wanting to get the hand-shaking part over so I could turn back to the pretty blonde with the rose-and-cream complexion, the pale pink lips, and the trim, slim figure. The woman who had, not so long ago, liked to whisper "Do me do me do me" in my ear while she held onto my ass like a saddle with two pommels.

"Where is Mr. Ring?" Humboldt asked, looking around (a bit theatrically, I thought).

"Mr. Ring is on his way to Long Island. His mother fell downstairs and broke her hip."

"Oh, wonderful," Humboldt said. He picked up the half-finished martini in front of him on the table and drained it until the olive with

the toothpick in it rested against his lips. He spat it back, then set the glass down and looked at me. “And I bet I can guess what he told you.”

I heard this but paid no attention. For the time being, Humboldt was no more important than minor static on a radio program you really want to hear. I looked at Diane instead. It was marvellous, really, how she looked smarter and prettier than previous. As if she had learned things—yes, even after only two weeks of separation, and while living with Ernie and Dee Dee Coslaw in Pound Ridge—that I could never know.

“How are you, Steve?” she asked.

“Fine,” I said. Then, “Not so fine, actually. I’ve missed you.”

Only watchful silence from the lady greeted this. Those big blue-green eyes looking at me, no more. Certainly no return serve, no I’ve missed you, too.

“And I quit smoking. That’s also played hell with my peace of mind.”

“Did you, finally? Good for you.”

I felt another flash of anger, this time a really ugly one, at her politely dismissive tone. As if I might not be telling the truth, but it didn’t really matter if I was. She’d carped at me about the cigarettes every day for two years, it seemed—how they were going to give me cancer, how they were going to give her cancer, how she wouldn’t even consider getting pregnant until I stopped, so I could just save any breath I might have been planning to waste on that subject—and now all at once it didn’t matter anymore, because I didn’t matter anymore.

“We have a little business to transact,” Humboldt said. “If you don’t mind, that is.”

There was one of those big, boxy lawyer suitcases on the floor beside him. He picked it up with a grunt and set it on the chair where my lawyer would have been if his mother hadn't broken her hip. Humboldt began unsnapping the clasps, but I quit paying attention at that point. The fact was, I did mind. It wasn't a matter of caution, either; it was a matter of priorities. I felt an instant's gratitude that Ring had been called away. It had certainly clarified the issues.

I looked at Diane and said, "I want to try again. Can we reconcile? Is there any chance of that?"

The look of absolute horror on her face crashed hopes I hadn't even known I'd been holding onto. Instead of answering, she looked past me at Humboldt.

"You said we didn't have to talk about this!" Her voice was trembling, accusatory. "You said you wouldn't even let it come up!"

Humboldt looked a little flustered. He shrugged and glanced briefly down at his empty martini glass before looking back up at Diane. I think he was wishing he'd ordered a double. "I didn't know Mr. Davis would be attending this meeting without his lawyer. You should have called me, Mr. Davis. Since you did not, I feel it necessary to inform you that Diane did not greenlight this meeting with any thoughts of reconciliation in mind. Her decision to seek a divorce is final."

He glanced at her briefly, seeking confirmation, and got it. She was nodding emphatically. Her cheeks were considerably brighter than they had been when I sat down, and it was not the sort of flush I associate with embarrassment. "You bet it is," she said, and I saw that furious look on her face again.

"Diane, why?" I hated the plaintive note I heard in my voice, a sound almost like a sheep's bleat, but there wasn't a goddamned thing I could do about it. "Why?"

"Oh Jesus," she said. "Are you telling me you really don't know?"

“Yes—”

Her cheeks were brighter than ever, the flush now rising almost to her temples. “No, probably you don’t. Isn’t that typical.” She picked up her water and spilled the top two inches on the tablecloth because her hand was trembling. I flashed back at once—I mean kapow—to the day she’d left, remembering how I’d knocked the glass of orange juice onto the floor and how I’d cautioned myself not to try picking up the broken pieces of glass until my hands had settled down, and how I’d gone ahead anyway and cut myself for my pains.

“Stop it, this is counterproductive,” Humboldt said. He sounded like a playground monitor trying to prevent a scuffle before it gets started, but his eyes were sweeping the rear part of the room, looking for our waiter, or any waiter whose eye he could catch. He was a lot less interested in us, at that particular moment, than he was in obtaining what the British like to call “the other half.”

“I just want to know—” I began.

“What you want to know doesn’t have anything to do with why we’re here,” Humboldt said, and for a moment he sounded as sharp and alert as he probably had been when he first strode out of law school with his diploma in his hand.

“Yes, right, finally,” Diane said. She spoke in a brittle, urgent voice. “Finally it’s not about what you want, what you need.”

“I don’t know what that means, but I’m willing to listen,” I said. “We could try counselling, I’m not against it if maybe—”

She raised her hands to shoulder-level, palms out. “Oh God, Mr. Macho’s gone New Age,” she said, then dropped her hands back into her lap. “After all the days you rode off into the sunset, tall in the saddle. Say it ain’t so, Joe.”

“Stop it,” Humboldt told her. He looked from his client to his client’s soon-to-be ex-husband (it was going to happen, all right; even the slight unreality that comes with not-smoking couldn’t conceal that self-evident truth from me by that point). “One more word from either of you and I’m going to declare this luncheon at an end.” He gave us a small smile, one so obviously manufactured that I found it perversely endearing. “And we haven’t even heard the specials yet.”

That—the first mention of food since I’d joined them—was just before the bad things started to happen, and I remember smelling salmon from one of the nearby tables. In the two weeks since I’d quit smoking, my sense of smell had become incredibly sharp, but I do not count that as much of a blessing, especially when it comes to salmon. I used to like it, but now I can’t abide the smell of it, let alone the taste. To me it smells of pain and fear and blood and death.

“He started it,” Diane said sulkily.

You started it, you were the one who walked out, I thought, but I kept it to myself. Humboldt clearly meant what he said; he would take Diane by the hand and walk her out of the restaurant if we started that schoolyard no-I-didn’t, yes-you-did shit. Not even the prospect of another drink would hold him here.

“Okay,” I said mildly ... and I had to work hard to achieve that mild tone, believe me. “I started it. What’s next?” I knew, of course; papers, papers, papers. And probably the only satisfaction I was going to get out of this sorry situation was telling them that I wasn’t going to sign any, or even look at any, on the advice of my lawyer. I glanced at Diane again, but she was looking down at her empty plate and her hair hid her face. I felt a strong urge to grab her by the shoulders and shake her inside her new blue dress like a pebble inside of a gourd. Do you think you’re in this alone? I would shout at her. Do you think you’re in this alone? Well, the Marlboro Man has got news for you, sweetheart—you’re a stubborn, self-indulgent little bi—

“Mr. Davis?” Humboldt asked politely.

I looked around at him.

“There you are,” he said. “I thought we’d lost you again.”

“Not at all,” I said.

“Good. Lovely.”

He had several sheafs of paper in his hands. They were held together by those paperclips that come in different colors—red, blue, yellow, purple. They went well with the Impressionist drawings on the walls of the Gotham Cafe. It occurred to me that I had come abysmally unprepared for this meeting, and not just because my lawyer was on the twelve-thirty-three to Babylon, either. Diane had her new dress; Humboldt had his Brinks truck of a briefcase, plus documents held together by color-coded paperclips; all I had was a new umbrella on a sunny day. I looked down at where it lay beside my chair (it had never crossed my mind to check it) and saw there was still a price-tag dangling from the handle. All at once I felt like Minnie Pearl.

The room smelled wonderful, as most restaurants do since they banned smoking in them—of flowers and wine and fresh coffee and chocolate and pastry—but what I smelled most clearly was salmon. I remember thinking that it smelled very good, and that I would probably order some. I also remember thinking that if I could eat at a meeting like this, I could probably eat anywhere.

“I have here a number of forms which will allow both you and Ms. Davis to remain financially mobile while assuring that neither of you will have unfair access to the funds you’ve both worked so hard to accumulate,” Humboldt said. “I also have preliminary court notifications which need to be signed by you, and forms that will allow us to put your bonds and T-bills in an escrow account until your current situation is settled by the court.”

I opened my mouth to tell him I wasn’t going to sign anything, and if that meant the meeting was over so be it, but I didn’t get out so

much as a single word. Before I could, I was interrupted by the maitre d'. He was screaming as well as talking, and I've tried to indicate that, but a bunch of e's strung together can't really convey the quality of that sound. It was as if he had a bellyful of steam and a teakettle whistle caught in his throat.

"That dog ... Eeeeeee! ... I told you time and again about that dog ... Eeeeeee! ... All that time I can't sleep ... Eeeeeee! ... She says cut your face, that cunt ... Eeeeeee! ... How you tease me! ... Eeeeeee! ... And now you bring that dog in here ... Eeeeeee!"

The room fell silent at once, of course, diners looking up in astonishment from their meals or their conversations as the thin, pale, black-clad figure came stalking across the room with its face outthrust and its long, storklike legs scissoring. The maitre d's bow-tie had turned a full ninety degrees from its normal position, so it now looked like the hands of a clock indicating the hour of six. His hands were clasped behind his back as he walked, and bent forward slightly from the waist as he was, he made me think of a drawing in my sixth-grade literature book, an illustration of Washington Irving's unfortunate schoolteacher, Ichabod Crane.

It was me he was looking at, me he was approaching. I stared at him, feeling almost hypnotized—it was like one of those dreams where you discover that you haven't studied for the exam you're supposed to take or that you're attending a White House dinner in your honor with no clothes on—and I might have stayed that way if Humboldt hadn't moved.

I heard his chair scrape back and glanced at him. He was standing up, his napkin held loosely in one hand. He looked surprised, but he also looked furious. I suddenly realized two things: that he was drunk, quite drunk, in fact, and that he saw this as a smirch on both his hospitality and his competence. He had chosen the restaurant, after all, and now look—the master of ceremonies had gone bonkers.

"Eeeeeee! ... I teach you! For the last time I teach you ..."

“Oh my God, he’s wet his pants,” a woman at a nearby table murmured. Her voice was low but perfectly audible in the silence as the maitre d’ drew in a fresh breath with which to scream, and I saw she was right. The crotch of the skinny man’s dress pants was soaked.

“See here, you idiot,” Humboldt said, turning to face him, and the maitre d’ brought his left hand out from behind his back. In it was the largest butcher-knife I have ever seen. It had to have been two feet long, with the top part of its cutting edge slightly belled, like a cutlass in an old pirate movie.

“Look out!” I yelled at Humboldt, and at one of the tables against the wall a skinny man in rimless spectacles screamed, ejecting a mouthful of chewed brown fragments of food onto the tablecloth in front of him.

Humboldt seemed to hear neither my yell nor the other man’s scream. He was frowning thunderously at the maitre d’. “You don’t need to expect to see me in here again if this is the way—” Humboldt began.

“Eeeeeee! EEEEEEEEE!” the maitre d’ screamed, and swung the butcher-knife flat through the air. It made a kind of whickering sound, like a whispered sentence. The period was the sound of the blade burying itself in William Humboldt’s right cheek. Blood exploded out of the wound in a furious spray of tiny droplets. They decorated the tablecloth in a fan-shaped stipplework, and I clearly saw (I will never forget it) one bright red drop fall into my waterglass and then dive for the bottom with a pinkish filament like a tail stretching out behind it. It looked like a bloody tadpole.

Humboldt’s cheek snapped open, revealing his teeth, and as he clapped his hand to the gouting wound, I saw something pinkish-white lying on the shoulder of his charcoal-gray suitcoat. It wasn’t until the whole thing was over that I realized it must have been his earlobe.

“Tell this in your ears!” the maitre d’ screamed furiously at Diane’s bleeding lawyer, who stood there with one hand clapped to his cheek. Except for the blood pouring over and between his fingers, Humboldt looked weirdly like Jack Benny doing one of his famous double-takes. “Call this to your hateful tattle-tale friends of the street ... you misery ... Eeeeeeee! ... DOG-LOVER!”

Now other people were screaming, mostly at the sight of the blood. Humboldt was a big man, and he was bleeding like a stuck pig. I could hear it pattering on the floor like water from a broken pipe, and the front of his white shirt was now red. His tie, which had been red to start with, was now black.

“Steve?” Diane said. “Steven?”

A man and a woman had been having lunch at the table behind her and slightly to her left. Now the man—about thirty and handsome in the way George Hamilton used to be—bolted to his feet and ran toward the front of the restaurant. “Troy, don’t go without me!” his date screamed, but Troy never looked back. He’d forgotten all about a library book he was supposed to return, it seemed, or maybe about how he’d promised to wax the car.

If there had been a paralysis in the room—I can’t actually say if there was or not, although I seem to have seen a great deal, and to remember it all—that broke it. There were more screams and other people got up. Several tables were overturned. Glasses and china shattered on the floor. I saw a man with his arm around the waist of his female companion hurry past behind the maitre d’; her hand was clamped into his shoulder like a claw. For a moment her eyes met mine, and they were as empty as the eyes of a Greek bust. Her face was dead pale, haglike with horror.

All of this might have happened in ten seconds, or maybe twenty. I remember it like a series of photographs or filmstrips, but it has no timeline. Time ceased to exist for me at the moment Alfalfa the maitre d’ brought his left hand out from behind his back and I saw the butcher-knife. During that time, the man in the tuxedo continued

to spew out a confusion of words in his special maitre d's language, the one that old girlfriend of mine had called Snooti. Some of it really was in a foreign language, some of it was English but completely without sense, and some of it was striking ... almost haunting. Have you ever read any of Dutch Schultz's long, confused deathbed statement? It was like that. Much of it I can't remember. What I can remember I suppose I'll never forget.

Humboldt staggered backward, still holding his lacerated cheek. The backs of his knees struck the seat of his chair and he sat down heavily on it. He looks like someone who's just been told he's disinherited, I thought. He started to turn toward Diane and me, his eyes wide and shocked. I had time to see there were tears spilling out of them, and then the maitre d' wrapped both hands around the handle of the butcher-knife and buried it in the center of Humboldt's head. It made a sound like someone whacking a pile of towels with a cane.

"Boot!" Humboldt cried. I'm quite sure that's what his last word on planet Earth was—"boot." Then his weeping eyes rolled up to whites and he slumped forward onto his plate, sweeping his own glassware off the table and onto the floor with one outflung hand. As this happened, the maitre d'—all his hair was sticking up in back, now, not just some of it—pried the long knife out of his head. Blood sprayed out of the headwound in a kind of vertical curtain, and splashed the front of Diane's dress. She raised her hands to her shoulders with the palms turned out once again, but this time it was in horror rather than exasperation. She shrieked, and then clapped her bloodspattered hands to her face, over her eyes. The maitre d' paid no attention to her. Instead, he turned to me.

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"That dog of yours," he said, speaking in an almost conversational tone. He registered absolutely no interest in or even knowledge of the screaming, terrified people stampeding behind him toward the doors. His eyes were very large, very dark. They looked brown to me again, but there seemed to be black circles around the irises. "That

dog of yours is so much rage. All the radios of Coney Island don't make up to dat dog, you motherfucker."

I had the umbrella in my hand, and the one thing I can't remember, no matter how hard I try, is when I grabbed it. I think it must have been while Humboldt was standing transfixed by the realization that his mouth had been expanded by eight inches or so, but I simply can't remember. I remember the man who looked like George Hamilton bolting for the door, and I know his name was Troy because that's what his companion called after him, but I can't remember picking up the umbrella I'd bought in the luggage store. It was in my hand, though, the price-tag sticking out of the bottom of my fist, and when the maitre d' bent forward as if bowing and ran the knife through the air at me—meaning, I think, to bury it in my throat—I raised it and brought it down on his wrist, like an old-time teacher whacking an unruly pupil with his hickory stick.

"Ud!" the maitre d' grunted as his hand was driven sharply down and the blade meant for my throat ploughed through the soggy pinkish tablecloth instead. He held on, though, and pulled it back. If I'd tried to hit his knife-hand again I'm sure I would have missed, but I didn't. I swung at his face, and fetched him an excellent lick—as excellent a lick as one can administer with an umbrella, anyway—up the side of his head. And as I did, the umbrella popped open like the visual punchline of a slapstick act.

I didn't think it was funny, though. The bloom of the umbrella hid him from me completely as he staggered backward with his free hand flying up to the place where I'd hit him, and I didn't like not being able to see him. In fact, it terrified me. Not that I wasn't terrified already.

I grabbed Diane's wrist and yanked her to her feet. She came without a word, took a step toward me, then stumbled on her high heels and fell clumsily into my arms. I was aware of her breasts pushing against me, and the wet, warm clamminess over them.

"Eeeee! You boinker!" the maitre d' screamed, or perhaps it was a "boinger" he called me. It probably doesn't matter, I know that, and

yet it quite often seems to me that it does. Late at night, the little questions haunt me as much as the big ones. “You boinking bastard! All these radios! Hush-do-baba! Fuck Cousin Brucie! Fuck YOU!”

He started around the table toward us (the area behind him was completely empty now, and looked like the aftermath of a brawl in a western movie saloon). My umbrella was still lying on the table with the opened top jutting off the far side, and the maitre d’ bumped it with his hip. It fell off in front of him, and while he kicked it aside, I set Diane back on her feet and pulled her toward the far side of the room. The front door was no good; it was probably too far away in any case, but even if we could get there, it was still jammed tight with frightened, screaming people. If he wanted me—or both of us—he would have no trouble catching us and carving us like a couple of turkeys.

“Bugs! You bugs! ... Eeeeeee! ... So much for your dog, eh? So much for your barking dog!”

“Make him stop!” Diane screamed. “Oh Jesus, he’s going to kill us both, make him stop!”

“I rot you, you abominations!” Closer, now. The umbrella hadn’t held him up for long, that was for sure. “I rot you and all your trulls!”

I saw three doors, two of them facing each other in a small alcove where there was also a pay telephone. Men’s and women’s rooms. No good. Even if they were single toilets with locks on the doors, they were no good. A nut like this one behind us would have no trouble bashing a bathroom lock off its screws, and we would have nowhere to run.

I dragged her toward the third door and shoved through it into a world of clean green tiles, strong fluorescent light, gleaming chrome, and steamy odors of food. The smell of salmon dominated. Humboldt had never gotten a chance to ask about the specials, but I thought I knew what at least one of them had been.

A waiter was standing there with a loaded tray balanced on the flat of one hand, his mouth agape and his eyes wide. He looked like Gimpel the Fool in that Isaac Singer story. “What—” he said, and then I shoved him aside. The tray went flying, with plates and glassware shattering against the wall.

“Ay!” a man yelled. He was huge, wearing a white smock and a white chef’s hat like a cloud. There was a red bandanna around his neck, and in one hand he held a ladle that was dripping some sort of brown sauce. “Ay, you can’t come in here like-a dat!”

“We have to get out,” I said. “He’s crazy. He’s—”

An idea struck me then, a way of explaining without explaining, and I put my hand over Diane’s left breast for a moment, on the soaked cloth of her dress. It was the last time I ever touched her intimately, and I don’t know if it felt good or not. I held my hand out to the chef, showing him a palm streaked with Humboldt’s blood.

“Good Christ,” he said. “Here. Inna da back.”

At that instant, the door we’d come through burst open again and the maitre d’ rolled in, eyes wild, hair sticking out everywhere like fur on a hedgehog that’s tucked itself into a ball. He looked around, saw the waiter, dismissed him, saw me, and rushed at me.

I bolted again, dragging Diane with me, shoving blindly at the softbellied bulk of the chef. We went past him, the front of Diane’s dress leaving a smear of blood on the front of his tunic. I saw he wasn’t coming with us, that he was turning toward the maitre d’ instead, and wanted to warn him, wanted to tell him that wouldn’t work, that it was the worst idea in the world and likely to be the last idea he ever had, but there was no time.

“Ay!” the chef cried. “Ay, Guy, what’s dis?” He said the maitre d’s name as the French do, so it rhymes with free, and then he didn’t say anything at all. There was a heavy thud that made me think of the sound of the knife burying itself in Humboldt’s skull, and then the

cook screamed. It had a watery sound. It was followed by a thick wet splat that haunts my dreams. I don't know what it was, and I don't want to know.

I yanked Diane down a narrow aisle between two stoves that baked a furious dull heat out at us. There was a door at the end, locked shut by two heavy steel bolts. I reached for the top one and then heard Guy, The Maitre d' from Hell, coming after us, babbling.

I wanted to keep at the bolt, wanted to believe I could open the door and get us outside before he could get within sticking distance, but part of me—the part that was determined to live—knew better. I pushed Diane against the door, stepped in front of her in a protective maneuver that must go all the way back to the Ice Age, and faced him.

He came running up the narrow aisle between the stoves with the knife gripped in his left hand and raised above his head. His mouth was open and pulled back from a set of dingy, eroded teeth. Any hope of help I might have had from Gimpel the Fool disappeared. He was cowering against the wall beside the door to the restaurant. His fingers were buried deep inside his mouth, making him look more like the village idiot than ever.

“Forgetful of me you shouldn't have been!” Guy screamed, sounding like Yoda in the Star Wars movies. “Your hateful dog! ... Your loud music, so disharmonious! ... Eeeee! ... How you ever—”

There was a large pot on one of the front burners of the lefthand stove. I reached out for it and slapped it at him. It was over an hour before I realized how badly I'd burned my hand doing that; I had a palmful of blisters like little buns, and more blisters on my three middle fingers. The pot skidded off its burner and tipped over in midair, dousing Guy from the waist down with what looked like corn, rice, and maybe two gallons of boiling water.

He screamed, staggered backward, and put the hand that wasn't holding the knife down on the other stove, almost directly into the

blue-yellow gasflame underneath a skillet where mushrooms which had been sauteing were now turning to charcoal. He screamed again, this time in a register so high it hurt my ears, and held his hand up before his eyes, as if not able to believe it was connected to him.

I looked to my right and saw a little nestle of cleaning equipment beside the door—Glass-X and Clorox and Janitor In A Drum on a shelf, a broom with a dustpan stuck on top of the handle like a hat, and a mop in a steel bucket with a squeegee on the side.

As Guy came toward me again, holding the knife in the hand that wasn't red and swelling up like an innertube, I grabbed the handle of the mop, used it to roll the bucket in front of me on its little casters, and then jabbed it out at him. Guy pulled back with his upper body but stood his ground. There was a peculiar, twitching little smile on his lips. He looked like a dog who has forgotten, temporarily, at least, how to snarl. He held the knife up in front of his face and made several mystic passes with it. The overhead fluorescents glimmered liquidly on the blade ... where it wasn't caked with blood, that was. He didn't seem to feel any pain in his burned hand, or in his legs, although they had been doused with boiling water and his tuxedo pants were spackled with rice.

"Rotten bugger," Guy said, making his mystic passes. He was like a Crusader preparing to go into battle. If, that was, you could imagine a Crusader in a rice-caked tux. "Kill you like I did your nasty barking dog."

"I don't have a dog," I said. "I can't have a dog. It's in the lease."

I think it was the only thing I said to him during the whole nightmare, and I'm not entirely sure I did say it out loud. It might only have been a thought. Behind him, I could see the chef struggling to his feet. He had one hand wrapped around the handle of the kitchen's big refrigerator and the other clapped to his bloodstained tunic, which was torn open across the swelling of his stomach in a big purple grin. He was doing his best to hold his plumbing in, but it was a battle he

was losing. One loop of intestines, shiny and bruise-colored, already hung out, resting against his left side like some awful watch-chain.

Guy fainted at me with his knife. I countered by shoving the mop-bucket at him, and he drew back. I pulled it to me again and stood there with my hands wrapped around the wooden mop-handle, ready to shove the bucket at him if he moved. My own hand was throbbing and I could feel sweat trickling down my cheeks like hot oil. Behind Guy, the cook had managed to get all the way up. Slowly, like an invalid in early recovery from a serious operation, he started working his way down the aisle toward Gimpel the Fool. I wished him well.

“Undo those bolts,” I said to Diane.

“What?”

“The bolts on the door. Undo them.”

“I can’t move,” she said. She was crying so hard I could barely understand her. “You’re crushing me.”

I moved forward a little to give her room. Guy bared his teeth at me. Mock-jabbed with the knife, then pulled it back, grinning his nervous, snarly little grin as I rolled the bucket at him again on its squeaky casters.

“Bug-infested stinkpot,” he said. He sounded like a man discussing the Mets’ chances in the forthcoming campaign. “Let’s see you play your radio this loud now, stinkpot. It gives you a change in your thinking, doesn’t it? Boink!”

He jabbed. I rolled. But this time he didn’t pull back as far, and I realized he was nerving himself up. He meant to go for it, and soon. I could feel Diane’s breasts brush against my back as she gasped for breath. I’d given her room, but she hadn’t turned around to work the bolts. She was just standing there.

“Open the door,” I told her, speaking out of the side of my mouth like a prison con. “Pull the goddam bolts, Diane.”

“I can’t,” she sobbed. “I can’t, I don’t have any strength in my hands. Make him stop, Steven, don’t stand there talking with him, make him stop.”

She was driving me insane. I really thought she was. “You turn around and pull those bolts, Diane, or I’ll just stand aside and let—”

“EEEEEEEEEE!” he screamed, and charged, waving and stabbing with the knife.

I slammed the mop-bucket forward with all the force I could muster, and swept his legs out from under him. He howled and brought the knife down in a long, desperate stroke. Any closer and it would have torn off the tip of my nose. Then he landed spraddled awkwardly on wide-spread knees, with his face just above the mop-squeezing gadget hung on the side of the bucket. Perfect! I drove the mophead into the nape of his neck. The strings dragged down over the shoulders of his black jacket like a witch-wig. His face slammed into the squeegee. I bent, grabbed the handle with my free hand, and clamped it shut. Guy shrieked with pain, the sound muffled by the mop.

“PULL THOSE BOLTS!” I screamed at Diane. “PULL THOSE BOLTS, YOU USELESS BITCH! PULL—”

Thud! Something hard and pointed slammed into my left buttock. I staggered forward with a yell—more surprise than pain, I think, although it did hurt. I went to one knee and lost my hold on the squeegee handle. Guy pulled back, slipping out from under the stringy head of the mop at the same time, breathing so loudly he sounded almost as if he were barking. It hadn’t slowed him down much, though; he lashed out at me with the knife as soon as he was clear of the bucket. I pulled back, feeling the breeze as the blade cut the air beside my cheek.

It was only as I scrambled up that I realized what had happened, what she had done. I snatched a quick glance over my shoulder at her. She stared back defiantly, her back pressed against the door. A crazy thought came to me: she wanted me to get killed. Had perhaps even planned it, the whole thing. Found herself a crazy maitre d' and —

Her eyes widened. “Look out!”

I turned back just in time to see him lunging at me. The sides of his face were bright red, except for the big white spots made by the drain-holes in the squeegee. I rammed the mophead at him, aiming for the throat and getting his chest instead. I stopped his charge and actually knocked him backward a step. What happened then was only luck. He slipped in water from the overturned bucket and went down hard, slamming his head on the tiles. Not thinking and just vaguely aware that I was screaming, I snatched up the skillet of mushrooms from the stove and brought it down on his upturned face as hard as I could. There was a muffled thump, followed by a horrible (but mercifully brief) hissing sound as the skin of his cheeks and forehead boiled.

I turned, shoved Diane aside, and drew the bolts holding the door shut. I opened the door and sunlight hit me like a hammer. And the smell of the air. I can't remember air ever smelling better, not even when I was a kid, and it was the first day of summer vacation.

I grabbed Diane's arm and pulled her out into a narrow alley lined with padlocked trash-bins. At the far end of this narrow stone slit, like a vision of heaven, was Fifty-third Street with traffic going heedlessly back and forth. I looked over my shoulder and through the open kitchen door. Guy lay on his back with carbonized mushrooms circling his head like an existential diadem. The skillet had slid off to one side, revealing a face that was red and swelling with blisters. One of his eyes was open, but it looked unseeingly up at the fluorescent lights. Behind him, the kitchen was empty. There was a pool of blood on the floor and bloody handprints on the white enamel

front of the walk-in fridge, but both the chef and Gimpel the Fool were gone.

I slammed the door shut and pointed down the alley. “Go on.”

She didn’t move, only looked at me.

I shoved her lightly on her left shoulder. “Go!”

She raised a hand like a traffic-cop, shook her head, then pointed a finger at me. “Don’t you touch me.”

“What’ll you do? Sic your lawyer on me? I think he’s dead, sweetheart.”

“Don’t you patronize me like that. Don’t you dare. And don’t touch me, Steven, I’m warning you.”

The kitchen door burst open. Moving, not thinking but just moving, I slammed it shut again. I heard a muffled cry—whether anger or pain I didn’t know and didn’t care—just before it clicked shut. I leaned my back against it and braced my feet. “Do you want to stand here and discuss it?” I asked her. “He’s still pretty lively, by the sound.” He hit the door again. I rocked with it, then slammed it shut. I waited for him to try again, but he didn’t.

Diane gave me a long look, glarey and uncertain, and then started walking up the alleyway with her head down and her hair hanging at the sides of her neck. I stood with my back against the door until she got about three quarters of the way to the street, then stood away from it, watching it warily. No one came out, but I decided that wasn’t going to guarantee any peace of mind. I dragged one of the trash-bins in front of the door, then set off after Diane, jogging.

*

When I got to the mouth of the alley, she wasn’t there anymore. I looked right, toward Madison, and didn’t see her. I looked left and

there she was, wandering slowly across Fifty-third on a diagonal, her head still down and her hair still hanging like curtains at the sides of her face. No one paid any attention to her; the people in front of the Gotham Cafe were gawking through the plate-glass windows like people in front of the New England Aquarium shark-tank at feeding time. Sirens were approaching, a lot of them.

I went across the street, reached for her shoulder, thought better of it. I settled for calling her name, instead.

She turned around, her eyes dulled with horror and shock. The front of her dress had turned into a grisly purple bib. She stank of blood and spent adrenaline.

“Leave me alone,” she said. “I never want to see you again, Steven.”

“You kicked my ass in there,” I said. “You kicked my ass and almost got me killed. Both of us. I can’t believe you, Diane.”

“I’ve wanted to kick your ass for the last fourteen months,” she said. “When it comes to fulfilling our dreams, we can’t always pick our times, can w—”

I slapped her across the face. I didn’t think about it, I just did it, and few things in my adult life have given me so much pleasure. I’m ashamed of that, but I’ve come too far in this story to tell a lie, even one of omission.

Her head rocked back. Her eyes widened in shock and pain, losing that dull, traumatized look.

“You bastard!” she cried, her hand going to her cheek. Now tears were brimming in her eyes. “Oh, you bastard!”

“I saved your life,” I said. “Don’t you realize that? Doesn’t that get through? I saved your fucking life.”

“You son of a bitch,” she whispered. “You controlling, judgemental, small-minded, conceited, complacent son of a bitch. I hate you.”

“Did you even hear me? If it wasn’t for the conceited, small-minded son of a bitch, you’d be dead now.”

“If it wasn’t for you, I wouldn’t have been there in the first place,” she said as the first three police cars came screaming down Fifty-third Street and pulled up in front of the Gotham Cafe. Cops poured out of them like clowns in a circus act. “If you ever touch me again, I’ll scratch your eyes out, Steve,” she said. “Stay away from me.”

I had to put my hands in my armpits. They wanted to kill her, to reach out and wrap themselves around her neck and just kill her.

She walked seven or eight steps, then turned back to me. She was smiling. It was a terrible smile, more awful than any expression I had seen on the face of Guy the Demon Waiter. “I had lovers,” she said, smiling her terrible smile. She was lying. The lie was all over her face, but that didn’t make it hurt any less. She wished it was true; that was all over her face, too. “Three of them over the last year or so. You weren’t any good at it, so I found men who were.”

She turned and walked down the street, like a woman who was sixty-five instead of twenty-seven. I stood and watched her. Just before she reached the corner I shouted it again. It was the one thing I couldn’t get past; it was stuck in my throat like a chicken bone. “I saved your life! Your goddam life!”

She paused at the corner and turned back to me. The terrible smile was still on her face. “No,” she said. “You didn’t.”

Then she went on around the corner. I haven’t seen her since, although I suppose I will. I’ll see her in court, as the saying goes.

*

I found a market on the next block and bought a package of Marlboros. When I got back to the corner of Madison and Fifty-third, Fifty-third had been blocked off with those blue sawhorses the cops use to protect crime-scenes and parade routes. I could see the restaurant, though. I could see it just fine. I sat down on the curb, lit a cigarette, and observed developments. Half a dozen rescue vehicles arrived—a scream of ambulances, I guess you could say. The chef went into the first one, unconscious but apparently still alive. His brief appearance before his fans on Fifty-third Street was followed by a body-bag on a stretcher—Humboldt. Next came Guy, strapped tightly to a stretcher and staring wildly around as he was loaded into the back of an ambulance. I thought that for just a moment his eyes met mine, but that was probably my imagination.

As Guy's ambulance pulled away, rolling through a hole in the sawhorse barricade provided by two uniformed cops, I tossed the cigarette I'd been smoking in the gutter. I hadn't gone through this day just to start killing myself with tobacco again, I decided.

I looked after the departing ambulance and tried to imagine the man inside it living wherever maitre d's live—Queens or Brooklyn or maybe even Rye or Mamaroneck. I tried to imagine what his own dining room might look like, what pictures might be on the walls. I couldn't do that, but I found I could imagine his bedroom with relative ease, although not whether he shared it with a woman. I could see him lying awake but perfectly still, looking up at the ceiling in the small hours while the moon hung in the black firmament like the half-lidded eye of a corpse; I could imagine him lying there and listening to the neighbor's dog bark steadily and monotonously, going on and on until the sound was like a silver nail driving into his brain. I imagined him lying not far from a closet filled with tuxedos in plastic dry-cleaning bags. I could see them hanging there like executed felons. I wondered if he did have a wife. If so, had he killed her before coming to work? I thought of the blob on his shirt and decided it was a possibility. I also wondered about the neighbor's dog, the one that wouldn't shut up. And the neighbor's family.

But mostly it was Guy I thought about, lying sleepless through all the same nights I had lain sleepless, listening to the dog next door or down the street as I had listened to sirens and the rumble of trucks heading downtown. I thought of him lying there and looking up at the shadows the moon had tacked to the ceiling. Thought of that cry—Eeeeeeee!—building up in his head like gas in a closed room.

“Eeeee,” I said ... just to see how it sounded. I dropped the package of Marlboros into the gutter and began stamping it methodically as I sat there on the curb. “Eeeee. Eeeee. Eeeeeee.”

One of the cops standing by the sawhorses looked over at me. “Hey, buddy, want to stop being a pain in the butt?” he called over. “We got us a situation here.”

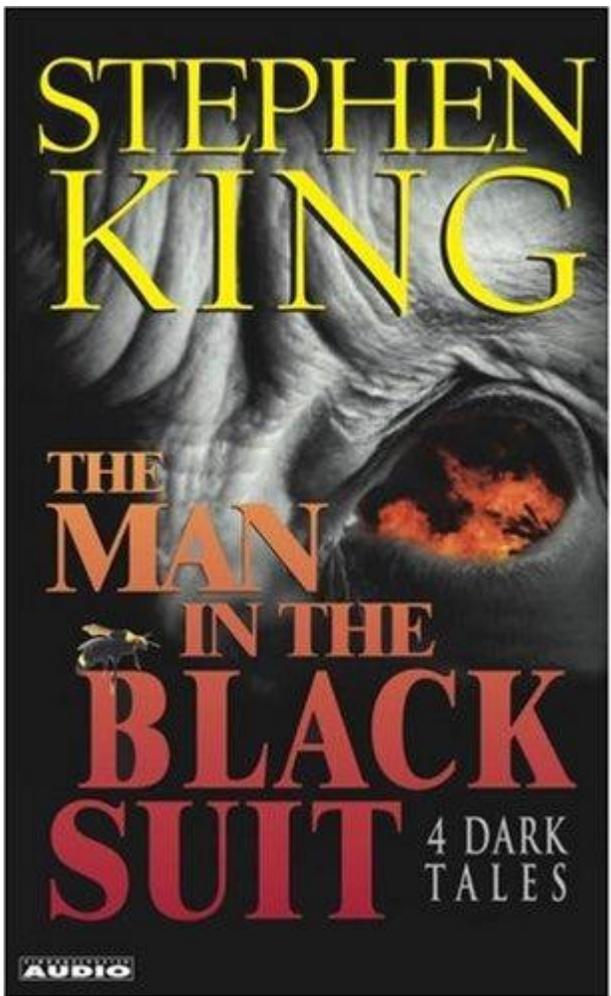
Of course you do, I thought. Don’t we all.

I didn’t say anything, though. I stopped stamping—the cigarette pack was pretty well dead by then, anyway—and stopped making the noise. I could still hear it in my head, though, and why not? It makes as much sense as anything else.

Eeeeeeee.

Eeeeeeee.

Eeeeeeee.



STEPHEN
KING

THE
MAN
IN THE
BLACK
SUIT

4 DARK
TALES

AUDIO

THE MAN IN THE BLACK SUIT

Stephen King

I am now a very old man and this is something which happened to me when I was very young—only nine years old. It was 1914, the summer after my brother Dan died in the west field and three years before America got into World War I. I've never told anyone about what happened at the fork in the stream that day, and I never will ... at least not with my mouth. I've decided to write it down, though, in this book which I will leave on the table beside my bed. I can't write long, because my hands shake so these days and I have next to no strength, but I don't think it will take long.

Later, someone may find what I have written. That seems likely to me, as it is pretty much human nature to look in a book marked DIARY after its owner has passed along. So yes—my words will probably be read. A better question is whether or not anyone will believe them. Almost certainly not, but that doesn't matter. It's not belief I'm interested in but freedom. Writing can give that, I've found. For twenty years I wrote a column called "Long Ago and Far Away" for the Castle Rock Call, and I know that sometimes it works that way—what you write down sometimes leaves you forever, like old photographs left in the bright sun, fading to nothing but white.

I pray for that sort of release.

A man in his nineties should be well past the terrors of childhood, but as my infirmities slowly creep up on me, like waves licking closer and closer to some indifferently built castle of sand, that terrible face grows clearer and clearer in my mind's eye. It glows like a dark star in the constellations of my childhood. What I might have done yesterday, who I might have seen here in my room at the nursing home, what I might have said to them or they to me ... those things are gone, but the face of the man in the black suit grows ever clearer, ever closer, and I remember every word he said. I don't want to think of him but I can't help it, and sometimes at night my old heart beats so hard and so fast I think it will tear itself right clear of my chest. So I uncap my fountain pen and force my trembling old hand to write this pointless anecdote in the diary one of my greatgrandchildren—I can't remember her name for sure, at least not

right now, but I know it starts with an S—gave to me last Christmas, and which I have never written in until now. Now I will write in it. I will write the story of how I met the man in the black suit on the bank of Castle Stream one afternoon in the summer of 1914.

*

The town of Motton was a different world in those days—more different than I could ever tell you. That was a world without airplanes droning overhead, a world almost without cars and trucks, a world where the skies were not cut into lanes and slices by overhead power lines.

There was not a single paved road in the whole town, and the business district consisted of nothing but Corson's General Store, Thut's Livery & Hardware, the Methodist Church at Christ's Corner, the school, the town hall, and Harry's Restaurant half a mile down from there, which my mother called, with unflinching disdain, "the liquor house."

Mostly, though, the difference was in how people lived—how apart they were. I'm not sure people born after the middle of the twentieth century could quite credit that, although they might say they could, to be polite to old folks like me. There were no phones in western Maine back then, for one thing. The first one wouldn't be installed for another five years, and by the time there was one in our house, I was nineteen and going to college at the University of Maine in Orono.

But that is only the roof of the thing. There was no doctor closer than Casco, and no more than a dozen houses in what you would call town. There were no neighborhoods (I'm not even sure we knew the word, although we had a verb—neighboring—that described church functions and barn dances), and open fields were the exception rather than the rule. Out of town the houses were farms that stood far apart from each other, and from December until middle March we mostly hunkered down in the little pockets of stovewarmth we called families. We hunkered and listened to the wind in the chimney and

hoped no one would get sick or break a leg or get a headful of bad ideas, like the farmer over in Castle Rock who had chopped up his wife and kids three winters before and then said in court that the ghosts made him do it. In those days before the Great War, most of Motton was woods and bog, dark long places full of moose and mosquitoes, snakes and secrets. In those days there were ghosts everywhere.

*

This thing I'm telling about happened on a Saturday. My father gave me a whole list of chores to do, including some that would have been Dan's, if he'd still been alive. He was my only brother, and he'd died of being stung by a bee. A year had gone by, and still my mother wouldn't hear that. She said it was something else, had to have been, that no one ever died of being stung by a bee. When Mama Sweet, the oldest lady in the Methodist Ladies' Aid, tried to tell her—at the church supper the previous winter, this was—that the same thing had happened to her favorite uncle back in '73, my mother clapped her hands over her ears, got up, and walked out of the church basement. She'd never been back since, either, and nothing my father could say to her would change her mind. She claimed she was done with church, and that if she ever had to see Helen Robichaud again (that was Mama Sweet's real name), she would slap her eyes out. She wouldn't be able to help herself, she said.

That day, Dad wanted me to lug wood for the cookstove, weed the beans and the cukes, pitch hay out of the loft, get two jugs of water to put in the cold pantry, and scrape as much old paint off the cellar bulkhead as I could. Then, he said, I could go fishing, if I didn't mind going by myself—he had to go over and see Bill Eversham about some cows. I said I sure didn't mind going by myself, and my Dad smiled like that didn't surprise him so very much. He'd given me a bamboo pole the week before—not because it was my birthday or anything, but just because he liked to give me things, sometimes—and I was wild to try it in Castle Stream, which was by far the troutiest brook I'd ever fished.

“But don’t you go too far in the woods,” he told me. “Not beyond where it splits.”

“No, sir.”

“Promise me.”

“Yessir, I promise.”

“Now promise your mother.”

We were standing on the back stoop; I had been bound for the springhouse with the waterjugs when my Dad stopped me. Now he turned me around to face my mother, who was standing at the marble counter in a flood of strong morning sunshine falling through the double windows over the sink. There was a curl of hair lying across the side of her forehead and touching her eyebrow—you see how well I remember it all? The bright light turned that little curl to filaments of gold and made me want to run to her and put my arms around her. In that instant I saw her as a woman, saw her as my father must have seen her. She was wearing a housedress with little red roses all over it, I remember, and she was kneading bread. Candy Bill, our little black Scottie dog, was standing alertly beside her feet, looking up, waiting for anything that might drop. My mother was looking at me.

“I promise,” I said.

She smiled, but it was the worried kind of smile she always seemed to make since my father brought Dan back from the west field in his arms. My father had come sobbing and bare-chested. He had taken off his shirt and draped it over Dan’s face, which had swelled and turned color. My boy! he had been crying. Oh, look at my boy! Jesus, look at my boy! I remember that as if it had been yesterday. It was the only time I ever heard my Dad take the Savior’s name in vain.

“What do you promise, Gary?” she asked.

“Promise not to go no further than where it forks, ma’am.”

“Any further.”

“Any.”

She gave me a patient look, saying nothing as her hands went on working in the dough, which now had a smooth, silky look.

“I promise not to go any further than where it forks, ma’am.”

“Thank you, Gary,” she said. “And try to remember that grammar is for the world as well as for school.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

*

Candy Bill followed me as I did my chores, and sat between my feet as I bolted my lunch, looking up at me with the same attentiveness he had shown my mother while she was kneading her bread, but when I got my new bamboo pole and my old, splintery creel and started out of the dooryard, he stopped and only stood in the dust by an old roll of snowfence, watching. I called him but he wouldn’t come. He yapped a time or two, as if telling me to come back, but that was all.

“Stay, then,” I said, trying to sound as if I didn’t care. I did, though, at least a little. Candy Bill always went fishing with me.

My mother came to the door and looked out at me with her left hand held up to shade her eyes. I can see her that way still, and it’s like looking at a photograph of someone who later became unhappy, or died suddenly. “You mind your Dad now, Gary!”

“Yes, ma’am, I will.”

She waved. I waved, too. Then I turned my back on her and walked away.

*

The sun beat down on my neck, hard and hot, for the first quarter-mile or so, but then I entered the woods, where double shadow fell over the road and it was cool and fir-smelling and you could hear the wind hissing through the deep needled groves. I walked with my pole on my shoulder like boys did back then, holding my creel in my other hand like a valise or a salesman's sample-case. About two miles into the woods along a road which was really nothing but a double rut with a grassy strip growing up the center hump, I began to hear the hurried, eager gossip of Castle Stream. I thought of trout with bright speckled backs and pure white bellies, and my heart went up in my chest.

The stream flowed under a little wooden bridge, and the banks leading down to the water were steep and brushy. I worked my way down carefully, holding on where I could and digging my heels in. I went down out of summer and back into midspring, or so it felt. The cool rose gently off the water, and a green smell like moss. When I got to the edge of the water I only stood there for a little while, breathing deep of that mossy smell and watching the dragonflies circle and the skitterbugs skate. Then, farther down, I saw a trout leap at a butterfly—a good big brookie, maybe fourteen inches long—and remembered I hadn't come here just to sightsee.

I walked along the bank, following the current, and wet my line for the first time with the bridge still in sight upstream. Something jerked the tip of my pole down a time or two and ate half my worm, but he was too sly for my nine-year-old hands—or maybe just not hungry enough to be careless—so I went on.

I stopped at two or three other places before I got to the place where Castle Stream forks, going southwest into Castle Rock and southeast into Kashwakamak Township, and at one of them I caught the biggest trout I have ever caught in my life, a beauty that measured nineteen inches from tip to tail on the little ruler I kept in my creel. That was a monster of a brook trout, even for those days.

If I had accepted this as gift enough for one day and gone back, I would not be writing now (and this is going to turn out longer than I thought it would, I see that already), but I didn't. Instead I saw to my catch right then and there as my father had shown me—cleaning it, placing it on dry grass at the bottom of the creel, then laying damp grass on top of it—and went on. I did not, at age nine, think that catching a nineteen-inch brook trout was particularly remarkable, although I do remember being amazed that my line had not broken when I, netless as well as artless, had hauled it out and swung it toward me in a clumsy tail-flapping arc.

Ten minutes later, I came to the place where the stream split in those days (it is long gone now; there is a settlement of duplex homes where Castle Stream once went its course, and a district grammar school as well, and if there is a stream it goes in darkness), dividing around a huge gray rock nearly the size of our outhouse. There was a pleasant flat space here, grassy and soft, overlooking what my Dad and I called South Branch. I squatted on my heels, dropped my line into the water, and almost immediately snagged a fine rainbow trout. He wasn't the size of my brookie—only a foot or so—but a good fish, just the same. I had it cleaned out before the gills had stopped flexing, stored it in my creel, and dropped my line back into the water.

This time there was no immediate bite so I leaned back, looking up at the blue stripe of sky I could see along the stream's course. Clouds floated by, west to east, and I tried to think what they looked like. I saw a unicorn, then a rooster, then a dog that looked a little like Candy Bill. I was looking for the next one when I drowsed off.

*

Or maybe slept. I don't know for sure. All I know is that a tug on my line so strong it almost pulled the bamboo pole out of my hand was what brought me back into the afternoon. I sat up, clutched the pole, and suddenly became aware that something was sitting on the tip of my nose. I crossed my eyes and saw a bee. My heart seemed to fall

dead in my chest, and for a horrible second I was sure I was going to wet my pants.

The tug on my line came again, stronger this time, but although I maintained my grip on the end of the pole so it wouldn't be pulled into the stream and perhaps carried away (I think I even had the presence of mind to snub the line with my forefinger), I made no effort to pull in my catch. All of my horrified attention was fixed on the fat black-and-yellow thing that was using my nose as a rest-stop.

I slowly poked out my lower lip and blew upward. The bee ruffled a little but kept its place. I blew again and it ruffled again ... but this time it also seemed to shift impatiently, and I didn't dare blow anymore, for fear it would lose its temper completely and give me a shot. It was too close for me to focus on what it was doing, but it was easy to imagine it ramming its stinger into one of my nostrils and shooting its poison up toward my eyes. And my brain.

A terrible idea came to me: that this was the very bee which had killed my brother. I knew it wasn't true, and not only because honeybees probably didn't live longer than a single year (except maybe for the queens; about them I was not so sure). It couldn't be true because bees died when they stung, and even at nine I knew it. Their stingers were barbed, and when they tried to fly away after doing the deed, they tore themselves apart. Still, the idea stayed. This was a special bee, a devil-bee, and it had come back to finish the other of Albion and Loretta's two boys.

And here is something else: I had been stung by bees before, and although the stings had swelled more than is perhaps usual (I can't really say for sure), I had never died of them. That was only for my brother, a terrible trap which had been laid for him in his very making, a trap which I had somehow escaped. But as I crossed my eyes until they hurt in an effort to focus on the bee, logic did not exist. It was the bee that existed, only that, the bee that had killed my brother, killed him so bad that my father had slipped down the straps of his overalls so he could take off his shirt and cover Dan's swelled, engorged face. Even in the depths of his grief he had done that,

because he didn't want his wife to see what had become of her firstborn. Now the bee had returned, and now it would kill me. It would kill me and I would die in convulsions on the bank, flopping just as a brookie flops after you take the hook out of its mouth.

As I sat there trembling on the edge of panic—of simply bolting to my feet and then bolting anywhere—there came a report from behind me. It was as sharp and peremptory as a pistol-shot, but I knew it wasn't a pistol-shot; it was someone clapping his hands. One single clap. At the moment it came, the bee tumbled off my nose and fell into my lap. It lay there on my pants with its legs sticking up and its stinger a threatless black thread against the old scuffed brown of the corduroy. It was dead as a doornail, I saw that at once. At the same moment, the pole gave another tug—the hardest yet—and I almost lost it again.

I grabbed it with both hands and gave it a big stupid yank that would have made my father clutch his head with both hands, if he had been there to see it. A rainbow trout, a good bit larger than the one I had already caught, rose out of the water in a wet, writhing flash, spraying fine drops of water from its filament of tail—it looked like one of those romanticized fishing pictures they used to put on the covers of men's magazines like *True* and *Man's Adventure* back in the forties and fifties. At that moment hauling in a big one was about the last thing on my mind, however, and when the line snapped and the fish fell back into the stream, I barely noticed. I looked over my shoulder to see who had clapped. A man was standing above me, at the edge of the trees. His face was very long and pale. His black hair was combed tight against his skull and parted with rigorous care on the left side of his narrow head. He was very tall. He was wearing a black three-piece suit, and I knew right away that he was not a human being, because his eyes were the orangey-red of flames in a woodstove. I don't just mean the irises, because he had no irises, and no pupils, and certainly no whites. His eyes were completely orange—an orange that shifted and flickered. And it's really too late not to say exactly what I mean, isn't it? He was on fire inside, and his

eyes were like the little isinglass portholes you sometimes see in stove doors.

My bladder let go, and the scuffed brown the dead bee was lying on went a darker brown. I was hardly aware of what had happened, and I couldn't take my eyes off the man standing on top of the bank and looking down at me, the man who had walked out of thirty miles of trackless western Maine woods in a fine black suit and narrow shoes of gleaming leather. I could see the watch-chain looped across his vest glittering in the summer sunshine. There was not so much as a single pine-needle on him. And he was smiling at me.

"Why, it's a fisherboy!" he cried in a mellow, pleasing voice. "Imagine that! Are we well-met, fisherboy?"

"Hello, sir," I said. The voice that came out of me did not tremble, but it didn't sound like my voice, either. It sounded older. Like Dan's voice, maybe. Or my father's, even. And all I could think was that maybe he would let me go if I pretended not to see what he was. If I pretended I didn't see there were flames glowing and dancing where his eyes should have been.

"I've saved you a nasty sting, perhaps," he said, and then, to my horror, he came down the bank to where I sat with a dead bee in my wet lap and a bamboo fishing pole in my nerveless hands. His slick-soled city shoes should have slipped on the low, grassy weeds which dressed the steep bank, but they didn't; nor did they leave tracks behind, I saw. Where his feet had touched—or seemed to touch—there was not a single broken twig, crushed leaf, or trampled shoe-shape.

Even before he reached me, I recognized the aroma baking up from the skin under the suit—the smell of burned matches. The smell of sulfur. The man in the black suit was the Devil. He had walked out of the deep woods between Motton and Kashwakamak, and now he was standing here beside me. From the corner of one eye I could see a hand as pale as the hand of a store window dummy. The fingers were hideously long.

He hunkered beside me on his hams, his knees popping just as the knees of any normal man might, but when he moved his hands so they dangled between his knees, I saw that each of those long fingers ended in what was not a fingernail but a long yellow claw.

“You didn’t answer my question, fisherboy,” he said in his mellow voice. It was, now that I think of it, like the voice of one of those radio announcers on the big-band shows years later, the ones that would sell Geritol and Serutan and Ovaltine and Dr. Grabow pipes. “Are we well-met?”

“Please don’t hurt me,” I whispered, in a voice so low I could barely hear it. I was more afraid than I could ever write down, more afraid than I want to remember ... but I do. I do. It never even crossed my mind to hope I was having a dream, although I might have, I suppose, if I had been older. But I wasn’t older; I was nine, and I knew the truth when it squatted down on its hunkers beside me. I knew a hawk from a handsaw, as my father would have said. The man who had come out of the woods on that Saturday afternoon in midsummer was the Devil, and inside the empty holes of his eyes, his brains were burning.

“Oh, do I smell something?” he asked, as if he hadn’t heard me ... although I knew he had. “Do I smell something ... wet?”

He leaned forward toward me with his nose stuck out, like someone who means to smell a flower. And I noticed an awful thing; as the shadow of his head travelled over the bank, the grass beneath it turned yellow and died. He lowered his head toward my pants and sniffed. His glaring eyes half-closed, as if he had inhaled some sublime aroma and wanted to concentrate on nothing but that.

“Oh, bad!” he cried. “Lovely-bad!” And then he chanted: “Opal! Diamond! Sapphire! Jade! I smell Gary’s lemonade!” Then he threw himself on his back in the little flat place and laughed wildly. It was the sound of a lunatic.

I thought about running, but my legs seemed two counties away from my brain. I wasn't crying, though; I had wet my pants like a baby, but I wasn't crying. I was too scared to cry. I suddenly knew that I was going to die, and probably painfully, but the worst of it was that that might not be the worst of it.

The worst of it might come later. After I was dead.

He sat up suddenly, the smell of burnt matches fluffing out from his suit and making me feel all gaggy in my throat. He looked at me solemnly from his narrow white face and burning eyes, but there was a sense of laughter about him, too. There was always that sense of laughter about him.

"Sad news, fisherboy," he said. "I've come with sad news."

I could only look at him—the black suit, the fine black shoes, the long white fingers that ended not in nails but in talons.

"Your mother is dead."

"No!" I cried. I thought of her making bread, of the curl lying across her forehead and just touching her eyebrow, standing there in the strong morning sunlight, and the terror swept over me again ... but not for myself this time. Then I thought of how she'd looked when I set off with my fishing pole, standing in the kitchen doorway with her hand shading her eyes, and how she had looked to me in that moment like a photograph of someone you expected to see again but never did. "No, you lie!" I screamed.

He smiled—the sadly patient smile of a man who has often been accused falsely. "I'm afraid not," he said. "It was the same thing that happened to your brother, Gary. It was a bee."

"No, that's not true," I said, and now I did begin to cry. "She's old, she's thirty-five, if a bee-sting could kill her the way it did Danny she would have died a long time ago and you're a lying bastard!"

I had called the Devil a lying bastard. On some level I was aware of this, but the entire front of my mind was taken up by the enormity of what he'd said. My mother dead? He might as well have told me that there was a new ocean where the Rockies had been. But I believed him. On some level I believed him completely, as we always believe, on some level, the worst thing our hearts can imagine.

"I understand your grief, little fisherboy, but that particular argument just doesn't hold water, I'm afraid." He spoke in a tone of bogus comfort that was horrible, maddening, without remorse or pity. "A man can go his whole life without seeing a mockingbird, you know, but does that mean mockingbirds don't exist? Your mother—"

A fish jumped below us. The man in the black suit frowned, then pointed a finger at it. The trout convulsed in the air, its body bending so strenuously that for a split-second it appeared to be snapping at its own tail, and when it fell back into Castle Stream it was floating lifelessly, dead. It struck the big gray rock where the waters divided, spun around twice in the whirlpool eddy that formed there, and then floated off in the direction of Castle Rock. Meanwhile, the terrible stranger turned his burning eyes on me again, his thin lips pulled back from tiny rows of sharp teeth in a cannibal smile.

"Your mother simply went through her entire life without being stung by a bee," he said. "But then—less than an hour ago, actually—one flew in through the kitchen window while she was taking the bread out of the oven and putting it on the counter to cool."

"No, I won't hear this, I won't hear this, I won't!"

I raised my hands and clapped them over my ears. He pursed his lips as if to whistle and blew at me gently. It was only a little breath, but the stench was foul beyond belief—clogged sewers, outhouses that have never known a single sprinkle of lime, dead chickens after a flood.

My hands fell away from the sides of my face.

“Good,” he said. “You need to hear this, Gary; you need to hear this, my little fisherboy. It was your mother who passed that fatal weakness on to your brother Dan; you got some of it, but you also got a protection from your father that poor Dan somehow missed.” He pursed his lips again, only this time, he made a cruelly comic little tsktsk sound instead of blowing his nasty breath at me. “So, although I don’t like to speak ill of the dead, it’s almost a case of poetic justice, isn’t it? After all, she killed your brother Dan as surely as if she had put a gun to his head and pulled the trigger.”

“No,” I whispered. “No, it isn’t true.”

“I assure you it is,” he said. “The bee flew in the window and lit on her neck. She slapped at it before she even knew what she was doing—you were wiser than that, weren’t you, Gary?—and the bee stung her. She felt her throat start to close up at once. That’s what happens, you know, to people who are allergic to bee-venom. Their throats close and they drown in the open air. That’s why Dan’s face was so swollen and purple. That’s why your father covered it with his shirt.”

I stared at him, now incapable of speech. Tears streamed down my cheeks. I didn’t want to believe him, and knew from my church schooling that the devil is the father of lies, but I did believe him, just the same. I believed he had been standing there in our dooryard, looking in the kitchen window, as my mother fell to her knees, clutching at her swollen throat while Candy Bill danced around her, barking shrilly.

“She made the most wonderfully awful noises,” the man in the black suit said reflectively, “and she scratched her face quite badly, I’m afraid. Her eyes bulged out like a frog’s eyes. She wept.” He paused, then added: “She wept as she died, isn’t that sweet? And here’s the most beautiful thing of all. After she was dead ... after she had been lying on the floor for fifteen minutes or so with no sound but the stove ticking and with that little stick of a bee-stinger still poking out of the side of her neck—so small, so small—do you know what Candy Bill

did? That little rascal licked away her tears. First on one side ... and then on the other.”

He looked out at the stream for a moment, his face sad and thoughtful. Then he turned back to me and his expression of bereavement disappeared like a dream. His face was as slack and avid as the face of a corpse that has died hungry. His eyes blazed. I could see his sharp little teeth between his pale lips.

“I’m starving,” he said abruptly. “I’m going to kill you and tear you open and eat your guts, little fisherboy. What do you think about that?”

No, I tried to say, please, no, but no sound came out. He meant to do it, I saw. He really meant to do it.

“I’m just so hungry,” he said, both petulant and teasing. “And you won’t want to live without your precious mommy, anyhow, take my word for it. Because your father’s the sort of man who’ll have to have some warm hole to stick it in, believe me, and if you’re the only one available, you’re the one who’ll have to serve. I’ll save you all that discomfort and unpleasantness. Also, you’ll go to Heaven, think of that. Murdered souls always go to Heaven. So we’ll both be serving God this afternoon, Gary. Isn’t that nice?”

He reached for me again with his long, pale hands, and without thinking what I was doing, I flipped open the top of my creel, pawed all the way down to the bottom, and brought out the monster brookie I’d caught earlier—the one I should have been satisfied with. I held it out to him blindly, my fingers in the red slit of its belly from which I had removed its insides as the man in the black suit had threatened to remove mine. The fish’s glazed eye stared dreamily at me, the gold ring around the black center reminding me of my mother’s wedding ring. And in that moment I saw her lying in her coffin with the sun shining off the wedding band and knew it was true—she had been stung by a bee, she had drowned in the warm, bread-smelling kitchen air, and Candy Bill had licked her dying tears from her swollen cheeks.

“Big fish!” the man in the black suit cried in a guttural, greedy voice.
“Oh, biiiig fiiish!”

He snatched it away from me and crammed it into a mouth that opened wider than any human mouth ever could. Many years later, when I was sixty-five (I know it was sixty-five because that was the summer I retired from teaching), I went to the New England Aquarium and finally saw a shark. The mouth of the man in the black suit was like that shark’s mouth when it opened, only his gullet was blazing red, the same color as his awful eyes, and I felt heat bake out of it and into my face, the way you feel a sudden wave of heat come pushing out of a fireplace when a dry piece of wood catches alight. And I didn’t imagine that heat, either, I know I didn’t, because just before he slid the head of my nineteen-inch brook trout between his gaping jaws, I saw the scales along the sides of the fish rise up and begin to curl like bits of paper floating over an open incinerator.

He slid the fish in like a man in a travelling show swallowing a sword. He didn’t chew, and his blazing eyes bulged out, as if in effort. The fish went in and went in, his throat bulged as it slid down his gullet, and now he began to cry tears of his own ... except his tears were blood, scarlet and thick.

I think it was the sight of those bloody tears that gave me my body back. I don’t know why that should have been, but I think it was. I bolted to my feet like a jack released from its box, turned with my bamboo pole still in one hand, and fled up the bank, bending over and tearing tough bunches of weeds out with my free hand in an effort to get up the slope more quickly.

He made a strangled, furious noise—the sound of any man with his mouth too full—and I looked back just as I got to the top. He was coming after me, the back of his suit-coat flapping and his thin gold watch-chain flashing and winking in the sun. The tail of the fish was still protruding from his mouth and I could smell the rest of it, roasting in the oven of his throat.

He reached for me, groping with his talons, and I fled along the top of the bank. After a hundred yards or so I found my voice and went to screaming—screaming in fear, of course, but also screaming in grief for my beautiful dead mother.

He was coming along after me. I could hear snapping branches and whipping bushes, but I didn't look back again. I lowered my head, slitted my eyes against the bushes and low-hanging branches along the stream's bank, and ran as fast as I could. And at every step I expected to feel his hands descending on my shoulders pulling me back into a final hot hug.

That didn't happen. Some unknown length of time later—it couldn't have been longer than five or ten minutes, I suppose, but it seemed like forever—I saw the bridge through layerings of leaves and firs. Still screaming, but breathlessly now, sounding like a teakettle which has almost boiled dry, I reached this second, steeper bank and charged up to it.

Halfway to the top I slipped to my knees, looked over my shoulder, and saw the man in the black suit almost at my heels, his white face pulled into a convulsion of fury and greed. His cheeks were splattered with his bloody tears and his shark's mouth hung open like a hinge.

"Fisherboy!" he snarled, and started up the bank after me, grasping at my foot with one long hand. I tore free, turned, and threw my fishing pole at him. He batted it down easily, but it tangled his feet up somehow and he went to his knees. I didn't wait to see anymore; I turned and bolted to the top of the slope. I almost slipped at the very top, but managed to grab one of the support struts running beneath the bridge and save myself.

"You can't get away, fisherboy!" he cried from behind me. He sounded furious, but he also sounded as if he were laughing. "It takes more than a mouthful of trout to fill me up!"

“Leave me alone!” I screamed back at him. I grabbed the bridge’s railing and threw myself over it in a clumsy somersault, filling my hands with splinters and bumping my head so hard on the boards when I came down that I saw stars. I rolled over onto my belly and began crawling. I lurched to my feet just before I got to the end of the bridge, stumbled once, found my rhythm, and then began to run. I ran as only nine-year-old boys can run, which is like the wind. It felt as if my feet only touched the ground with every third or fourth stride, and for all I know, that may be true. I ran straight up the righthand wheelrut in the road, ran until my temples pounded and my eyes pulsed in their sockets, ran until I had a hot stitch in my left side from the bottom of my ribs to my armpit, ran until I could taste blood and something like metal-shavings in the back of my throat. When I couldn’t run anymore I stumbled to a stop and looked back over my shoulder, puffing and blowing like a windbroke horse. I was convinced I would see him standing right there behind me in his natty black suit, the watch-chain a glittering loop across his vest and not a hair out of place.

But he was gone. The road stretching back toward Castle Stream between the darkly massed pines and spruces was empty. And yet I sensed him somewhere near in those woods, watching me with his grassfire eyes, smelling of burnt matches and roasted fish.

I turned and began walking as fast as I could, limping a little—I’d pulled muscles in both legs, and when I got out of bed the next morning I was so sore I could barely walk. I didn’t notice those things then, though. I just kept looking over my shoulder, needing again and again to verify that the road behind me was still empty. It was, each time I looked, but those backward glances seemed to increase my fear rather than lessening it. The firs looked darker, massier, and I kept imagining what lay behind the trees which marched beside the road—long, tangled corridors of forest, leg-breaking deadfalls, ravines where anything might live. Until that Saturday in 1914, I had thought that bears were the worst thing the forest could hold.

Now I knew better.

*

A mile or so further up the road, just beyond the place where it came out of the woods and joined the Geegan Flat Road, I saw my father walking toward me and whistling “The Old Oaken Bucket.” He was carrying his own rod, the one with the fancy spinning reel from Monkey Ward. In his other hand he had his creel, the one with the ribbon my mother had woven through the handle back when Dan was still alive. DEDICATED TO JESUS, that ribbon said. I had been walking but when I saw him I started to run again, screaming Dad! Dad! Dad! at the top of my lungs and staggering from side to side on my tired, sprung legs like a drunken sailor. The expression of surprise on his face when he recognized me might have been comical under other circumstances, but not under these. He dropped his rod and creel into the road without so much as a downward glance at them and ran to me. It was the fastest I ever saw my Dad run in his life; when we came together it was a wonder the impact didn’t knock us both senseless, and I struck my face on his belt-buckle hard enough to start a little nosebleed. I didn’t notice that until later, though. Right then I only reached out my arms and clutched him as hard as I could. I held on and rubbed my hot face back and forth against his belly, covering his old blue workshirt with blood and tears and snot.

“Gary, what is it? What happened? Are you all right?”

“Ma’s dead!” I sobbed. “I met a man in the woods and he told me! Ma’s dead! She got stung by a bee and it swelled her all up just like what happened to Dan, and she’s dead! She’s on the kitchen floor and Candy Bill ... licked the t-t-tears ... off her ... off her ...”

Face was the last word I had to say, but by then my chest was hitching so bad I couldn’t get it out. My tears were flowing again, and my Dad’s startled, frightened face had blurred into three overlapping images. I began to howl—not like a little kid who’s skun his knee but like a dog that’s seen something bad by moonlight—and my father pressed my head against his hard flat stomach again. I slipped out from under his hand, though, and looked back over my shoulder. I

wanted to make sure the man in the black suit wasn't coming. There was no sign of him; the road winding back into the woods was completely empty. I promised myself I would never go back down that road again, not ever, no matter what, and I suppose now God's greatest blessing to His creatures below is that they can't see the future. It might have broken my mind if I had known I would be going back down that road, and not two hours later. For that moment, though, I was only relieved to see we were still alone. Then I thought of my mother—my beautiful dead mother—and laid my face back against my father's stomach and bawled some more.

"Gary, listen to me," he said a moment or two later. I went on bawling. He gave me a little longer to do that, then reached down and lifted my chin so he could look into my face and I could look into his. "Your Mom's fine," he said.

I could only look at him with tears streaming down my cheeks. I didn't believe him.

"I don't know who told you different, or what kind of dirty dog would want to put a scare like that into a little boy, but I swear to God your mother's fine."

"But ... but he said ..."

"I don't care what he said. I got back from Eversham's earlier than I expected—he doesn't want to sell any cows, it's all just talk—and decided I had time to catch up with you. I got my pole and my creel and your mother made us a couple of jelly fold-overs. Her new bread. Still warm. So she was fine half an hour ago, Gary, and there's nobody knows any different that's come from this direction, I guarantee you. Not in just half an hour's time." He looked over my shoulder. "Who was this man? And where was he? I'm going to find him and thrash him within an inch of his life."

I thought a thousand things in just two seconds—that's what it seemed like, anyway—but the last thing I thought was the most powerful: if my Dad met up with the man in the black suit, I didn't

think my Dad would be the one to do the thrashing. Or the walking away.

I kept remembering those long white fingers, and the talons at the ends of them.

“Gary?”

“I don’t know that I remember,” I said.

“Were you where the stream splits? The big rock?”

I could never lie to my father when he asked a direct question—not to save his life or mine. “Yes, but don’t go down there.” I seized his arm with both hands and tugged it hard. “Please don’t. He was a scary man.” Inspiration struck like an illuminating lightning-bolt. “I think he had a gun.”

He looked at me thoughtfully. “Maybe there wasn’t a man,” he said, lifting his voice a little on the last word and turning it into something that was almost but not quite a question. “Maybe you fell asleep while you were fishing, son, and had a bad dream. Like the ones you had about Danny last winter.”

I had had a lot of bad dreams about Dan last winter, dreams where I would open the door to our closet or to the dark, fruity interior of the cider shed and see him standing there and looking at me out of his purple strangulated face; from many of these dreams I had awakened screaming, and awakened my parents, as well. I had fallen asleep on the bank of the stream for a little while, too—dozed off, anyway—but I hadn’t dreamed and I was sure I had awakened just before the man in the black suit clapped the bee dead, sending it tumbling off my nose and into my lap. I hadn’t dreamed him the way I had dreamed Dan, I was quite sure of that, although my meeting with him had already attained a dreamlike quality in my mind, as I suppose supernatural occurrences always must. But if my Dad thought that the man had only existed in my own head, that might be better. Better for him.

“It might have been, I guess,” I said.

“Well, we ought to go back and find your rod and your creel.”

He actually started in that direction, and I had to tug frantically at his arm to stop him again, and turn him back toward me.

“Later,” I said. “Please, Dad? I want to see Mother. I’ve got to see her with my own eyes.”

He thought that over, then nodded. “Yes, I suppose you do. We’ll go home first, and get your rod and creel later.”

So we walked back to the farm together, my father with his fish-pole propped on his shoulder just like one of my friends, me carrying his creel, both of us eating folded-over slices of my mother’s bread smeared with blackcurrant jam.

“Did you catch anything?” he asked as we came in sight of the barn.

“Yes, sir,” I said. “A rainbow. Pretty good-sized.” And a brookie that was a lot bigger, I thought but didn’t say. Biggest one I ever saw, to tell the truth, but I don’t have that one to show you, Dad. I gave that one to the man in the black suit, so he wouldn’t eat me. And it worked ... but just barely.

“That’s all? Nothing else?”

“After I caught it I fell asleep.” This was not really an answer, but not really a lie, either.

“Lucky you didn’t lose your pole. You didn’t, did you, Gary?”

“No, sir,” I said, very reluctantly. Lying about that would do no good even if I’d been able to think up a whopper—not if he was set on going back to get my creel anyway, and I could see by his face that he was.

Up ahead, Candy Bill came racing out of the back door, barking his shrill bark and wagging his whole rear end back and forth the way Scotties do when they're excited. I couldn't wait any longer; hope and anxiety bubbled up in my throat like foam. I broke away from my father and ran to the house, still lugging his creel and still convinced, in my heart of hearts, that I was going to find my mother dead on the kitchen floor with her face swelled and purple like Dan's had been when my father carried him in from the west field, crying and calling the name of Jesus.

But she was standing at the counter, just as well and fine as when I had left her, humming a song as she shelled peas into a bowl. She looked around at me, first in surprise and then in fright as she took in my wide eyes and pale cheeks.

"Gary, what is it? What's the matter?"

I didn't answer, only ran to her and covered her with kisses. At some point my father came in and said, "Don't worry, Lo—he's all right. He just had one of his bad dreams, down there by the brook."

"Pray God it's the last of them," she said, and hugged me tighter while Candy Bill danced around our feet, barking his shrill bark.

*

"You don't have to come with me if you don't want to, Gary," my father said, although he had already made it clear that he thought I should—that I should go back, that I should face my fear, as I suppose folks would say nowadays. That's very well for fearful things that are make-believe, but two hours hadn't done much to change my conviction that the man in the black suit had been real. I wouldn't be able to convince my father of that, though. I don't think there was a nine-year-old that ever lived who would have been able to convince his father he'd seen the Devil come walking out of the woods in a black suit.

“I’ll come,” I said. I had walked out of the house to join him before he left, mustering all my courage in order to get my feet moving, and now we were standing by the chopping-block in the side yard, not far from the woodpile.

“What you got behind your back?” he asked.

I brought it out slowly. I would go with him, and I would hope the man in the black suit with the arrow-straight part down the left side of his head was gone ... but if he wasn’t, I wanted to be prepared. As prepared as I could be, anyway. I had the family Bible in the hand I had brought out from behind my back. I’d set out just to bring my New Testament, which I had won for memorizing the most psalms in the Thursday night Youth Fellowship competition (I managed eight, although most of them except the Twenty-third had floated out of my mind in a week’s time), but the little red Testament didn’t seem like enough when you were maybe going to face the Devil himself, not even when the words of Jesus were marked out in red ink.

My father looked at the old Bible, swelled with family documents and pictures, and I thought he’d tell me to put it back, but he didn’t. A look of mixed grief and sympathy crossed his face, and he nodded. “All right,” he said. “Does your mother know you took that?”

“No, sir.”

He nodded again. “Then we’ll hope she doesn’t spot it gone before we get back. Come on. And don’t drop it.”

*

Half an hour or so later, the two of us stood on the bank looking down at the place where Castle Stream forked, and at the flat place where I’d had my encounter with the man with the red-orange eyes. I had my bamboo rod in my hand—I’d picked it up below the bridge—and my creel lay down below, on the flat place. Its wicker top was flipped back. We stood looking down, my father and I, for a long time, and neither of us said anything.

Opal! Diamond! Sapphire! Jade! I smell Gary's lemonade! That had been his unpleasant little poem, and once he had recited it, he had thrown himself on his back, laughing like a child who has just discovered he has enough courage to say bathroom words like shit or piss. The flat place down there was as green and lush as any place in Maine that the sun can get to in early July ... except where the stranger had lain. There the grass was dead and yellow in the shape of a man.

I looked down and saw I was holding our lumpy old family Bible straight out in front of me with both thumbs pressing so hard on the cover that they were white. It was the way Mama Sweet's husband Norville held a willow-fork when he was trying to dowse somebody a well.

"Stay here," my father said at last, and skidded sideways down the bank, digging his shoes into the rich soft soil and holding his arms out for balance. I stood where I was, holding the Bible stiffly out at the ends of my arms like a willow-fork, my heart thumping wildly. I don't know if I had a sense of being watched that time or not; I was too scared to have a sense of anything, except for a sense of wanting to be far away from that place and those woods.

My Dad bent down, sniffed at where the grass was dead, and grimaced. I knew what he was smelling: something like burnt matches. Then he grabbed my creel and came on back up the bank, hurrying. He snagged one fast look over his shoulder to make sure nothing was coming along behind. Nothing was. When he handed me the creel, the lid was still hanging back on its cunning little leather hinges. I looked inside and saw nothing but two handfuls of grass.

"Thought you said you caught a rainbow," my father said, "but maybe you dreamed that, too."

Something in his voice stung me. "No, sir," I said. "I caught one."

“Well, it sure as hell didn’t flop out, not if it was gutted and cleaned. And you wouldn’t put a catch into your fisherbox without doing that, would you, Gary? I taught you better than that.”

“Yes, sir, you did, but—”

“So if you didn’t dream catching it and if it was dead in the box, something must have come along and eaten it,” my father said, and then he grabbed another quick glance over his shoulder, eyes wide, as if he had heard something move in the woods. I wasn’t exactly surprised to see drops of sweat standing out on his forehead like big clear jewels. “Come on,” he said. “Let’s get the hell out of here.”

I was for that, and we went back along the bank to the bridge, walking quick without speaking. When we got there, my Dad dropped to one knee and examined the place where we’d found my rod. There was another patch of dead grass there, and the lady’s slipper was all brown and curled in on itself, as if a blast of heat had charred it. While my father did this, I looked in my empty creel.

“He must have gone back and eaten my other fish, too,” I said.

My father looked up at me. “Other fish!”

“Yes, sir. I didn’t tell you, but I caught a brookie, too. A big one. He was awful hungry, that fella.” I wanted to say more, and the words trembled just behind my lips, but in the end I didn’t.

We climbed up to the bridge and helped one another over the railing. My father took my creel, looked into it, then went to the railing and threw it over. I came up beside him in time to see it splash down and float away like a boat, riding lower and lower in the stream as the water poured in between the wicker weavings.

“It smelled bad,” my father said, but he didn’t look at me when he said it, and his voice sounded oddly defensive. It was the only time I ever heard him speak just that way.

“Yes, sir.”

“We’ll tell your mother we couldn’t find it. If she asks. If she doesn’t ask, we won’t tell her anything.”

“No, sir, we won’t.”

And she didn’t and we didn’t and that’s the way it was.

*

That day in the woods is eighty-one years gone, and for many of the years in between I have never even thought of it ... not awake, at least. Like any other man or woman who ever lived, I can’t say about my dreams, not for sure. But now I’m old, and I dream awake, it seems. My infirmities have crept up like waves which will soon take a child’s abandoned sand castle, and my memories have also crept up, making me think of some old rhyme that went, in part, “Just leave them alone/And they’ll come home/Wagging their tails behind them.” I remember meals I ate, games I played, girls I kissed in the school cloakroom when we played Post Office, boys I chummed with, the first drink I ever took, the first cigarette I ever smoked (cornshuck behind Dicky Hammer’s pig-shed, and I threw up). Yet of all the memories, the one of the man in the black suit is the strongest, and glows with its own spectral, haunted light. He was real, he was the Devil, and that day I was either his errand or his luck. I feel more and more strongly that escaping him was my luck—just luck, and not the intercession of the God I have worshipped and sung hymns to all my life.

As I lie here in my nursing-home room, and in the ruined sand castle that is my body, I tell myself that I need not fear the Devil—that I have lived a good, kindly life, and I need not fear the Devil. Sometimes I remind myself that it was I, not my father, who finally coaxed my mother back to church later on that summer. In the dark, however, these thoughts have no power to ease or comfort. In the dark comes a voice which whispers that the nine-year-old boy I was had done nothing for which he might legitimately fear the devil either

... and yet the Devil came. And in the dark I sometimes hear that voice drop even lower, into ranges which are inhuman. Big fish! it whispers in tones of hushed greed, and all the truths of the moral world fall to ruin before its hunger. Biiig fiiish!

The Devil came to me once, long ago; suppose he were to come again now? I am too old to run now; I can't even get to the bathroom and back without my walker. I have no fine large brook trout with which to propitiate him, either, even for a moment or two; I am old and my creel is empty. Suppose he were to come back and find me so?

And suppose he is still hungry?

—

My favorite Nathaniel Hawthorne story is “Young Goodman Brown.” I think it’s one of the ten best stories ever written by an American. “The Man in the Black Suit” is my homage to it. As for the particulars, I was talking with a friend of mine one day, and he happened to mention that his Grandpa believed—truly believed — that he had seen the Devil in the woods, back around the turn of the twentieth century. Grandpa said the Devil came walking out of the woods and started talking to him just like a natural man. While Grandpa was chinning with him, he realized that the man from the woods had burning red eyes and smelled like sulfur. My friend’s Grandpa became convinced that the Devil would kill him if he realized Grandpa had caught on, so he did his best to make normal conversation until he could eventually get away. My story grew from my friend’s story. Writing it was no fun, but I went on with it, anyway. Sometimes stories cry out to be told in such loud voices that you write them just to shut them up. I thought the finished product a rather humdrum folktale told in pedestrian language, certainly miles from the Hawthorne story I liked so much. When The New Yorker asked to publish it, I was shocked. When it won first prize in the O. Henry Best Short Story competition for 1996, I was convinced someone had made a mistake (that did not keep me from accepting the award, however). Reader response was generally positive, too.

This story is proof that writers are often the worst judges of what they have written.



STEPHEN KING'S **THE MAN
WHO LOVED FLOWERS**

THE MAN WHO LOVED FLOWERS

Stephen King

On an early evening in May of 1963, a young man with his hand in his pocket walked briskly up New York's Third Avenue. The air was soft and beautiful, the sky was darkening by slow degrees from blue to the calm and lovely violet of dusk. There are people who love the city, and this was one of the nights that made them love it. Everyone standing in the doorways of the delicatessens and dry-cleaning shops and restaurants seemed to be smiling. An old lady pushing two bags of groceries in an old baby pram grinned at the young man and hailed him: "Hey, beautiful!" The young man gave her a half-smile and raised his hand in a wave.

She passed on her way, thinking: He's in love.

He had that look about him. He was dressed in a light gray suit, the narrow tie pulled down a little, his top collar button undone. His hair was dark and cut short. His complexion was fair, his eyes a light blue. Not an extraordinary face, but on this soft spring evening, on this avenue, in May of 1963, he was beautiful, and the old woman found herself thinking with a moment's sweet nostalgia that in spring anyone can be beautiful ... if they're hurrying to meet the one of their dreams for dinner and maybe dancing after. Spring is the only season when nostalgia never seems to turn bitter, and she went on her way glad that she had spoken to him and glad he had returned the compliment by raising his hand in half-salute.

The young man crossed Sixty-third Street, walking with a bounce in his step and that same half-smile on his lips. Partway up the block, an old man stood beside a chipped green handcart filled with flowers—the predominant color was yellow; a yellow fever of jonquils and late crocuses. The old man also had carnations and a few hothouse tea roses, mostly yellow and white. He was eating a pretzel and listening to a bulky transistor radio that was sitting kitty-corner on his handcart.

The radio poured out bad news that no one listened to: a hammer murderer was still on the loose; JFK had declared that the situation in a little Asian country called Vietnam ("Vitenum" the guy reading

the news call it) would bear watching; an unidentified woman had been pulled from the East River; a grand jury had failed to indict a crime overlord in the current city administration's war on heroin; the Russians had exploded a nuclear device. None of it seemed real, none of it seemed to matter. The air was soft and sweet. Two men with beer bellies stood outside a bakery, pitching nickels and ribbing each other. Spring trembled on the edge of summer, and in the city, summer is the season of dreams.

The young man passed the flower stand and the sound of the bad news faded. He hesitated, looked over his shoulder, and thought it over. He reached into his coat pocket and touched the something in there again. For a moment his face seemed puzzled, lonely, almost haunted, and then, as his hand left the pocket, it regained its former expression of eager expectation.

He turned back to the flower stand, smiling. He would bring her some flowers, that would please her. He loved to see her eyes light up with surprise and joy when he brought her a surprise—little things, because he was far from rich. A box of candy. A bracelet. Once only a bag of Valencia oranges, because he knew they were Norma's favorite.

"My young friend," the flower vendor said, as the man in the gray suit came back, running his eyes over the stock in the handcart. The vendor was maybe sixty-eight, wearing a torn gray knitted sweater and a soft cap in spite of the warmth of the evening. His face was a map of wrinkles, his eyes were deep in pouches, and a cigarette jittered between his fingers. But he also remembered how it was to be young in the spring—young and so much in love that you practically zoomed everywhere. The vendor's face was normally sour, but now he smiled a little, just as the old woman pushing the groceries had, because this guy was such an obvious case. He brushed pretzel crumbs from the front of his baggy sweater and thought: If this kid were sick, they'd have him in intensive care right now.

"How much are your flowers?" the young man asked.

“I’ll make you up a nice bouquet for a dollar. Those tea roses, they’re hothouse. Cost a little more, seventy cents apiece. I sell you half a dozen for three dollars and fifty cents.”

“Expensive,” the young man said.

“Nothing good comes cheap, my young friend. Didn’t your mother ever teach you that?”

The young man grinned. “She might have mentioned it at that.”

“Sure. Sure she did. I give you half a dozen, two red, two yellow, two white. Can’t do no better than that, can I? Put in some baby’s breath—they love that—and fill it out with some fern. Nice. Or you can have the bouquet for a dollar.”

“They?” the young man asked, still smiling.

“My young friend,” the flower vendor said, flicking his cigarette butt into the gutter and returning the smile, “no one buys flowers for themselves in May. It’s like a national law, you understand what I mean?”

The young man thought of Norma, her happy, surprised eyes and her gentle smile, and he ducked his head a little. “I guess I do at that,” he said.

“Sure you do. What do you say?”

“Well, what do you think?”

“I’m gonna tell you what I think. Hey! Advice is still free, isn’t it?”

The young man smiled and said, “I guess it’s the only thing left that is.”

“You’re damn tooting it is,” the flower vendor said. “Okay, my young friend. If the flowers are for your mother, you get her the bouquet. A few jonquils, a few crocuses, some lily of the valley. She don’t spoil it

by saying, 'Oh Junior I love them how much did they cost oh that's too much don't you know enough not to throw your money around?' "

The young man threw his head back and laughed.

The vendor said, "But if it's your girl, that's a different thing, my son, and you know it. You bring her the tea roses and she don't turn into an accountant, you take my meaning? Hey! She's gonna throw her arms around your neck—"

"I'll take the tea roses," the young man said, and this time it was the flower vendor's turn to laugh. The two men pitching nickels glanced over, smiling.

"Hey, kid!" one of them called. "You wanna buy a weddin' ring cheap? I'll sell you mine ... I don't want it no more."

The young man grinned and blushed to the roots of his dark hair.

The flower vendor picked out six tea roses, snipped the stems a little, spritzed them with water, and wrapped them in a large conical spill.

"Tonight's weather looks just the way you'd want it," the radio said. "Fair and mild, temps in the mid to upper sixties, perfect for a little rooftop stargazing, if you're the romantic type. Enjoy, Greater New York, enjoy!"

The flower vendor Scotch-taped the seam of the paper spill and advised the young man to tell his lady that a little sugar added to the water she put them in would preserve them longer.

"I'll tell her," the young man said. He held out a five-dollar bill. "Thank you."

"Just doing the job, my young friend," the vendor said, giving him a dollar and two quarters. His smile grew a bit sad. "Give her a kiss for me."

On the radio, the Four Seasons began singing “Sherry.” The young man pocketed his change and went on up the street, eyes wide and alert and eager, looking not so much around him at the life ebbing and flowing up and down Third Avenue as inward and ahead, anticipating. But certain things did impinge: a mother pulling a baby in a wagon, the baby’s face comically smeared with ice cream; a little girl jumping rope and singsonging out her rhyme: “Betty and Henry up in a tree, K-I-S-S-I-N-G! First comes love, then comes marriage, here comes Henry with a baby carriage!” Two women stood outside a washateria, smoking and comparing pregnancies. A group of men were looking in a hardware-store window at a gigantic color TV with a four-figure price tag—a baseball game was on, and all the players’ faces looked green. The playing field was a vague strawberry color, and the New York Mets were leading the Phillies by a score of six to one in the top of the ninth.

He walked on, carrying the flowers, unaware that the two women outside the washateria had stopped talking for a moment and had watched him wistfully as he walked by with his paper of tea roses; their days of receiving flowers were long over. He was unaware of a young traffic cop who stopped the cars at the intersection of Third and Sixty-ninth with a blast on his whistle to let him cross; the cop was engaged himself and recognized the dreamy expression on the young man’s face from his own shaving mirror, where he had often seen it lately. He was unaware of the two teen-aged girls who passed him going the other way and then clutched themselves and giggled.

At Seventy-third Street he stopped and turned right. This street was a little darker, lined with brownstones and walk-down restaurants with Italian names. Three blocks down, a stickball game was going on in the fading light. The young man did not go that far; half a block down he turned into a narrow lane.

Now the stars were out, gleaming softly, and the lane was dark and shadowy, lined with vague shapes of garbage cans. The young man was alone now—no, not quite. A wavering yowl rose in the purple

gloom, and the young man frowned. It was some tomcat's love song, and there was nothing pretty about that.

He walked more slowly, and glanced at his watch. It was quarter of eight and Norma should be just—

Then he saw her, coming toward him from the courtyard, wearing dark blue slacks and a sailor blouse that made his heart ache. It was always a surprise seeing her for the first time, it was always a sweet shock—she looked so young.

Now his smile shone out—radiated out, and he walked faster.

“Norma!” he said.

She looked up and smiled ... but as they drew together, the smile faded.

His own smile trembled a little, and he felt a moment's disquiet. Her face over the sailor blouse suddenly seemed blurred. It was getting dark now ... could he have been mistaken? Surely not. It was Norma.

“I brought you flowers,” he said in a happy relief, and handed the paper spill to her.

She looked at them for a moment, smiled—and handed them back.

“Thank you, but you're mistaken,” she said. “My name is—”

“Norma,” he whispered, and pulled the short-handled hammer out of his coat pocket where it had been all along. “They're for you, Norma ... it was always for you ... all for you.”

She backed away, her face a round white blur, her mouth an opening black O of terror, and she wasn't Norma, Norma was dead, she had been dead for ten years, and it didn't matter because she was going to scream and he swung the hammer to stop the scream, to kill the scream, and as he swung the hammer the spill of flowers fell out of

his hand, the spill spilled and broke open, spilling red, white, and yellow tea roses beside the dented trash cans where cats made alien love in the dark, screaming in love, screaming, screaming.

He swung the hammer and she didn't scream, but she might scream because she wasn't Norma, none of them were Norma, and he swung the hammer, swung the hammer, swung the hammer. She wasn't Norma and so he swung the hammer, as he had done five other times.

Some unknown time later he slipped the hammer back into his inner coat pocket and backed away from the dark shadow sprawled on the cobblestones, away from the litter of tea roses by the garbage cans. He turned and left the narrow lane. It was full dark now. The stickball players had gone in. If there were bloodstains on his suit, they wouldn't show, not in the dark, not in the soft late spring dark, and her name had not been Norma but he knew what his name was. It was ... was ...

Love.

His name was love, and he walked these dark streets because Norma was waiting for him. And he would find her. Someday soon.

He began to smile. A bounce came into his step as he walked on down Seventy-third Street. A middle-aged married couple sitting on the steps of their building watched him go by, head cocked, eyes far away, a half-smile on his lips. When he had passed by the woman said, "How come you never look that way anymore?"

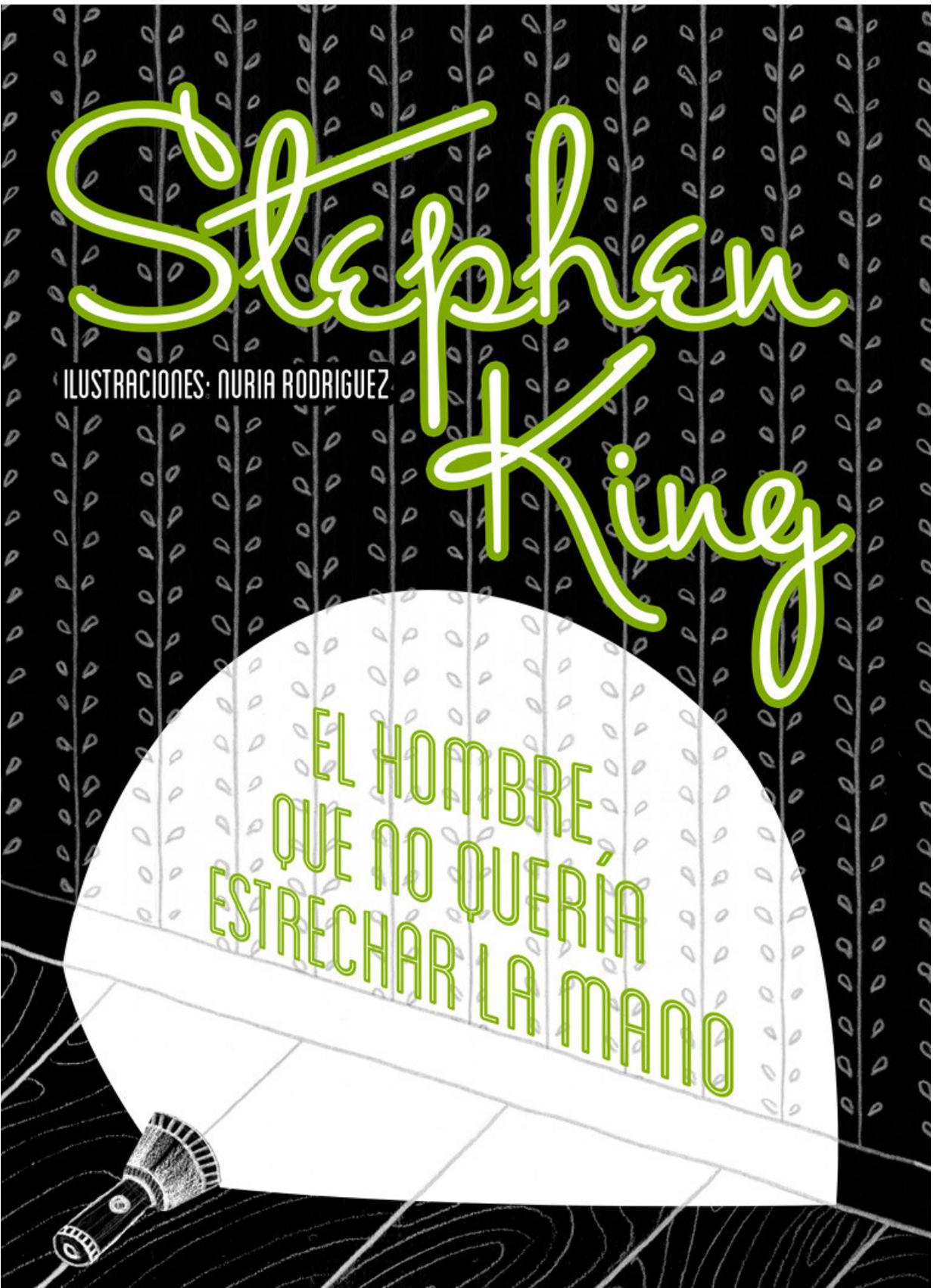
"Huh?"

"Nothing," she said, but she watched the young man in the gray suit disappear into the gloom of the encroaching night and thought that if there was anything more beautiful than springtime, it was young love.

Stephen King

ILUSTRACIONES: NURIA RODRIGUEZ

EL HOMBRE
QUE NO QUERÍA
ESTRECHAR LA MANO



THE MAN WHO WOULD NOT SHAKE HANDS

Stephen King

Stevens served drinks, and soon after eight o'clock on that bitter winter night, most of us retired with them to the library. For a time no one said anything; the only sounds were the crackle of the fire in the hearth, the dim click of billiard balls, and, from outside, the shriek of the wind. Yet it was warm enough in here, at 249B East 35th.

I remember that David Adley was on my right that night, and Emlyn McCarron, who had once given us a frightening story about a woman who had given birth under unusual circumstances, was on my left. Beyond him was Johanssen, with his Wall Street Journal folded in his lap.

Stevens came in with a small white packet and handed it to George Gregson without so much as a pause. Stevens is the perfect butler in spite of his faint Brooklyn accent (or maybe because of it), but his greatest attribute, so far as I am concerned, is that he always knows to whom the packet must go if no one asks for it.

George took it without protest and sat for a moment in his high wing chair, looking into the fireplace, which is big enough to broil a good-sized ox. I saw his eyes flick momentarily to the inscription chiseled into the keystone: IT is THE TALE, NOT HE WHO TELLS IT.

He tore the packet open with his old, trembling fingers and tossed the contents into the fire. For a moment the flames turned into a rainbow, and there was murmured laughter. I turned and saw Stevens standing far back in the shadows by the foyer door. His hands were crossed behind his back. His face was carefully blank.

I suppose we all jumped a little when his scratchy, almost querulous voice broke the silence; I know that I did.

“I once saw a man murdered right in this room,” George Gregson said, “although no juror would have convicted the killer. Yet, at the end of the business, he convicted himself—and served as his own executioner!”

There was a pause while he lit his pipe. Smoke drifted around his seamed face in a blue raft, and he shook the wooden match out with the slow, declamatory gestures of a man whose joints hurt him badly. He threw the stick into the fireplace, where it landed on the ashy remains of the packet. He watched the flames char the wood. His sharp blue eyes brooded beneath their bushy salt-and-pepper brows. His nose was large and hooked, his lips thin and firm, his shoulders hunched almost to the back of his skull.

“Don’t tease us, George!” growled Peter Andrews. “Bring it on!”

“No fear. Be patient.” And we all had to wait until he had his pipe fired to his complete satisfaction. When a fine bed of coals had been laid in the large briar bowl, George folded his large, slightly palsied hands over one knee and said:

“Very well, then. I’m eighty-five and what I’m going to tell you occurred when I was twenty or thereabouts. It was 1919, at any rate, and I was just back from the Great War. My fiancée had died five months earlier, of influenza. She was only nineteen, and I fear I drank and played cards a great deal more than I should. She had been waiting for two years, you understand, and during that period I received a letter faithfully each week. Perhaps you may understand why I indulged myself so heavily. I had no religious beliefs, finding the general tenets and theories of Christianity rather comic in the trenches, and I had no family to support me. And so I can say with truth that the good friends who saw me through my time of trial rarely left me. There were fifty-three of them (more than most people have!): fifty-two cards and a bottle of Cutty Sark whiskey. I had taken up residence in the very rooms I inhabit now, on Brennan Street. But they were much cheaper then, and there were considerably fewer medicine bottles and pills and nostrums cluttering the shelves. Yet I spent most of my time here, at 249B, for there was almost always a poker game to be found.”

David Adley interrupted, and although he was smiling, I don’t think he was joking at all. “And was Stevens here back then, George?”

George looked around at the butler. “Was it you, Stevens, or was it your father?”

Stevens allowed himself the merest ghost of a smile. “As 1919 was over sixty-five years ago, sir, it was my grandfather, I must allow.”

“Yours is a post that runs in the family, we must take it,” Adley mused.

“As you take it, sir,” Stevens replied gently.

“Now that I think back on it,” George said, “there is a remarkable resemblance between you and your ... did you say grandfather, Stevens?”

“Yes, sir, so I said.”

“If you and he were put side by side, I’d be hard put to tell which was which ... but that’s neither here nor there, is it?”

“No, sir.”

“I was in the game room—right through that same little door over there—playing patience the first and only time I met Henry Brower. There were four of us who were ready to sit down and play poker; we only wanted a fifth to make the evening go. When Jason Davidson told me that George Oxley, our usual fifth, had broken his leg and was laid up in bed with a cast at the end of a damned pulley contraption, it seemed that we should have no game that night. I was contemplating the prospect of finishing the evening with nothing to take my mind off my own thoughts but patience and a mind-blotting quantity of whiskey when the fellow across the room said in a calm and pleasant voice, ‘If you gentlemen have been speaking of poker, I would very much enjoy picking up a hand, if you have no particular objections.’

“He had been buried behind a copy of the New York World until then, so that when I looked over I was seeing him for the first time. He was

a young man with an old face, if you take my meaning. Some of the marks I saw on his face I had begun to see stamped on my own since the death of Rosalie. Some—but not all. Although the fellow could have been no older than twenty-eight from his hair and hands and manner of walking, his face seemed marked with experience and his eyes, which were very dark, seemed more than sad; they seemed almost haunted. He was quite good-looking, with a short, clipped mustache and darkish blond hair. He wore a good-looking brown suit and his top collar button had been loosened. ‘My name is Henry Brower,’ he said.

“Davidson immediately rushed across the room to shake hands; in fact, he acted as though he might actually snatch Brower’s hand out of Brower’s lap. An odd thing happened: Brower dropped his paper and held both hands up and out of reach. The expression on his face was one of horror.

“Davidson halted, quite confused, more bewildered than angry. He was only twenty-two himself—God, how young we all were in those days—and a bit of a puppy.

” ‘Excuse me,’ Brower said with complete gravity, ‘but I never shake hands!’

“Davidson blinked. ‘Never?’ he said. ‘How very peculiar. Why in the world not?’ Well, I’ve told you that he was a bit of a puppy. Brower took it in the best possible way, with an open (yet rather troubled) smile.

” ‘I’ve just come back from Bombay,’ he said. ‘It’s a strange, crowded, filthy place, full of disease and pestilence. The vultures strut and preen on the very city walls by the thousands. I was there on a trade mission for two years, and I seem to have picked up a horror of our Western custom of handshaking. I know I’m foolish and impolite, and yet I cannot seem to bring myself to it. So if you would be so very good as to let me off with no hard feelings ...’

” ‘Only on one condition,’ Davidson said with a smile.

” ‘What would that be?’

” ‘Only that you draw up to the table and share a tumbler of George’s whiskey while I go for Baker and French and Jack Wilden.’

“Brower smiled at him, nodded, and put his paper away. Davidson made a brash circled thumb-and-finger, and chased away to get the others. Brower and I drew up to the greenfelted table, and when I offered him a drink he declined with thanks and ordered his own bottle. I suspected it might have something to do with his odd fetish and said nothing. I have known men whose horror of germs and disease stretched that far and even further ... and so may many of you.”

There were nods of agreement.

” ‘It’s good to be here,’ Brower told me reflectively. ‘I’ve shunned any kind of companionship since I returned from my post. It’s not good for a man to be alone, you know. I think that, even for the most self-sufficient of men, being isolated from the flow of humanity must be the worst form of torture!’ He said this with a queer kind of emphasis, and I nodded. I had experienced such loneliness in the trenches, usually at night. I experienced it again, more keenly, after learning of Rosalie’s death. I found myself warming to him in spite of his self-professed eccentricity.

” ‘Bombay must have been a fascinating place,’ I said.

” ‘Fascinating ... and terrible! There are things over there which are undreamed of in our philosophy. Their reaction to motorcars is amusing: the children shrink from them as they go by and then follow them for blocks. They find the airplane terrifying and incomprehensible. Of course, we Americans view these contraptions with complete equanimity—even complacency!—but I assure you that my reaction was exactly the same as theirs when I first observed a street-corner beggar swallow an entire packet of steel needles and then pull them, one by one, from the open sores at the end of his

fingers. Yet here is something that natives of that part of the world take utterly for granted.

” ‘Perhaps,’ he added somberly, ‘the two cultures were never intended to mix, but to keep their separate wonders to themselves. For an American such as you or I to swallow a packet of needles would result in a slow, horrible death. And as for the motorcar ...’ He trailed off, and a bleak, shadowed expression came to his face.

“I was about to speak when Stevens the Elder appeared with Brower’s bottle of Scotch, and directly following him, Davidson and the others.

“Davidson prefaced the introductions by saying, ‘I’ve told them all of your little fetish, Henry, so you needn’t fear for a thing. This is Darrel Baker, the fearsome-looking fellow with the beard is Andrew French, and last but not least, Jack Wilden. George Gregson you already know.’

“Brower smiled and nodded at all of them in lieu of shaking hands. Poker chips and three fresh decks of cards were produced, money was changed for markers, and the game began.

“We played for better than six hours, and I won perhaps two hundred dollars. Darrel Baker, who was not a particularly good player, lost about eight hundred (not that he would ever feel the pinch; his father owned three of the largest shoe factories in New England), and the rest had split Baker’s losses with me about evenly. Davidson was a few dollars up and Brower a few down; yet for Brower to be near even was no mean feat, for he had had astoundingly bad cards for most of the evening. He was adroit at both the traditional five-card draw and the newer seven-card-stud variety of the game, and I thought that several times he had won money on cool bluffs that I myself would have hesitated to try.

“I did notice one thing: although he drank quite heavily—by the time French prepared to deal the last hand, he had polished off almost an entire bottle of Scotch—his speech did not slur at all, his card-

playing skill never faltered, and his odd fixation about the touching of hands never flagged. When he won a pot, he never touched it if someone had markers or change or if someone had 'gone light' and still had chips to contribute. Once, when Davidson placed his glass rather close to his elbow, Brower flinched back abruptly, almost spilling his own drink. Baker looked surprised, but Davidson passed it off with a remark.

"Jack Wilden had commented a few moments earlier that he had a drive to Albany staring him in the face later that morning, and once more around the table would do for him. So the deal came to French, and he called seven-card stud.

"I can remember that final hand as clearly as my own name, although I should be pressed to describe what I had for lunch yesterday or whom I ate it with. The mysteries of age, I suppose, and yet I think that if any of you other fellows had been there you might remember it as well.

"I was dealt two hearts down and one up. I can't speak for Wilden or French, but young Davidson had the ace of hearts and Brower the ten of spades. Davidson bet two dollars—five was our limit—and the cards went round again. I drew a heart to make four, Brower drew a jack of spades to go with his ten. Davidson had caught a trey which did not seem to improve his hand, yet he threw three dollars into the pot. 'Last hand,' he said merrily. 'Drop it in, boys! There's a lady who would like to go out on the town with me tomorrow night!'

"I don't suppose I would have believed a fortune-teller if he had told me how often that remark would come back to haunt me at odd moments, right down to this day.

"French dealt our third round of up cards. I got no help with my flush, but Baker, who was the big loser, paired up something—kings, I think. Brower had gotten a deuce of diamonds that did not seem to help anything. Baker bet the limit on his pair, and Davidson promptly raised him five. Everyone stayed in the game, and our last up card came around the table. I drew the king of hearts to fill up my flush,

Baker drew a third to his pair, and Davidson got a second ace that fairly made his eyes sparkle. Brower got a queen of clubs, and for the life of me I couldn't see why he remained in. His cards looked as bad as any he had folded that night.

"The bettings began to get a little steep. Baker bet five, Davidson raised five, Brower called. Jack Wilden said, 'Somehow I don't think my pair is quite good enough,' and threw in his hand. I called the ten and raised another five. Baker called and raised again.

"Well, I needn't bore you with a raise-by-raise description. I'll only say that there was a three-raise limit per man, and Baker, Davidson, and I each took three raises of five dollars. Brower merely called each bet and raise, being careful to wait until all hands were clear of the pot before throwing his money in. And there was a lot of money in there—slightly better than two hundred dollars—as French dealt us our last card facedown.

"There was a pause as we all looked, although it meant nothing to me; I had my hand, and from what I could see on the table it was good. Baker threw in five, Davidson raised, and we waited to see what Brower would do. His face was slightly flushed with alcohol, he had removed his tie and unbuttoned a second shirt button, but he seemed quite calm. 'I call ... and raise five,' he said.

"I blinked a little, for I had fully expected him to fold. Still, the cards I held told me I must play to win, and so I raised five. We played with no limit to the number of raises a player could make on the last card, and so the pot grew marvelously. I stopped first, being content simply to call in view of the full house I had become more and more sure someone must be holding. Baker stopped next, blinking warily from Davidson's pair of aces to Brower's mystifying junk hand. Baker was not the best of card players, but he was good enough to sense something in the wind.

"Between them, Davidson and Brower raised at least ten more times, perhaps more. Baker and I were carried along, unwilling to cast

away our large investments. The four of us had run out of chips, and greenbacks now lay in a drift over the huge sprawl of markers.

” ‘Well,’ Davidson said, following Brower’s latest raise, ‘I believe I’ll simply call. If you’ve been running a bluff, Henry, it’s been a fine one. But I have you beaten and Jack’s got a long trip ahead of him tomorrow.’ And with that he put a five-dollar bill on top of the pile and said, ‘I call.’

“I don’t know about the others, but I felt a distinct sense of relief that had little to do with the large sum of money I had put into the pot. The game had been becoming cutthroat, and while Baker and I could afford to lose, if it came to that, Jase Davidson could not. He was currently at loose ends, living on a trust fund—not a large one—left him by his aunt. And Brower—how well could he stand the loss? Remember, gentlemen, that by this time there was better than a thousand dollars on the table.”

George paused here. His pipe had gone out.

“Well, what happened?” Adley leaned forward. “Don’t tease us, George. You’ve got us all on the edge of our chairs. Push us off or settle us back in.”

“Be patient,” George said, unperturbed. He produced another match, scratched it on the sole of his shoe, and puffed at his pipe. We waited intently, without speaking. Outside, the wind screeched and hooted around the eaves.

When the pipe was aglow and things seemed set to rights, George continued:

“As you know, the rules of poker state that the man who has been called should show first. But Baker was too anxious to end the tension; he pulled out one of his three down cards and turned it over to show four kings.

” ‘That does me,’ I said. ‘A flush.’

” ‘I have you,’ Davidson said to Baker, and showed two of his down cards. Two aces, to make four. ‘Damn well played.’ And he began to pull in the huge pot.

” ‘Wait!’ Brower said. He did not reach out and touch Davidson’s hand as most would have done, but his voice was enough. Davidson paused to look and his mouth fell—actually fell open as if all the muscles there had turned to water. Brower had turned over all three of his down cards, to reveal a straight flush, from the eight to the queen. ‘I believe this beats your aces?’ Brower said politely.

“Davidson went red, then white. ‘Yes,’ he said slowly, as if discovering the fact for the first time. ‘Yes, it does.’

“I would give a great deal to know Davidson’s motivation for what came next. He knew of Brower’s extreme aversion to being touched; the man had showed it in a hundred different ways that night. It may have been that Davidson simply forgot it in his desire to show Brower (and all of us) that he could cut his losses and take even such a grave reversal in a sportsmanlike way. I’ve told you that he was something of a puppy, and such a gesture would probably have been in his character. But puppies can also nip when they are provoked. They aren’t killers—a puppy won’t go for the throat; but many a man has had his fingers stitched to pay for teasing a little dog too long with a slipper or a rubber bone. That would also be a part of Davidson’s character, as I remember him.

“I would, as I can say, give a great deal to know ... but the results are all that matter, I suppose.

“When Davidson took his hands away from the pot, Brower reached over to rake it in. At that instant, Davidson’s face lit up with a kind of ruddy good fellowship, and he plucked Brower’s hand from the table and wrung it firmly. ‘Brilliant playing, Henry, simply brilliant. I don’t believe I ever—’

“Brower cut him off with a high, womanish scream that was frightful in the deserted silence of the game room, and jerked away. Chips

and currency cascaded every which way as the table tottered and nearly fell over.

“We were all immobilized with the sudden turn of events, and quite unable to move. Brower staggered away from the table, holding his hand out in front of him like a masculine version of Lady Macbeth. He was as white as a corpse, and the stark terror on his face is beyond my powers of description. I felt a bolt of horror go through me such as I had never experienced before or since, not even when they brought me the telegram with the news of Rosalie’s death.

“Then he began to moan. It was a hollow, awful sound, cryptlike. I remember thinking, Why, the man’s quite insane; and then he said the queerest thing: ‘The switch ... I’ve left the switch on in the motorcar ... O God, I am so sorry!’ And he fled up the stairs toward the main lobby.

“I was the first to come out of it. I lurched out of my chair and chased after him, leaving Baker and Wilden and Davidson sitting around the huge pot of money Brower had won. They looked like graven Inca statues guarding a tribal treasure.

“The front door was still swinging to and fro, and when I dashed out into the street I saw Brower at once, standing on the edge of the sidewalk and looking vainly for a taxi. When he saw me he cringed so miserably that I could not help feeling pity intermixed with wonder.

” ‘Here,’ I said, ‘wait! I’m sorry for what Davidson did and I’m sure he didn’t mean it; all the same, if you must go because of it, you must. But you’ve left a great deal of money behind and you shall have it.’

” ‘I should never have come,’ he groaned. ‘But I was so desperate for any kind of human fellowship that I ... I ...’ Without thinking, I reached out to touch him—the most elemental gesture of one human being to another when he is grief-stricken—but Brower shrank away from me and cried, ‘Don’t touch me! Isn’t one enough? O God, why don’t I just die?’

“His eye suddenly lit feverishly on a stray dog with slat-thin sides and mangy, chewed fur that was making its way up the other side of the deserted, early-morning street. The cur’s tongue hung out and it walked with a wary, three-legged limp. It was looking, I suppose, for garbage cans to tip over and forage in.

” ‘That could be me over there,’ he said reflectively, as if to himself. ‘Shunned by everyone, forced to walk alone and venture out only after every other living thing is safe behind locked doors. Pariah dog!’

” ‘Come now,’ I said, a little sternly, for such talk smacked more than a little of the melodramatic. ‘You’ve had some kind of nasty shock and obviously something has happened to put your nerves in a bad state, but in the War I saw a thousand things which—’

” ‘You don’t believe me, do you?’ he asked. ‘You think I’m in the grip of some sort of hysteria, don’t you?’

” ‘Old man, I really don’t know what you might be gripping or what might be gripping you, but I do know that if we continue to stand out here in the damp night air, we’ll both catch the grippe. Now if you’d care to step back inside with me—only as far as the foyer, if you’d like—I’ll ask Stevens to—’

“His eyes were wild enough to make me acutely uneasy. There was no light of sanity left in them, and he reminded me of nothing so much as the battle-fatigued psychotics I had seen carried away in carts from the front lines: husks of men with awful, blank eyes like potholes to hell, mumbling and gibbering.

” ‘Would you care to see how one outcast responds to another?’ he asked me, taking no notice of what I had been saying at all. ‘Watch, then, and see what I’ve learned in strange ports of call!’

“And he suddenly raised his voice and said imperiously, ‘Dog!’

“The dog raised his head, looked at him with wary, rolling eyes (one glittered with rabid wildness; the other was filmed by a cataract), and suddenly changed direction and came limpingly, reluctantly, across the street to where Brower stood.

“It did not want to come; that much was obvious. It whined and growled and tucked its mangy rope of a tail between its legs; but it was drawn to him nonetheless. It came right up to Brower’s feet, and then lay upon its belly, whining and crouching and shuddering. Its emaciated sides went in and out like a bellows, and its good eye rolled horribly in its socket.

“Brower uttered a hideous, despairing laugh that I still hear in my dreams, and squatted by it. ‘There,’ he said. ‘You see? It knows me as one of its kind ... and knows what I bring it!’ He reached for the dog and the cur uttered a snarling, lugubrious howl. It bared its teeth.

” ‘Don’t!’ I cried sharply. ‘He’ll bite!’

“Brower took no notice. In the glow of the streetlight his face was livid, hideous, the eyes black holes burnt in parchment. ‘Nonsense,’ he crooned. ‘Nonsense. I only want to shake hands with him ... as your friend shook with me!’ And suddenly he seized the dog’s paw and shook it. The dog made a horrible howling noise, but made no move to bite him.

“Suddenly Brower stood up. His eyes seemed to have cleared somewhat, and except for his excessive pallor, he might have again been the man who had offered courteously to pick up a hand with us earlier the night before.

” ‘I’m leaving now,’ he said quietly. ‘Please apologize to your friends and tell them I’m sorry to have acted like such a fool. Perhaps I’ll have a chance to ... redeem myself another time.’

” ‘t’s we who owe you the apology,’ I said. ‘And have you forgotten the money? It’s better than a thousand dollars.’

” ‘O yes! The money!’ And his mouth curved in one of the bitterest smiles I have ever seen.

” ‘Never mind coming into the lobby,’ I said. ‘If you will promise to wait right here, I’ll bring it. Will you do that?’

” ‘Yes,’ he said. ‘If you wish, I’ll do that.’ And he looked reflectively down at the dog whining at his feet. ‘Perhaps he would like to come to my lodgings with me and have a square meal for once in his miserable life.’ And the bitter smile reappeared.

“I left him then, before he could reconsider, and went downstairs. Someone—probably Jack Wilden; he always had an orderly mind—had changed all the markers for greenbacks and had stacked the money neatly in the center of the green felt. None of them spoke to me as I gathered it up. Baker and Jack Wilden were smoking wordlessly; Jason Davidson was hanging his head and looking at his feet. His face was a picture of misery and shame. I touched him on the shoulder as I went back to the stairs and he looked at me gratefully.

“When I reached the street again, it was utterly deserted. Brower had gone. I stood there with a wad of greenbacks in each hand, looking vainly either way, but nothing moved. I called once, tentatively, in case he should be standing in the shadows someplace near, but there was no response. Then I happened to look down. The stray dog was still there, but his days of foraging in trash cans were over. He was quite dead. The fleas and ticks were leaving his body in marching columns. I stepped back, revolted and yet also filled with a species of odd, dreamy terror. I had a premonition that I was not yet through with Henry Brower, and so I wasn’t; but I never saw him again.”

The fire in the grate had died to guttering flames and cold had begun to creep out of the shadows, but no one moved or spoke while George lit his pipe again. He sighed and recrossed his legs, making the old joints crackle, and resumed.

“Needless to say, the others who had taken part in the game were unanimous in opinion: we must find Brower and give him his money. I suppose some would think we were insane to feel so, but that was a more honorable age. Davidson was in an awful funk when he left; I tried to draw him aside and offer him a good word or two, but he only shook his head and shuffled out. I let him go. Things would look different to him after a night’s sleep, and we could go looking for Brower together. Wilden was going out of town, and Baker had ‘social rounds’ to make. It would be a good way for Davidson to gain back a little self-respect, I thought.

“But when I went round to his apartment the next morning, I found him not yet up. I might have awakened him, but he was a young fellow and I decided to let him sleep the morning away while I spaded up a few elementary facts.

“I called here first, and talked to Stevens’s—” He turned toward Stevens and raised an eyebrow.

“Grandfather, sir,” Stevens said.

“Thank you.”

“You’re welcome, sir, I’m sure.”

“I talked to Stevens’s grandfather. I spoke to him in the very spot where Stevens himself now stands, in fact. He said that Raymond Greer, a fellow I knew slightly, had spoken for Brower. Greer was with the city trade commission, and I immediately went to his office in the Flatiron Building. I found him in, and he spoke to me immediately.

“When I told him what had happened the night before, his face became filled with a confusion of pity, gloom, and fear.

” ‘Poor old Henry!’ he exclaimed. ‘I knew it was coming to this, but I never suspected it would arrive so quickly.’

” ‘What?’ I asked.

” ‘His breakdown,’ Greer said. ‘It stems from his year in Bombay, and I suppose no one but Henry will ever know the whole story. But I’ll tell you what I can.’

“The story that Greer unfolded to me in his office that day increased both my sympathy and understanding. Henry Brower, it appeared, had been unluckily involved in a real tragedy. And, as in all classic tragedies of the stage, it had stemmed from a fatal flaw—in Brower’s case, forgetfulness.

“As a member of the trade-commission group in Bombay, he had enjoyed the use of a motorcar, a relative rarity there. Greer said that Brower took an almost childish pleasure in driving it through the narrow streets and byways of the city, scaring up chickens in great, gabbling flocks and making the women and men fall on their knees to their heathen gods. He drove it everywhere, attracting great attention and huge crowds of ragged children that followed him about but always hung back when he offered them a ride in the marvelous device, which he constantly did. The auto was a Model-A Ford with a truck body, and one of the earliest cars able to start not only by a crank but by the touch of a button. I ask you to remember that.

“One day Brower took the auto far across the city to visit one of the high poobahs of that place concerning possible consignments of jute rope. He attracted his usual notice as the Ford machine growled and backfired through the streets, sounding like an artillery barrage in progress—and, of course, the children followed.

“Brower was to take dinner with the jute manufacturer, an affair of great ceremony and formality, and they were only halfway through the second course, seated on an open-air terrace above the teeming street below, when the familiar racketing, coughing roar of the car began below them, accompanied by screams and shrieks.

“One of the more adventurous boys—and the son of an obscure holy man—had crept into the cab of the auto, convinced that whatever dragon there was under the iron hood could not be roused without the white man behind the wheel. And Brower, intent upon the coming negotiations, had left the switch on and the spark retarded.

“One can imagine the boy growing more daring before the eyes of his peers as he touched the mirror, waggled the wheel, and made mock tooting noises. Each time he thumbed his nose at the dragon under the hood, the awe in the faces of the others must have grown.

“His foot must have been pressed down on the clutch, perhaps for support, when he pushed the starter button. The engine was hot; it caught fire immediately. The boy, in his extreme terror, would have reacted by removing his foot from the clutch immediately, preparatory to jumping out. Had the car been older or in poorer condition, it would have stalled. But Brower cared for it scrupulously, and it leaped forward in a series of bucking, roaring jerks. Brower was just in time to see this as he rushed from the jute manufacturer’s house.

“The boy’s fatal mistake must have been little more than an accident. Perhaps, in his flailings to get out, an elbow accidentally struck the throttle. Perhaps he pulled it with the panicky hope that this was how the white man choked the dragon back into sleep. However it happened ... it happened. The auto gained suicidal speed and charged down the crowded, roiling street, bumping over bundles and bales, crushing the wicker cages of the animal vendor, smashing a flower cart to splinters. It roared straight downhill toward the street’s turning, leaped over the curb, crashed into a stone wall and exploded in a ball of flame.”

George switched his briar from one side of his mouth to the other.

“This was all Greer could tell me, because it was all Brower had told him that made any sense. The rest was a kind of deranged harangue on the folly of two such disparate cultures ever mixing. The dead boy’s father evidently confronted Brower before he was recalled and

flung a slaughtered chicken at him. There was a curse. At this point, Greer gave me a smile which said that we were both men of the world, lit a cigarette, and remarked, 'There's always a curse when a thing of this sort happens. The miserable heathens must keep up appearances at all costs. It's their bread and butter.'

" 'What was the curse?' I wondered.

" 'I should have thought you would have guessed,' said Greer. 'The wallah told him that a man who would practice sorcery on a small child should become a pariah, an outcast. Then he told Brower that any living thing he touched with his hands would die. Forever and forever, amen.' Greer chuckled.

" 'Brower believed it?'

" 'Greer believed he did. 'You must remember that the man had suffered a dreadful shock. And now, from what you tell me, his obsession is worsening rather than curing itself.'

" 'Can you tell me his address?'

" 'Greer hunted through his files, and finally came up with a listing. 'I don't guarantee that you'll find him there,' he said. 'People have been naturally reluctant to hire him, and I understand he hasn't a great deal of money.'

" 'I felt a pang of guilt at this, but said nothing. Greer struck me as a little too pompous, a little too smug, to deserve what little information I had on Henry Brower. But as I rose, something prompted me to say, 'I saw Brower shake hands with a mangy street cur last night. Fifteen minutes later the dog was dead.'

" 'Really? How interesting.' He raised his eyebrows as if the remark had no bearing on anything we had been discussing.

" 'I rose to take my leave and was about to shake Greer's hand when the secretary opened his office door. 'Pardon me, but you are Mr.

Gregson?’

“I told her I was.

” ‘A man named Baker has just called. He’s asked you to come to twenty-three Nineteenth Street immediately.’

“It gave me quite a nasty start, because I had already been there once that day—it was Jason Davidson’s address. When I left Greer’s office, he was just settling back with his pipe and *The Wall Street Journal*. I never saw him again, and don’t count it any great loss. I was filled with a very specific dread—the kind that will nevertheless not quite crystallize into an actual fear with a fixed object, because it is too awful, too unbelievable to actually be considered.”

Here I interrupted his narrative. “Good God, George! You’re not going to tell us he was dead?”

“Quite dead,” George agreed. “I arrived almost simultaneously with the coroner. His death was listed as a coronary thrombosis. He was short of his twenty-third birthday by sixteen days.

“In the days that followed, I tried to tell myself that it was all a nasty coincidence, best forgotten. I did not sleep well, even with the help of my good friend Mr. Cutty Sark. I told myself that the thing to do was divide that night’s last pot between the three of us and forget that Henry Brower had ever stepped into our lives. But I could not. I drew a cashier’s check for the sum instead, and went to the address that Greer had given me, which was in Harlem.

“He was not there. His forwarding address was a place on the East Side, a slightly less-well-off neighborhood of nonetheless respectable brownstones. He had left those lodgings a full month before the poker game, and the new address was in the East Village, an area of ramshackle tenements.

“The building superintendent, a scrawny man with a huge black mastiff snarling at his knee, told me that Brower had moved out on

April third—the day after our game. I asked for a forwarding address and he threw back his head and emitted a screaming gobble that apparently served him in the place of laughter.

” ‘The only forradin’ address they gives when they leave here is Hell, boss. But sometimes they stops in the Bowery on their way there.’

“The Bowery was then what it is only believed to be by out-of-towners now: the home of the homeless, the last stop for the faceless men who only care for another bottle of cheap wine or another shot of the white powder that brings long dreams. I went there. In those days there were dozens of flophouses, a few benevolent missions that took drunks in for the night, and hundreds of alleys where a man might hide an old, louse-ridden mattress. I saw scores of men, all of them little more than shells, eaten by drink and drugs. No names were known or used. When a man has sunk to a final basement level, his liver rotted by wood alcohol, his nose an open, festering sore from the constant sniffing of cocaine and potash, his fingers destroyed by frostbite, his teeth rotted to black stubs—a man no longer has a use for a name. But I described Henry Brower to every man I saw, with no response. Bartenders shook their heads and shrugged. The others just looked at the ground and kept walking.

“I didn’t find him that day, or the next, or the next. Two weeks went by, and then I talked to a man who said a fellow like that had been in Devarney’s Rooms three nights before.

“I walked there; it was only two blocks from the area I had been covering. The man at the desk was a scabrous ancient with a peeling bald skull and rheumy, glittering eyes. Rooms were advertised in the flyspecked window facing the street at a dime a night. I went through my description of Brower, the old fellow nodding all the way through it. When I had finished, he said:

” ‘I know him, young meester. Know him well. But I can’t quite recall ... I think ever s’much better with a dollar in front of me.’

“I produced a dollar and he made it disappear neat as a button, arthritis notwithstanding.

” ‘He was here, young meester, but he’s gone.’

” ‘Do you know where?’

” ‘I can’t quite recall,’ the desk clerk said. ‘I might, howsomever, with a dollar in front of me.’

“I produced a second bill, which he made disappear as neatly as he had the first. At this, something seemed to strike him as being deliciously funny, and a rasping, tubercular cough came out of his chest.

” ‘You’ve had your amusement,’ I said, ‘and been well paid for it as well. Now, do you know where this man is?’

“The old man laughed gleefully again. ‘Yes—Potter’s Field is his new residence; eternity’s the length of his lease; and he’s got the Devil for a roommate. How do you like them apples, young meester? He must’ve died sometime yesterday morning, for when I found him at noon he was still warm and toasty. Sitting bolt upright by the winder, he was. I’d gone up to either have his dime against the dark or show him the door. As it turned out, the city showed him six feet of earth.’ This caused another unpleasant outburst of senile glee.

” ‘Was there anything unusual?’ I asked, not quite daring to examine the import of my own question. ‘Anything out of the ordinary?’

” ‘I seem to recall somethin’ ... Let me see ...’

“I produced a dollar to aid his memory, but this time it did not produce laughter, although it disappeared with the same speed.

” ‘Yes, there was something passin odd about it,’ the old man said. ‘I’ve called the city hack for enough of them to know. Bleedin Jesus, ain’t I! I’ve found ‘em hangin from the hook on the door, found ‘em

dead in bed, found ‘em out on the fire escape in January with a bottle between their knees frozen just as blue as the Atlantic. I even found one fella that drowned in the washstand, although that was over thirty years ago. But this fella—sittin bolt upright in his brown suit, just like some swell from uptown, with his hair all combed. Had hold of his right wrist with his left hand, he did. I’ve seen all kinds, but he’s the only one I ever seen that died shakin his own hand.’

“I left and walked all the way to the docks, and the old man’s last words seemed to play over and over again in my brain like a phonograph record that has gotten stuck in one groove. He’s the only one I ever seen that died shakin his own hand.

“I walked down to the end of one of the piers, out to where the dirty gray water lapped the encrusted pilings. And then I ripped that cashier’s check into a thousand pieces and threw it into the water.”

George Gregson shifted and cleared his throat. The fire had burned down to reluctant embers, and cold was creeping into the deserted game room. The tables and chairs seemed spectral and unreal, like furnishings glimpsed in a dream where past and present merge. The flames rimmed the letters cut into the fireplace keystone with dull orange light: IT IS THE TALE, NOT HE WHO TELLS IT.

“I only saw him once, and once was enough; I’ve never forgotten. But it did serve to bring me out of my own time of mourning, for any man who can walk among his fellows is not wholly alone.

“If you’ll bring me my coat, Stevens, I believe I’ll toddle along home—I’ve stayed far past my usual bedtime.”

And when Stevens had brought it, George smiled and pointed at a small mole just below the left corner of Stevens’s mouth. “The resemblance really is remarkable, you know—your grandfather had a mole in that exact same place.”

Stevens smiled but made no reply. George left, and the rest of us slipped out soon after.

MAN WITH A BELLY

Stephen King

(Cavalier, Dec. 1978)

John Bracken sat on the park bench and waited to make his hit. The bench was one of the many on the outskirts of James Memorial Park, which borders the south side of Hammond Street. In the daytime the park is overrun by kids, mother wheeling prams, and old men with bags of crumbs for the pigeons. At night it belongs to the junkies and muggers. Respectable citizens, women in particular, avoided Hammond Street after dark. But Norma Correzente was not most women.

He heard her approach on the stroke of eleven, as always. He had been there since quarter of. The beat-cop wasn't due until 11:20, and everything was on top.

He was calm, as he always was before a hit. He was a cold and efficient workman, and that was why Vittorio had hired him. Bracken was not a button-man in the Family sense; he was an independent, a journeyman. His family resided completely within his wallet. This was why he had been hired.

There was a pause in the footfalls as she paused at the intersection of Hammond and Pardis Avenue. Then she crossed, probably thinking of nothing but covering the last block, going up to her penthouse suite, and pouring a large Scotch and water.

Bracken got ready, thinking it was a strange contract. Norma Correzente, formerly Norma White of the Boston Whites, was the wife of Vito Correzente. The marriage had been headline material - rich society bitch weds notorious Vito ("I'm just a businessman"). The Wop. It was not a novelty to the clan; aging Don marries a young woman of blood. Murder by contract was not new, either. The Sicilians could put in for a patent on that if it ever became legal.

But Bracken had not been hired to kill. He tensed, ready for her.

The phone call had been long-distance; he could tell by the clickings on the line.

“Mr. Bracken?”

“Yes.”

“I have word from Mr. Sills that you are available for work.”

” I could be,” Bracken answered. Benny Sills was one of several contact men who passed information from one end of a potential contract to the other, a kind of booking agent. He ran a hock-shop in a large eastern city where he also bankrolled independent smash-and-grab teams of proven reputation and sold heavy-caliber weapons to dubious political groups. “My name is Benito Torreos. Do you know it?”

“Yes.” Torreos was the right-hand man—consigliare was the word, Bracken thought - of Vito Correzente.

“Good. There is a letter for you in your hotel box, Mr. Bracken. It contains a round-trip plane ticket and a check for a thousand dollars. If you are indeed available, please take both. If not, the money is yours for calling the airport and canceling the reservation.”

“I’m available.”

“Good,” Torreos repeated. “My employer is anxious to speak to you at nine tomorrow evening, if convenient. The address is 400 Meegan Boulevard.”

“I’ll be there.

“Goodbye. Mr. Bracken.” The phone clicked.

Bracken went downstairs to get his mail.

Men who remain active and take care of themselves all their lives can remain incredibly fit even into their late years, but... there comes

a time when the clock begins to run down. Tissues fail in spite of walks, workouts, massages. The cheeks dewlap. The eyelids crenellate into wrinkled accordions. Vito Correzente had begun to enter that stage of hit life. He looked to be a well preserved seventy. Bracken put him at seventy-eight. His handshake was firm, but palsy lurked beneath, biding its time.

400 Meegan was the Graymoor Arms, and the top floor had been two \$1,000-a-month suites which Correzente had convened into a single monolith, strewn with grotesque knickknacks and Byzantine antiques. Bracken thought he could smell just a whiff of pasta and oregano.

Benny the Bull admitted him, looking like an overweight pug who had found his way into his manager's wardrobe by mistake. and he stood watchfully at the door of the sunken living room until Correzente waved him away with one driftwood hand. The door closed decorously, and Don Vittorio offered Bracken a cigar.

"No thank you."

Correzente nodded and lit one for himself. He was dressed in black pants and a white turtleneck; his hair, thick and rich and the color of iron, was brushed back elegantly. A large ruby glittered on his fourth finger.

"I want you to make a hit," he said. "I pay you t'irty t'ousan' before and twenty t'ousan' after.

"That's an agreeable price." He thought: too agreeable.

"You doan have to make no bones."

"No bones? You said a hit. A hit means I have to make bones."

Correzente smiled a wintry smile. For a moment he looked even older than seventy-eight. He looked older than all the ages. His

accent was faint, mellow, agreeable, a mere rounding of the hard English plosive and glottal stops.

“It’s my wife. I want you to rape her. Bracken waited.

“I want you to hurt her.” He smiled. One gold tooth glittered mellowly in the indirect lighting.

The story was simple, and yet there was a beautiful circularity to it which Bracken appreciated. Correzente had married Norma White because he had an itch. She had accepted his suit for the same reason. But while his itch was for her body, her bloodline, and the heat of her youth, hers was a much colder thing: money. A seamy compulsion often forces a seamy liaison, and Norma White was a compulsive gambler.

Doll Vittorio was being laughed at. It could not be borne. The matter could have been remedied simply and suddenly if he had been cuckolded by some young tony in tight pants, but to be cuckolded by his own wealth was more complex and contained a bitter irony which perhaps only a Sicilian could fully grasp. Her white Protestant family had cut her off, and so she had joined the family of Vito The Wop.

He had been one of the masters coping easily with the changes from bootleg to gambling and vice to full white-collar organization, never afraid to invest where it seemed that investiture would bring a profit, never afraid to show the iron fist inside the glove. He was a man with a belly, in the Sicilian argot.

Until now.

He had struck upon the solution because it was fitting. It was pure, object lesson, and vengeance all in one. He had chosen Bracken because he was an independent and unlike many hit men, he was neither homosexual nor impotent.

Bracken took the job.

It took him two weeks to prepare. During the first, he shadowed her for brief, unconnected periods of time, watching her go to the beauty parlor, buy dresses, play golf. She was a fine, aristocratic-looking woman with dark hair, a self-confident way of moving, and sleek body lines. He took a gestalt of her personality from the way she drove (fast, cutting in and out of traffic, jumping lights), the way she spoke (clear enunciation, Back Bay accent brooking no nonsense or waste of time), her manner of dress, a hundred other personal characteristics. When he felt that he had her fairly well ticketed, he dropped her daytime activities and concentrated on her nights, which were nearly as regular as clockwork. She left the Graymoor at seven and walked (he had never seen her take a taxi or bus) the four blocks to Jarvis's, the most opulent gambling den in the city. She always went as if dressed for a lover. She left Jarvis's promptly at ten-forty-five and walked back home. She left checks of varying amounts behind her. The pitman whom Bracken bribed said that an average week at the tables was costing Vito Correzente from eight to ten thousand dollars.

Bracken began to think that he had been bought cheaply at that.

He admired Norma Correzente in a personal yet detached way. She had found her horse and was riding him. She was not cheating or sneaking. She was an aggressive woman who was taking what she needed. There were no lies involved.

Admiration aside, he prepared to do his job. He reflected that it would be the first contract in his career where the weapon would need no getting rid of.

Now, on the bench, he felt a sudden surge of adrenaline that made his muscles tighten almost painfully. Then they relaxed and all his concentration focused in white light on the job ahead.

Her shadow trailed behind her, elongating as she left the last streetlight behind and approached the next.

She glanced at him, not in a fearful way, but with a quick appraisal that dismissed him as a pointless loiterer. When she was directly opposite him, he spoke once, sharply: "Norma."

It had the desired effect. It put her off balance. She did not reach immediately for her purse, where she carried a caliber pistol of Swedish make.

He came off the bench in an explosion. One moment he slouched, a sleepy head lost in a heroin haze. The next he had hooked a hard arm around her throat, choking the yell (not a scream; not her) in her throat. He pulled her off the sidewalk. Her purse dropped and he kicked it into darkness. A pencil, a notebook, the pistol, and a few Kleenex spilled from it. She tried to knee his crotch and he turned his thigh muscle into it. One hand raked his cheek. He had bent the other back and away.

Bushes. The night breeze made faint nets of shadow through them. He tripped her and she went down behind them, sprawled in the grass and gum wrappers.

When he came down on top she met him with a fist. The birthstone ring she wore gouged the bridge of his nose, bringing blood.

He yanked her skin up. The inner lining ripped. No girdle. Thank God.

She brought her heel down on the muscle of his calf and he let out a grunt. A rabbit punch caught him. He drove his fist into the softness of her belly and she wheezed her breath out. Her mouth opened, not to cry out but to find air, and her shadowed face was an unreal map of eye and lip and plane of cheek. He tore at her underpants, missed his grip, tore at them again. They stretched but didn't give.

Fists, feet. She was hammering at him, not trying to yell anymore, saving her breath. He tried to get her chin with his left and she slipped the punch. Her dark hair was a fan on the grass. She bit his

neck like a dog, going for the big vein there. He brought his knee up and her intake of breath became a small shriek.

He grabbed her pants again and this time there was a pop as the waistband let go. She almost scratched her way out from under and he drove the top of his head into the shelf of her chin. There was an ivory click as her teeth came together. Her body went slack and he jackknifed atop her. breathing in great lurches .

She was shamming. Both hands came down in a clap, catching his ears squarely between them. Red pain exploded in his head, and for the first time, he felt the strain of emotion while doing a job. He butted her savagely, and again.

This time she was not playing possum. Blood trickled slowly from one white nostril. He raped her.

He had thought her unconscious, but when he finished he saw her looking up at him in the dark. One of her eyes was rapidly puffing shut. Her clothes were tattered. Not that he had come out so well; his entire body felt raw and frayed.

“I am told to tell you that this is how your husband pays a debt to his honor. I am told to tell you that he is a man with a belly. I am told to tell you that all debts are paid and there is honor again.”

He spoke expressionlessly. His contract was fulfilled. He got up on one knee, warily, then gained his feet. The cop would be by in seven minutes. It was time to be gone. Her one open eye glittered up at him in the dark, a pirate's gem.

Site said one word: “Wait.”

Her second apartment, the one not even Benny Torreos knew about, was a walk-down nine blocks away. Bracken had given her his coat to hide her tom dress. They had only one exchange of conversation during the walk.

“I will give you twice what my husband paid you if you will do a job for me. “

“No. You don’t have the money, and I have never crossed an employer. It’s bad for business.”

“I have the money. Not from him. From my family. And I don’t want you to kill him.”

Bracken said sardonically: “Rape is out. “

She found her apartment key after a hunt through her jumbled purse and let him in. The living room was done in varying, tasteful shades of green, a low-slung, modern decor that avoided the livid tastelessness of many trusting places. The only clashing, aggressive note was an impressionistic painting of a huge, canted roulette wheel which was hung over the lime-colored couch. It was done in hectic shades of red.

She crossed beneath it, reached into the next room, and turned on “light”. There was a round bed with the covers turned back. When he walked through he saw that there were a number of mirrors,

She dropped his coat and stood in the ragged remnants of her dress. One rose-tinted nipple, dumbly erotic, peeped through shattered chiffon.

“Now, she said calmly, “we’ll do it in a civilized way.

After, in the time of talking, she poured out her virulence toward the man she had married. There was a restful rise and fall to the cadence of her curses, and Bracken listened contentedly enough, poised on the dark knife-edge of sleep.

He was a wop, a stinking spic, a lover of sheep, a crude bludgeoner who went to chic restaurants and ate pie with his fingers; a grabber and a twister, a black-and-bluer of flesh; a lover of junk shop gimcracks; an aficionado of Norman Rockwell; a pederast; a man

who would not treat her as a diadem but rather as a brace for his sagging manhood; not as a proud woman but as a dirty backstain joke to bolster the admiration of his pasta-eating, sweaty associates.

“A man with a belly,” she whispered into the darkness just before Bracken dropped off “I am his belly. I am his guts. I am his honor.” It occurred to him, as his mind fled to sleep, that the conflict of their honor had formed a bridge of hate between them that he now walked on, across oceans of darkness.

While they sat in the breakfast nook the following morning, eating doughnuts and watching legs pass in the tiny window above, she made her proposition: “Make me pregnant. I will pay you to do this.”

Bracken put down his doughnut and looked at her.

She smiled and brushed her hair back. “He wants a child. Could he make one?” She shrugged. “Perhaps lasagna is good for potency. I, however, take pills. He knows I take them.”

Bracken sipped his coffee. “Stud service?”

Norma laughed, a tinkly sound. “I suppose. I go to him today. No makeup. Black eye. Scratched face. Tears. How ! wish to be a good wife.” The, black charring note of score began to creep in. “How I want to learn the recipe for his favorite greasy noodles. How I want to give him a son.”

Her Face had become alive, lovely. “He will be prideful and forgiving... in short, blind. I’ll get what I want, which is freedom of the tables. And he will get what he want!: which is an heir.

“Perhaps not” She was lying, and when she looked into his eyes she saw his knowledge and smiled with slow, shy guile. “And perhaps, at the right time, I will kill him with the truth.”

“You won’t tell him?”

“Would it kill him?” Bracken leaned forward with mild professional interest.

“If. someone cut open your belly, would it kill you?”

“It would cost one hundred thousand dollars, Bracken said. “Forty before conception and sixty after. Have you got that kind of money?”

“Yes.”

He nodded. “All right.” He paused. “It’s a funny hit, you know that? A funny hit.”

She laughed.

He returned to the Graymoor that afternoon and collected the rest of his money. Correzente was smiling and robust.

Bracken was thanked profusely. More business would be thrown his way. Bracken nodded, and Correzente leaned toward him in a fatherly way.

“Can you keep your mouth shut about all this?”

“I always keep my mouth shut.” Bracken said, and left.

Benny the Bull gave him a handshake and an envelope containing a plane ticket to Cleveland. Once there, Bracken bought a used car and drove back.

He took up residence in Norma Correzente’s second apartment. She brought him a carton of paperback novels. He read them and watched old movies on TV. He did not go out even when it would have been safe to go out They made sex regularly. It was like being in a very plush jail. Ten weeks after the contract with Dan Vittorio had, been fulfilled, she killed the rabbit.

Bracken left town again.

He was in Palm Springs, and the phone connection was very bad.

“Mr. Bracken?”

“Yes. Talk louder, please.” Bracken was dressed in sweaty tennis whites; the girl on the bed wore only her skin. Tennis racket dangled from one hand. She swished at the air with it idly watching Bracken with the nearly expressionless eyes of experienced desire.

“This is Benito Torreos, Mr. Bracken.

“Yes. “

“You did a job for my Don seven months ago. You remember?”

“Yes.” New sweat began to crawl down his back.

“He wants to see you. He’s dying.”

Bracken thought carefully, knowing his life almost certainly depended on his next words. He did not see what he had done as a double-cross: he had fulfilled two separate and exclusive contracts, and had been able to vacation from then until now on his earnings. But the old man would see it as a cross, a stain on his pride and good faith. He was a man with a belly.

“Why does he want to see me?”

“To ask a question.”

The connection was very bad, and Bracken knew that to simply replace the instrument in its cradle would likely mean death. The family has a long arm. It was either to go Vito or run, and the connection was very bad.

“How is Mrs. Correzente?” He asked politely.

“Dead,” Benny Torreos said flatly. “She died last month, in childbirth.”

The bedroom was gothic shades of white on white - rug, walls, ceiling, curtains, even the sky beyond the windows. A steady drizzle was falling outside the Graymoor. Don Vito, shrunken to the size of a jockey twisted from the back of his horse, lay immured in his deathbed, which was also white.

He lifted one hand to Bracken. It shook briefly in the air, then dropped to the snowy coverlet again. There was a soft click as Torreo left them, closing the door to rejoin the relatives in the front room. The women out there were dressed in black, and shawled. Even the business suits of their men seemed old fashioned, as if death had dragged Sicily back into the fabric of the clothes and of the wearers by force.

Bracken went to the bed. The old man's face had fallen away to a skull. There was a sour smell that seemed to come from the folds of his flesh. His mouth had been twisted down cruelly on the left side, and the left hand was claw-fingered and frozen.

"Bracken," Correzente said. His voice was blurred and cottony. The operative side of his face lifted in a grotesque smile while the other side remained impassive. "I must tell you."

"Benny said you had a question."

"Yes." The word came out yeth. "But I must... tell you."

"Tell me what?"

"They told me you did a good job. You do. You have killed my wife and me."

"I did my job."

"Pride", the old man said, and smiled apologetically. "Pride ...

He seemed to gather himself. "She promised to be a good wife, a dutiful wife. She said she had been taking pills but these pills were

no more. She said she would bear me a son.

“We made love together. But I am old. She asked if it was too much for me.” The skull smile again. “Should I tell my chastened wife that I am no more a man? No, I say. No too much.

“We make love more. And I, I have a stroke. A little blood vessel up here” — he tapped his head gravely— “goes pop, like a balloon. The doctor comes and says, No more, Vito. You will kill yourself. And I say, yes, more. Until I have put a child in her.”

“Pride ...

“Then the doctor say, You have done this. You have made a baby at seventy-eight. He say, I would give you a cigar, Vito, but you must smoke no more cigars. “

Bracken shifted his legs. The whiteness of the room was oppressive, creeping.

“I am overjoyed. I am a man, much man. I have a belly. The house is filled with my family. We have, oh, the word is for much food -”

“Banquet,” Bracken said.

“Yes. and I sit at the head of the table, then rise. My wife, she rises. I toast her with wine and tell them. I say, I have given my belly to my wife!” “I am the happiness of the world. I am beyond laughings and dirty jokes. I give her money for the wheels and tables. I give her what she wants. Then one night, we argue. Much hard words pass. And then ... I have this. Pain. One eye goes blind. She saw it and screamed. She runs for the telephone in the living room with her belly before her. I try to call but am down a dark hole. when I wake up, they tell me she has fallen on the steps going down from hen to the living room. They tell me she is in the hospital. Then they tell me ... ” The hand rose again. “Fut.” Don Vito said. The dreadful smile came and went.

Correzente was visibly tired now. His eyes closed, then opened slowly, as if weighted.

“You see?” he whispered. “The irony?”

“Benny said you had a question.” Bracken said.

The dead face looked up at him steadily. “The baby lives,” he said. “They tell me this. In a glass house.”

“Incubator.”

“They say the baby has pretty blue eyes.

Bracken said nothing.

“You made one of Norma’s eyes black. But they were brown. And then is no blue-eyed Sicilian.”

“Benny said you had a question,” Bracken said.

“I have ask my question. My doctor say, it’s genes. I do not know genes. I only know what a dying man lies in bed and thinks. How she was prideful and how she could wait.”

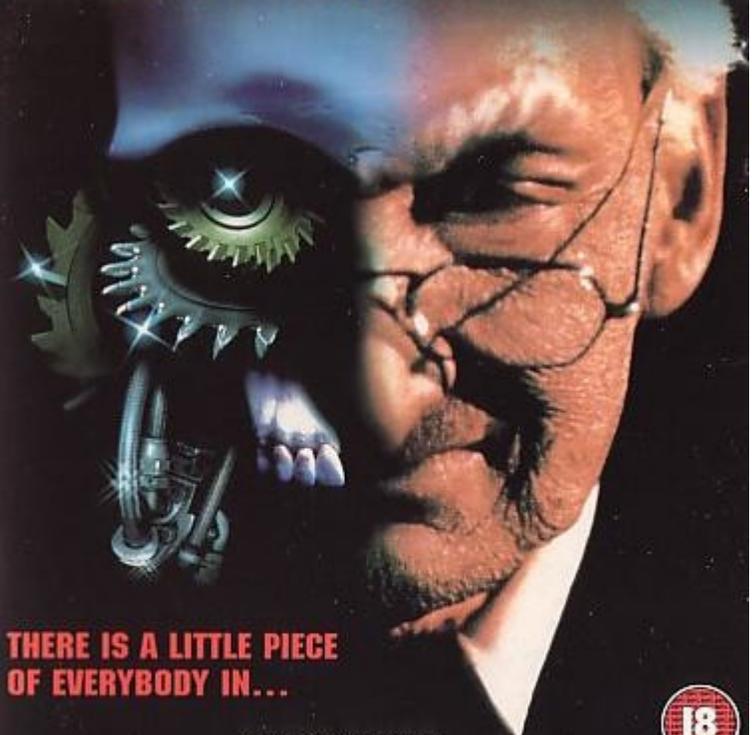
Bracken looked down at him, his mind a thousand miles away. He thought of the blonde, how she served, the brown flesh of her legs below the blinding white of her skirt, the flickering glimpse of her panties, the fan of her hair on the pillow, her trained tennis muscles.

“How stupid you are,” he said to the old man, softly. He leaned forward, breathing in the scent of Correzente’s doom. “Death has made you senile. I have my own belly. Do you think I would take my own leavings?”

A line of spittle was making a slow trek down from the corner of the old man’s mouth to his chin.

“The baby’s eyes will go brown. Too bad you won’t see it. Goodbye, stupid old man.” He got up. The room was white and full of death. He left and went back to Palm Springs.

THE DIRECTOR OF "POLTERGEIST" STAR OF "A NIGHTMARE ON ELM STREET" BASED ON A SHORT STORY BY
TOBE HOOPER ROBERT ENGLUND STEPHEN KING



**THERE IS A LITTLE PIECE
OF EVERYBODY IN...**

AN **ANANT SINGH** PRODUCTION



THE MANGLER

THE MANGLER

Stephen King

Officer Hunton got to the laundry just as the ambulance was leaving—slowly, with no siren or flashing lights. Ominous. Inside, the office was stuffed with milling, silent people, some of them weeping. The plant itself was empty; the big automatic washers at the far end had not even been shut down. It made Hunton very wary. The crowd should be at the scene of the accident, not in the office. It was the way things worked—the human animal had a built-in urge to view the remains. A very bad one, then. Hunton felt his stomach tighten as it always did when the accident was very bad. Fourteen years of cleaning human litter from highways and streets and the sidewalks at the bases of very tall buildings had not been able to erase that little hitch in the belly, as if something evil had clotted there.

A man in a white shirt saw Hunton and walked toward him reluctantly. He was a buffalo of a man with head thrust forward between shoulders, nose and cheeks vein-broken either from high blood pressure or too many conversations with the brown bottle. He was trying to frame words, but after two tries Hunton cut him off briskly:

“Are you the owner? Mr. Gartley?”

“No ... no. I’m Stanner. The foreman. God, this—”

Hunton got out his notebook. “Please show me the scene of the accident, Mr. Stanner, and tell me what happened.”

Stanner seemed to grow even more white; the blotches on his nose and cheeks stood out like birthmarks. “D-do I have to?”

Hunton raised his eyebrows. “I’m afraid you do. The call I got said it was serious.”

“Serious—” Stanner seemed to be battling with his gorge; for a moment his Adam’s apple went up and down like a monkey on a stick. “Mrs. Frawley is dead. Jesus, I wish Bill Gartley was here.”

“What happened?”

Stanner said, “You better come over here.”

He led Hunton past a row of hand presses, a shirt-folding unit, and then stopped by a laundry-marking machine. He passed a shaky hand across his forehead. “You’ll have to go over by yourself, Officer. I can’t look at it again. It makes me ... I can’t. I’m sorry.”

Hunton walked around the marking machine with a mild feeling of contempt for the man. They run a loose shop, cut corners, run live steam through home-welded pipes, they work with dangerous cleaning chemicals without the proper protection, and finally, someone gets hurt. Or gets dead. Then they can’t look. They can’t—

Hunton saw it.

The machine was still running. No one had shut it off. The machine he later came to know intimately: the Hadley-Watson Model-6 Speed Ironer and Folder. A long and clumsy name. The people who worked here in the steam and the wet had a better name for it. The mangler.

Hunton took a long, frozen look, and then he performed a first in his fourteen years as a law-enforcement officer: he turned around, put a convulsive hand to his mouth, and threw up.

“You didn’t eat much,” Jackson said.

The women were inside, doing dishes and talking babies while John Hunton and Mark Jackson sat in lawn chairs near the aromatic barbecue. Hunton smiled slightly at the understatement. He had eaten nothing.

“There was a bad one today,” he said. “The worst.”

“Car crash?”

“No. Industrial.”

“Messy?”

Hunton did not reply immediately, but his face made an involuntary, writhing grimace. He got a beer out of the cooler between them, opened it, and emptied half of it. “I suppose you college profs don’t know anything about industrial laundries?”

Jackson chuckled. “This one does. I spent a summer working in one as an undergraduate.”

“Then you know the machine they call the speed ironer?”

Jackson nodded. “Sure. They run damp flatwork through them, mostly sheets and linen. A big, long machine.”

“That’s it,” Hunton said. “A woman named Adelle Frawley got caught in it at the Blue Ribbon Laundry crosstown. It sucked her right in.”

Jackson looked suddenly ill. “But ... that can’t happen, Johnny. There’s a safety bar. If one of the women feeding the machine accidentally gets a hand under it, the bar snaps up and stops the machine. At least that’s how I remember it.”

Hunton nodded. “It’s a state law. But it happened.”

Hunton closed his eyes and in the darkness he could see the Hadley-Watson speed ironer again, as it had been that afternoon. It formed a long, rectangular box in shape, thirty feet by six. At the feeder end, a moving canvas belt moved under the safety bar, up at a slight angle, and then down. The belt carried the damp-dried, wrinkled sheets in continuous cycle over and under sixteen huge revolving cylinders that made up the main body of the machine. Over eight and under eight, pressed between them like thin ham between layers of superheated bread. Steam heat in the cylinders could be adjusted up to 300 degrees for maximum drying. The pressure on the sheets that rode the moving canvas belt was set at 800 pounds per square foot to get out every wrinkle.

And Mrs. Frawley, somehow, had been caught and dragged in. The steel, asbestos-jacketed pressing cylinders had been as red as barn paint, and the rising steam from the machine had carried the sickening stench of hot blood. Bits of her white blouse and blue slacks, even ripped segments of her bra and panties, had been torn free and ejected from the machine's far end thirty feet down, the bigger sections of cloth folded with grotesque and bloodstained neatness by the automatic folder. But not even that was the worst.

*

"It tried to fold everything," he said to Jackson, tasting bile in his throat. "But a person isn't a sheet, Mark. What I saw ... what was left of her ..." Like Stanner, the hapless foreman, he could not finish. "They took her out in a basket," he said softly.

Jackson whistled. "Who's going to get it in the neck? The laundry or the state inspectors?"

"Don't know yet," Hunton said. The malign image still hung behind his eyes, the image of the mangle wheezing and thumping and hissing, blood dripping down the green sides of the long cabinet in runnels, the burning stink of her ... "It depends on who okayed that goddamn safety bar and under what circumstances."

"If it's the management, can they wiggle out of it?"

Hunton smiled without humor. "The woman died, Mark. If Gartley and Stanner were cutting corners on the speed ironer's maintenance, they'll go to jail. No matter who they know on the City Council."

"Do you think they were cutting corners?"

Hunton thought of the Blue Ribbon Laundry, badly lighted, floors wet and slippery, some of the machines incredibly ancient and creaking. "I think it's likely," he said quietly.

They got up to go in the house together. “Tell me how it comes out, Johnny,” Jackson said. “I’m interested.”

Hunton was wrong about the mangler; it was clean as a whistle.

Six state inspectors went over it before the inquest, piece by piece. The net result was absolutely nothing. The inquest verdict was death by misadventure.

Hunton, dumbfounded, cornered Roger Martin, one of the inspectors, after the hearing. Martin was a tall drink of water with glasses as thick as the bottoms of shot glasses. He fidgeted with a ball-point pen under Hunton’s questions.

“Nothing? Absolutely nothing doing with the machine?”

“Nothing,” Martin said. “Of course, the safety bar was the guts of the matter. It’s in perfect working order. You heard that Mrs. Gillian testify. Mrs. Frawley must have pushed her hand too far. No one saw that; they were watching their own work. She started screaming. Her hand was gone already, and the machine was taking her arm. They tried to pull her out instead of shutting it down—pure panic. Another woman, Mrs. Keene, said she did try to shut it off, but it’s a fair assumption that she hit the start button rather than the stop in the confusion. By then it was too late.”

“Then the safety bar malfunctioned,” Hunton said flatly. “Unless she put her hand over it rather than under?”

“You can’t. There’s a stainless-steel facing above the safety bar. And the bar itself didn’t malfunction. It’s circuited into the machine itself. If the safety bar goes on the blink, the machine shuts down.”

“Then how did it happen, for Christ’s sake?”

“We don’t know. My colleagues and I are of the opinion that the only way the speed ironer could have killed Mrs. Frawley was for her to

have fallen into it from above. And she had both feet on the floor when it happened. A dozen witnesses can testify to that.”

“You’re describing an impossible accident,” Hunton said.

“No. Only one we don’t understand.” He paused, hesitated, and then said: “I will tell you one thing, Hunton, since you seem to have taken this case to heart. If you mention it to anyone else, I’ll deny I said it. But I didn’t like that machine. It seemed ... almost to be mocking us. I’ve inspected over a dozen speed ironers in the last five years on a regular basis. Some of them are in such bad shape that I wouldn’t leave a dog unleashed around them—the state law is lamentably lax. But they were only machines for all that. But this one ... it’s a spook. I don’t know why, but it is. I think if I’d found one thing, even a technicality, that was off whack, I would have ordered it shut down. Crazy, huh?”

“I felt the same way,” Hunton said.

“Let me tell you about something that happened two years ago in Milton,” the inspector said. He took off his glasses and began to polish them slowly on his vest. “Fella had parked an old icebox out in his backyard. The woman who called us said her dog had been caught in it and suffocated. We got the state police-man in the area to inform him it had to go to the town dump. Nice enough fella, sorry about the dog. He loaded it into his pickup and took it to the dump the next morning. That afternoon a woman in the neighborhood reported her son missing.”

“God,” Hunton said.

“The icebox was at the dump and the kid was in it, dead. A smart kid, according to his mother. She said he’d no more play in an empty icebox than he would take a ride with a strange man. Well, he did. We wrote it off. Case closed?”

“I guess,” Hunton said.

“No. The dump caretaker went out next day to take the door off the thing. City Ordinance No. 58 on the maintenance of public dumping places.” Martin looked at him expressionlessly. “He found six dead birds inside. Gulls, sparrows, a robin. And he said the door closed on his arm while he was brushing them out. Gave him a hell of a jump. That mangler at the Blue Ribbon strikes me like that, Hunton. I don’t like it.”

They looked at each other wordlessly in the empty inquest chamber, some six city blocks from where the Hadley-Watson Model-6 Speed Ironer and Folder sat in the busy laundry, steaming and fuming over its sheets.

The case was driven out of his mind in the space of a week by the press of more prosaic police work. It was only brought back when he and his wife dropped over to Mark Jackson’s house for an evening of bid whist and beer.

Jackson greeted him with: “Have you ever wondered if that laundry machine you told me about is haunted, Johnny?”

Hunton blinked, at a loss. “What?”

“The speed ironer at the Blue Ribbon Laundry, I guess you didn’t catch the squeal this time.”

“What squeal?” Hunton asked, interested.

Jackson passed him the evening paper and pointed to an item at the bottom of page two. The story said that a steam line had let go on the large speed ironer at the Blue Ribbon Laundry, burning three of the six women working at the feeder end. The accident had occurred at 3:45 P.M. and was attributed to a rise in steam pressure from the laundry’s boiler. One of the women, Mrs. Annette Gillian, had been held at City Receiving Hospital with second-degree burns.

“Funny coincidence,” he said, but the memory of Inspector Martin’s words in the empty inquest chamber suddenly recurred: It’s a spook

... And the story about the dog and the boy and the birds caught in the discarded refrigerator.

He played cards very badly that night.

Mrs. Gillian was propped up in bed reading *Screen Secrets* when Hunton came into the four-bed hospital room. A large bandage blanketed one arm and the side of her neck. The room's other occupant, a young woman with a pallid face, was sleeping.

Mrs. Gillian blinked at the blue uniform and then smiled tentatively. "If it was for Mrs. Cherinikov, you'll have to come back later. They just gave her medication."

"No, it's for you, Mrs. Gillian." Her smile faded a little. "I'm here unofficially—which means I'm curious about the accident at the laundry. John Hunton." He held out his hand.

It was the right move. Mrs. Gillian's smile became brilliant and she took his grip awkwardly with her unburnt hand. "Anything I can tell you, Mr. Hunton. God, I thought my Andy was in trouble at school again."

"What happened?"

"We was running sheets and the ironer just blew up—or it seemed that way. I was thinking about going home an' getting off my dogs when there's this great big bang, like a bomb. Steam is everywhere and this hissing noise ... awful." Her smile trembled on the verge of extinction. "It was like the ironer was breathing. Like a dragon, it was. And Alberta—that's Alberta Keene—shouted that something was exploding and everyone was running and screaming and Ginny Jason started yelling she was burnt. I started to run away and I fell down. I didn't know I got it worst until then. God forbid it was no worse than it was. That live steam is three hundred degrees."

"The paper said a steam line let go. What does that mean?"

“The overhead pipe comes down into this kinda flexible line that feeds the machine. George—Mr. Stanner—said there must have been a surge from the boiler or something. The line split wide open.”

Hunton could think of nothing else to ask. He was making ready to leave when she said reflectively:

“We never used to have these things on that machine. Only lately. The steam line breaking. That awful, awful accident with Mrs. Frawley, God rest her. And little things. Like the day Essie got her dress caught in one of the drive chains. That could have been dangerous if she hadn't ripped it right out. Bolts and things fall off. Oh, Herb Diment—he's the laundry repairman—has had an awful time with it. Sheets get caught in the folder. George says that's because they're using too much bleach in the washers, but it never used to happen. Now the girls hate to work on it. Essie even says there are still little bits of Adelle Frawley caught in it and it's sacrilege or something. Like it had a curse. It's been that way ever since Sherry cut her hand on one of the clamps.”

“Sherry?” Hunton asked.

“Sherry Ouelette. Pretty little thing, just out of high school. Good worker. But clumsy sometimes. You know how young girls are.”

“She cut her hand on something?”

“Nothing strange about that. There are clamps to tighten down the feeder belt, see. Sherry was adjusting them so we could do a heavier load and probably dreaming about some boy. She cut her finger and bled all over everything.” Mrs. Gillian looked puzzled. “It wasn't until after that the bolts started falling off. Adelle was ... you know ... about a week later. As if the machine had tasted blood and found it liked it. Don't women get funny ideas sometimes, Officer Hinton?”

“Hunton,” he said absently, looking over her head and into space.

Ironically, he had met Mark Jackson in a washateria in the block that separated their houses, and it was there that the cop and the English professor still had their most interesting conversations.

Now they sat side by side in bland plastic chairs, their clothes going round and round behind the glass portholes of the coin-op washers. Jackson's paperback copy of Milton's collected works lay neglected beside him while he listened to Hunton tell Mrs. Gillian's story.

When Hunton had finished, Jackson said, "I asked you once if you thought the mangler might be haunted. I was only half joking. I'll ask you again now."

"No," Hunton said uneasily. "Don't be stupid."

Jackson watched the turning clothes reflectively. "Haunted is a bad word. Let's say possessed. There are almost as many spells for casting demons in as there are for casting them out. Frazier's Golden Bough is replete with them. Druidic and Aztec lore contain others. Even older ones, back to Egypt. Almost all of them can be reduced to startlingly common denominators. The most common, of course, is the blood of a virgin." He looked at Hunton. "Mrs. Gillian said the trouble started after this Sherry Ouelette accidentally cut herself."

"Oh, come on," Hunton said.

"You have to admit she sounds just the type," Jackson said.

"I'll run right over to her house," Hunton said with a small smile. "I can see it. 'Miss Ouelette, I'm Officer John Hunton. I'm investigating an ironer with a bad case of demon possession and would like to know if you're a virgin.' Do you think I'd get a chance to say goodbye to Sandra and the kids before they carted me off to the booby hatch?"

"I'd be willing to bet you'll end up saying something just like that," Jackson said without smiling. "I'm serious, Johnny. That machine

scares the hell out of me and I've never seen it."

"For the sake of conversation," Hunton said, "what are some of the other so-called common denominators?"

Jackson shrugged. "Hard to say without study. Most Anglo-Saxon hex formulas specify graveyard dirt or the eye of a toad. European spells often mention the hand of glory, which can be interpreted as the actual hand of a dead man or one of the hallucinogenics used in connection with the Witches' Sabbath—usually belladonna or a psilocybin derivative. There could be others."

"And you think all those things got into the Blue Ribbon ironer? Christ, Mark, I'll bet there isn't any belladonna within a five-hundred-mile radius. Or do you think someone whacked off their Uncle Fred's hand and dropped it in the folder?"

"If seven hundred monkeys typed for seven hundred years—"

"One of them would turn out the works of Shakespeare," Hunton finished sourly. "Go to hell. Your turn to go across to the drugstore and get some dimes for the dryers."

*

It was very funny how George Stanner lost his arm in the mangler.

Seven o'clock Monday morning the laundry was deserted except for Stanner and Herb Diment, the maintenance man. They were performing the twice-yearly function of greasing the mangler's bearings before the laundry's regular day began at seven-thirty. Diment was at the far end, greasing the four secondaries and thinking of how unpleasant this machine made him feel lately, when the mangler suddenly roared into life.

He had been holding up four of the canvas exit belts to get at the motor beneath and suddenly the belts were running in his hands, ripping the flesh off his palms, dragging him along.

He pulled free with a convulsive jerk seconds before the belts would have carried his hands into the folder.

“What the Christ, George!” he yelled. “Shut the frigging thing off!”

George Stanner began to scream.

It was a high, wailing, blood-maddened sound that filled the laundry, echoing off the steel faces of the washers, the grinning mouths of the steam presses, the vacant eyes of the industrial dryers. Stanner drew in a great, whooping gasp of air and screamed again: “Oh God of Christ I’m caught I’M CAUGHT—”

The rollers began to produce rising steam. The folder gnashed and thumped. Bearings and motors seemed to cry out with a hidden life of their own.

Diment raced to the other end of the machine.

The first roller was already going a sinister red. Diment made a moaning, gobbling noise in his throat. The mangler howled and thumped and hissed.

A deaf observer might have thought at first that Stanner was merely bent over the machine at an odd angle. Then even a deaf man would have seen the pallid, eye-bulging rictus of his face, mouth twisted open in a continuous scream. The arm was disappearing under the safety bar and beneath the first roller; the fabric of his shirt had torn away at the shoulder seam and his upper arm bulged grotesquely as the blood was pushed steadily backward.

“Turn it off!” Stanner screamed. There was a snap as his elbow broke.

Diment thumbed the off button.

The mangler continued to hum and growl and turn.

Unbelieving, he slammed the button again and again—nothing. The skin of Stanner’s arm had grown shiny and taut. Soon it would split with the pressure the roll was putting on it; and still he was conscious and screaming. Diment had a nightmare cartoon image of a man flattened by a steamroller, leaving only a shadow.

“Fuses—” Stanner screeched. His head was being pulled down, down, as he was dragged forward.

Diment whirled and ran to the boiler room, Stanner’s screams chasing him like lunatic ghosts. The mixed stench of blood and steam rose in the air.

On the left wall were three heavy gray boxes containing all the fuses for the laundry’s electricity. Diment yanked them open and began to pull the long, cylindrical fuses like a crazy man, throwing them back over his shoulders. The overhead lights went out; then the air compressor; then the boiler itself, with a huge dying whine.

And still the mangler turned. Stanner’s screams had been reduced to bubbly moans.

Diment’s eye happened on the fire ax in its glassed-in box. He grabbed it with a small, gagging whimper and ran back. Stanner’s arm was gone almost to the shoulder. Within seconds his bent and straining neck would be snapped against the safety bar.

“I can’t,” Diment blubbered, holding the ax. “Jesus, George, I can’t, I can’t, I—”

The machine was an abattoir now. The folder spat out pieces of shirt sleeve, scraps of flesh, a finger. Stanner gave a huge, whooping scream and Diment swung the ax up and brought it down in the laundry’s shadowy lightlessness. Twice. Again.

Stanner fell away, unconscious and blue, blood jetting from the stump just below the shoulder. The mangler sucked what was left into itself ... and shut down.

Weeping, Diment pulled his belt out of its loops and began to make a tourniquet.

Hunton was talking on the phone with Roger Martin, the inspector. Jackson watched him while he patiently rolled a ball back and forth for three-year-old Patty Hunton to chase.

“He pulled all the fuses?” Hunton was asking. “And the off button just didn’t function, huh? ... Has the ironer been shut down? ... Good. Great. Huh? ... No, not official.” Hunton frowned, then looked sideways at Jackson. “Are you still reminded of that refrigerator, Roger? ... Yes. Me too. Goodbye.”

He hung up and looked at Jackson. “Let’s go see the girl, Mark.”

She had her own apartment (the hesitant yet proprietary way she showed them in after Hunton had flashed his buzzer made him suspect that she hadn’t had it long), and she sat uncomfortably across from them in the carefully decorated, postage-stamp living room.

“I’m Officer Hunton and this is my associate, Mr. Jackson. It’s about the accident at the laundry.” He felt hugely uncomfortable with this dark, shyly pretty girl.

“Awful,” Sherry Ouelette murmured. “It’s the only place I’ve ever worked. Mr. Gartley is my uncle. I liked it because it let me have this place and my own friends. But now ... it’s so spooky.”

“The State Board of Safety has shut the ironer down pending a full investigation,” Hunton said. “Did you know that?”

“Sure.” She sighed restlessly. “I don’t know what I’m going to do—”

“Miss Ouelette,” Jackson interrupted, “you had an accident with the ironer, didn’t you? Cut your hand on a clamp, I believe?”

“Yes, I cut my finger.” Suddenly her face clouded. “That was the first thing.” She looked at them woefully. “Sometimes I feel like the girls don’t like me so much anymore ... as if I were to blame.”

“I have to ask you a hard question,” Jackson said slowly. “A question you won’t like. It seems absurdly personal and off the subject, but I can only tell you it is not. Your answers won’t ever be marked down in a file or record.”

She looked frightened. “D-did I do something?”

Jackson smiled and shook his head; she melted. Thank God for Mark, Hunton thought.

“I’ll add this, though: the answer may help you keep your nice little flat here, get your job back, and make things at the laundry the way they were before.”

“I’d answer anything to have that,” she said.

“Sherry, are you a virgin?”

She looked utterly flabbergasted, utterly shocked, as if a priest had given communion and then slapped her. Then she lifted her head, made a gesture at her neat efficiency apartment, as if asking them how they could believe it might be a place of assignation.

“I’m saving myself for my husband,” she said simply.

Hunton and Jackson looked calmly at each other, and in that tick of a second, Hunton knew that it was all true: a devil had taken over the inanimate steel and cogs and gears of the mangle and had turned it into something with its own life.

“Thank you,” Jackson said quietly.

“What now?” Hunton asked bleakly as they rode back. “Find a priest to exorcise it?”

Jackson snorted. "You'd go a far piece to find one that wouldn't hand you a few tracts to read while he phoned the booby hatch. It has to be our play, Johnny."

"Can we do it?"

"Maybe. The problem is this: We know something is in the mangler. We don't know what." Hunton felt cold, as if touched by a fleshless finger. "There are a great many demons. Is the one we're dealing with in the circle of Bubastis or Pan? Baal? Or the Christian deity we call Satan? We don't know. If the demon had been deliberately cast, we would have a better chance. But this seems to be a case of random possession."

Jackson ran his fingers through his hair. "The blood of a virgin, yes. But that narrows it down hardly at all. We have to be sure, very sure."

"Why?" Hunton asked bluntly. "Why not just get a bunch of exorcism formulas together and try them out?"

Jackson's face went cold. "This isn't cops 'n' robbers, Johnny. For Christ's sake, don't think it is. The rite of exorcism is horribly dangerous. It's like controlled nuclear fission, in a way. We could make a mistake and destroy ourselves. The demon is caught in that piece of machinery. But give it a chance and—"

"It could get out?"

"It would love to get out," Jackson said grimly. "And it likes to kill."

When Jackson came over the following evening, Hunton had sent his wife and daughter to a movie. They had the living room to themselves, and for this Hunton was relieved. He could still barely believe what he had become involved in.

"I canceled my classes," Jackson said, "and spent the day with some of the most god-awful books you can imagine. This afternoon I fed

over thirty recipes for calling demons into the tech computer. I've got a number of common elements. Surprisingly few."

He showed Hunton the list: blood of a virgin, graveyard dirt, hand of glory, bat's blood, night moss, horse's hoof, eye of toad.

There were others, all marked secondary.

"Horse's hoof," Hunton said thoughtfully. "Funny—"

"Very common. In fact—"

"Could these things—any of them—be interpreted loosely?" Hunton interrupted.

"If lichens picked at night could be substituted for night moss, for instance?"

"Yes."

"It's very likely," Jackson said. "Magical formulas are often ambiguous and elastic. The black arts have always allowed plenty of room for creativity."

"Substitute Jell-O for horse's hoof," Hunton said. "Very popular in bag lunches. I noticed a little container of it sitting under the ironer's sheet platform on the day the Frawley woman died. Gelatin is made from horses' hooves."

Jackson nodded. "Anything else?"

"Bat's blood ... well, it's a big place. Lots of unlighted nooks and crannies. Bats seem likely, although I doubt if the management would admit to it. One could conceivably have been trapped in the mangler."

Jackson tipped his head back and knuckled bloodshot eyes. "It fits ... it all fits."

“It does?”

“Yes. We can safely rule out the hand of glory, I think. Certainly no one dropped a hand into the ironer before Mrs. Frawley’s death, and belladonna is definitely not indigenous to the area.”

“Graveyard dirt?”

“What do you think?”

“It would have to be a hell of a coincidence,” Hunton said. “Nearest cemetery is Pleasant Hill, and that’s five miles from the Blue Ribbon.”

“Okay,” Jackson said. “I got the computer operator—who thought I was getting ready for Halloween—to run a positive breakdown of all the primary and secondary elements on the list. Every possible combination. I threw out some two dozen which were completely meaningless. The others fall into fairly clear-cut categories. The elements we’ve isolated are in one of those.”

“What is it?”

Jackson grinned. “An easy one. The mythos centers in South America with branches in the Caribbean. Related to voodoo. The literature I’ve got looks on the deities as strictly bush league, compared to some of the real heavies, like Suddath or He-Who-Cannot-Be-Named. The thing in that machine is going to slink away like the neighborhood bully.”

“How do we do it?”

“Holy water and a smidgen of the Holy Eucharist ought to do it. And we can read some of the Leviticus to it. Strictly Christian white magic.”

“You’re sure it’s not worse?”

“Don’t see how it can be,” Jackson said pensively. “I don’t mind telling you I was worried about that hand of glory. That’s very black juju. Strong magic.”

“Holy water wouldn’t stop it?”

“A demon called up in conjunction with the hand of glory could eat a stack of Bibles for breakfast. We would be in bad trouble messing with something like that at all. Better to pull the goddamn thing apart.”

“Well, are you completely sure—”

“No, but fairly sure. It all fits too well.”

“When?”

“The sooner, the better,” Jackson said. “How do we get in? Break a window?”

Hunton smiled, reached into his pocket, and dangled a key in front of Jackson’s nose.

“Where’d you get that? Gartley?”

“No,” Hunton said. “From a state inspector named Martin.”

“He know what we’re doing?”

“I think he suspects. He told me a funny story a couple of weeks ago.”

“About the mangler?”

“No,” Hunton said. “About a refrigerator. Come on.”

Adelle Frawley was dead; sewed together by a patient undertaker, she lay in her coffin. Yet something of her spirit perhaps remained in the machine, and if it did, it cried out. She would have known, could

have warned them. She had been prone to indigestion, and for this common ailment she had taken a common stomach tablet called E-Z Gel, purchasable over the counter of any drugstore for seventy-nine cents. The side panel holds a printed warning: People with glaucoma must not take E-Z Gel, because the active ingredient causes an aggravation of that condition. Unfortunately, Adelle Frawley did not have that condition. She might have remembered the day, shortly before Sherry Ouelette cut her hand, that she had dropped a full box of E-Z Gel tablets into the mangler by accident. But she was dead, unaware that the active ingredient which soothed her heartburn was a chemical derivative of belladonna, known quaintly in some European countries as the hand of glory.

There was a sudden ghastly burping noise in the spectral silence of the Blue Ribbon Laundry—a bat fluttered madly for its hole in the insulation above the dryers where it had roosted, wrapping wings around its blind face.

It was a noise almost like a chuckle.

The mangler began to run with a sudden, lurching grind—belts hurrying through the darkness, cogs meeting and meshing and grinding, heavy pulverizing rollers rotating on and on.

It was ready for them.

When Hunton pulled into the parking lot it was shortly after midnight and the moon was hidden behind a raft of moving clouds. He jammed on the brakes and switched off the lights in the same motion; Jackson's forehead almost slammed against the padded dash.

He switched off the ignition and the steady thump-hiss-thump became louder. "It's the mangler," he said slowly. "It's the mangler. Running by itself. In the middle of the night."

They sat for a moment in silence, feeling the fear crawl up their legs.

Hunton said, "All right. Let's do it."

They got out and walked to the building, the sound of the mangler growing louder. As Hunton put the key into the lock of the service door, he thought that the machine did sound alive—as if it were breathing in great hot gasps and speaking to itself in hissing, sardonic whispers.

"All of a sudden I'm glad I'm with a cop," Jackson said. He shifted the brown bag he held from one arm to the other. Inside was a small jelly jar filled with holy water wrapped in waxed paper, and a Gideon Bible.

They stepped inside and Hunton snapped up the light switches by the door. The fluorescents flickered into cold life. At the same instant the mangler shut off.

A membrane of steam hung over its rollers. It waited for them in its new ominous silence.

"God, it's an ugly thing," Jackson whispered.

"Come on," Hunton said. "Before we lose our nerve."

They walked over to it. The safety bar was in its down position over the belt which fed the machine.

Hunton put out a hand. "Close enough, Mark. Give me the stuff and tell me what to do."

"But—"

"No argument."

Jackson handed him the bag and Hunton put it on the sheet table in front of the machine. He gave Jackson the Bible.

"I'm going to read," Jackson said. "When I point at you, sprinkle the holy water on the machine with your fingers. You say: In the name of

the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, get thee from this place, thou unclean. Got it?"

"Yes."

"The second time I point, break the wafer and repeat the incantation again."

"How will we know if it's working?"

"You'll know. The thing is apt to break every window in the place getting out. If it doesn't work the first time, we keep doing it until it does."

"I'm scared green," Hunton said.

"As a matter of fact, so am I."

"If we're wrong about the hand of glory—"

"We're not," Jackson said. "Here we go."

He began. His voice filled the empty laundry with spectral echoes. "Turnest not thou aside to idols, nor make molten gods for yourself. I am the Lord thy God ..." The words fell like stones into a silence that had suddenly become filled with a creeping, tomblike cold. The mangler remained still and silent under the fluorescents, and to Hunton it still seemed to grin.

"... and the land will vomit you out for having defiled it, as it vomited out nations before you." Jackson looked up, his face strained, and pointed.

Hunton sprinkled holy water across the feeder belt.

There was a sudden, gnashing scream of tortured metal. Smoke rose from the canvas belts where the holy water had touched and took on writhing, red-tinged shapes. The mangler suddenly jerked into life.

“We’ve got it!” Jackson cried above the rising clamor. “It’s on the run!”

He began to read again, his voice rising over the sound of the machinery. He pointed to Hunton again, and Hunton sprinkled some of the host. As he did so he was suddenly swept with a bone-freezing terror, a sudden vivid feeling that it had gone wrong, that the machine had called their bluff—and was the stronger.

Jackson’s voice was still rising, approaching climax.

Sparks began to jump across the arc between the main motor and the secondary; the smell of ozone filled the air, like the copper smell of hot blood. Now the main motor was smoking; the mangler was running at an insane, blurred speed: a finger touched to the central belt would have caused the whole body to be hauled in and turned to a bloody rag in the space of five seconds. The concrete beneath their feet trembled and thrummed.

A main bearing blew with a searing flash of purple light, filling the chill air with the smell of thunderstorms, and still the mangler ran, faster and faster, belts and rollers and cogs moving at a speed that made them seem to blend and merge, change, melt, transmute—

Hunton, who had been standing almost hypnotized, suddenly took a step backward. “Get away!” he screamed over the blaring racket.

“We’ve almost got it!” Jackson yelled back. “Why—”

There was a sudden indescribable ripping noise and a fissure in the concrete floor suddenly raced toward them and past, widening. Chips of ancient cement flew up in a starburst.

Jackson looked at the mangler and screamed.

It was trying to pull itself out of the concrete, like a dinosaur trying to escape a tar pit. And it wasn’t precisely an ironer anymore. It was still changing, melting. The 550-volt cable fell, spitting blue fire, into

the rollers and was chewed away. For a moment two fireballs glared at them like lambent eyes, eyes filled with a great and cold hunger.

Another fault line tore open. The mangler leaned toward them, within an ace of being free of the concrete moorings that held it. It leered at them; the safety bar had slammed up and what Hunton saw was a gaping, hungry mouth filled with steam.

They turned to run and another fissure opened at their feet. Behind them, a great screaming roar as the thing came free. Hunton leaped over, but Jackson stumbled and fell sprawling.

Hunton turned to help and a huge, amorphous shadow fell over him, blocking the fluorescents.

It stood over Jackson, who lay on his back, staring up in a silent rictus of terror—the perfect sacrifice. Hunton had only a confused impression of something black and moving that bulked to a tremendous height above them both, something with glaring electric eyes the size of footballs, an open mouth with a moving canvas tongue.

He ran; Jackson's dying scream followed him.

When Roger Martin finally got out of bed to answer the doorbell, he was still only a third awake; but when Hunton reeled in, shock slapped him fully into the world with a rough hand.

Hunton's eyes bulged madly from his head, and his hands were claws as he scratched at the front of Martin's robe. There was a small oozing cut on his cheek and his face was splashed with dirty gray specks of powdered cement.

His hair had gone dead white.

"Help me ... for Jesus' sake, help me. Mark is dead. Jackson is dead."

“Slow down,” Martin said. “Come in the living room.”

Hunton followed him, making a thick whining noise in his throat, like a dog.

Martin poured him a two-ounce knock of Jim Beam and Hunton held the glass in both hands, downing the raw liquor in a choked gulp. The glass fell unheeded to the carpet and his hands, like wandering ghosts, sought Martin’s lapels again.

“The mangler killed Mark Jackson. It ... it ... oh God, it might get out! We can’t let it get out! We can’t ... we ... oh—” He began to scream, a crazy, whooping sound that rose and fell in jagged cycles.

Martin tried to hand him another drink but Hunton knocked it aside. “We have to burn it,” he said. “Burn it before it can get out. Oh, what if it gets out? Oh Jesus, what if—” His eyes suddenly flickered, glazed, rolled up to show the whites, and he fell to the carpet in a stonelike faint.

Mrs. Martin was in the doorway, clutching her robe to her throat. “Who is he, Rog? Is he crazy? I thought—” She shuddered.

“I don’t think he’s crazy.” She was suddenly frightened by the sick shadow of fear on her husband’s face. “God, I hope he came quick enough.”

He turned to the telephone, picked up the receiver, froze.

There was a faint, swelling noise from the east of the house, the way that Hunton had come. A steady, grinding clatter, growing louder. The living-room window stood half open and now Martin caught a dark smell on the breeze. An odor of ozone ... or blood.

He stood with his hand on the useless telephone as it grew louder, louder, gnashing and fuming, something in the streets that was hot and steaming. The blood stench filled the room.

His hand dropped from the telephone.

It was already out.

MORNING DELIVERIES (Milkman #1)

Stephen King

The dawn washed slowly down Culver Street.

To anyone awake inside, the night was still black, but dawn had actually been tiptoeing around for almost half an hour. In the big maple on the corner of Culver and Balfour Avenue, a red squirrel blinked and turned its insomniac's stare on the sleeping houses. Halfway down the block a sparrow alighted in the Mackenzies' birdbath and fluttered pearly drops about itself. An ant bumbled along the gutter and happened upon a tiny crumb of chocolate in a discarded candy wrapper.

The night breeze that had rustled leaves and billowed curtains now packed up. The maple on the corner gave a last rusty shiver and was still, waiting for the full overture that would follow this quiet prologue.

A band of faint light tinged the eastern sky. The darksome whippoorwill went off duty and the chickadees came to tentative life, still hesitant, as if afraid to greet the day on their own.

The squirrel disappeared into a puckered hole in the fork of the maple.

The sparrow fluttered to the lip of the birdbath and paused.

The ant also paused over his treasure like a librarian ruminating over a folio edition.

Culver Street trembled silently on the sunlit edge of the planet—that moving straightedge astronomers call the terminator.

A sound grew quietly out of the silence, swelling unobtrusively until it seemed it had always been there, hidden under the greater noises of the night so lately passed. It grew, took on clarity, and became the decorously muffled motor of a milk truck.

It turned from Balfour onto Culver. It was a fine, beigecolored truck with red lettering on the sides. The squirrel popped out of the puckered mouth of its hole like a tongue, checked on the truck, and then spied a likely-looking bit of nest fodder. It hurried down the trunk headfirst after it. The sparrow took wing. The ant took what chocolate it could manage and headed for its hill.

The chickadees began to sing more loudly.

On the next block, a dog barked.

The letters on the sides of the milk truck read: CRAMER'S DAIRY. There was a picture of a bottle of milk, and below that: MORNING DELIVERIES OUR SPECIALTY!

The milkman wore a blue-gray uniform and a cocked hat. Written over the pocket in gold thread was a name: SPIKE. He was whistling over the comfortable rattle of bottles in ice behind him.

He pulled the truck in to the curb at the Mackenzies' house, took his milk case from the floor beside him, and swung out onto the sidewalk. He paused for a moment to sniff the air, fresh and new and infinitely mysterious, and then he strode strongly up the walk to the door.

A small square of white paper was held to the mailbox by a magnet that looked like a tomato. Spike read what was written there closely and slowly, as one might read a message he had found in an old bottle crusted with salt.

1 qt. milk

1 econ cream

1 orange juice

Thanks

Nella M.

Spike the milkman looked at his hand case thoughtfully, set it down, and from it produced the milk and cream. He inspected the sheet again, lifted the tomato-magnet to make sure he had not missed a period, comma, or dash which would change the complexion of things, nodded, replaced the magnet, picked up his case, and went back to the truck.

The back of the milk truck was damp and black and cool. There was a sunken, buggy smell in its air. It mixed uneasily with the smell of dairy products. The orange juice was behind the deadly nightshade. He pulled a carton out of the ice, nodded again, and went back up the walk. He put the carton of juice down with the milk and cream and went back to his truck.

Not too far away, the five-o'clock whistle blew at the industrial laundry where Spike's old friend Rocky worked. He thought of Rocky starting up his laundry wheels in the steamy, gasping heat, and smiled. Perhaps he would see Rocky later. Perhaps tonight ... when deliveries were done.

Spike started the truck and drove on. A little transistor radio hung on an imitation leather strap from a bloodstained meathook which curved down from the cab's ceiling. He turned it on and quiet music counterpointed his engine as he drove up to the McCarthy house.

Mrs. McCarthy's note was where it always was, wedged into the letter slot. It was brief and to the point:Chocolate

Spike took out his pen, scrawled Delivery Made across it, and pushed it through the letter slot. Then he went back to the truck. The chocolate milk was stacked in two coolers at the very back, handy to the rear doors, because it was a very big seller in June. The milkman glanced at the coolers, then reached over them and took one of the empty chocolate milk cartons he kept in the far corner. The carton was of course brown, and a happy youngster cavorted above printed matter which informed the consumer that this was CRAMER'S DAIRY DRINK WHOLESOME AND DELICIOUS SERVE HOT OR COLD KIDS LOVE IT!

He set the empty carton on top of a case of milk. Then he brushed aside ice-chips until he could see the mayonnaise jar. He grabbed it and looked inside. The tarantula moved, but sluggishly. The cold had doped it. Spike unscrewed the lid of the jar and tipped it over the opened carton. The tarantula made a feeble effort to scramble back up the slick glass side of the jar, and succeeded not at all. It fell into the empty chocolate milk carton with a fat plop. The milkman carefully reclosed the carton, put it in his carrier, and dashed up the McCarthys' walk. Spiders were his favorite, and spiders were his best, even if he did say so himself. A day when he could deliver a spider was a happy day for Spike.

As he made his way slowly up Culver, the symphony of the dawn continued. The pearly band in the east gave way to a deepening flush of pink, first barely discernible, then rapidly brightening to a scarlet which began almost immediately to fade toward summer blue. The first rays of sunlight, pretty as a drawing in a child's Sunday-school workbook, now waited in the wings.

At the Webbers' house Spike left a bottle of all-purpose cream filled with an acid gel. At the Jenners' he left five quarts of milk. Growing boys there. He had never seen them, but there was a treehouse out back, and sometimes there were bikes and ball bats left in the yard. At the Collinses' two quarts of milk and a carton of yogurt. At Miss Ordway's a carton of eggnog that had been spiked with belladonna.

Down the block a door slammed. Mr. Webber, who had to go all the way into the city, opened the slatted carport door and went inside, swinging his briefcase. The milkman waited for the waspy sound of his little Saab starting up and smiled when he heard it. Variety is the spice of life, Spike's mother—God rest her soul!—had been fond of saying, but we are Irish, and the Irish prefer to take their 'taters plain. Be regular in all ways, Spike, and you will be happy. And it was just as true as could be, he had found as he rolled down the road of life in his neat beige milk truck.

Only three houses left now.

At the Kincaids' he found a note which read "Nothing today, thanks" and left a capped milk bottle which looked empty but contained a deadly cyanide gas. At the Walkers' he left two quarts of milk and a pint of whipping cream.

By the time he reached the Mertons' at the end of the block, rays of sunlight were shining through the trees and dappling the faded hopscotch grid on the sidewalk which passed the Mertons' yard.

Spike bent, picked up what looked like a pretty damned good hopscotching rock—flat on one side—and tossed it. The pebble landed on a line. He shook his head, grinned, and went up the walk, whistling.

The light breeze brought him the smell of industrial laundry soap, making him think again of Rocky. He was surer all the time that he would be seeing Rocky. Tonight.

Here the note was pinned in the Mertons' newspaper holder:Cancel

Spike opened the door and went in.

The house was crypt-cold and without furniture. Barren it was, stripped to the walls. Even the stove in the kitchen was gone; there was a brighter square of linoleum where it had stood.

In the living room, every scrap of wallpaper had been removed from the walls. The globe was gone from the overhead light. The bulb had been fused black. A huge splotch of drying blood covered part of one wall. It looked like a psychiatrist's inkblot. In the center of it a crater had been gouged deeply into the plaster. There was a matted clump of hair in this crater, and a few splinters of bone.

The milkman nodded, went back out, and stood on the porch for a moment. It would be a fine day. The sky was already bluer than a baby's eye, and patched with guileless little fair-weather clouds ... the ones baseball players call "angels."

He pulled the note from the newspaper holder and crumpled it into a ball. He put it in the left front pocket of his white milkman's pants.

He went back to his truck, kicking the stone from the hopscotch grid into the gutter. The milk truck rattled around the corner and was gone.

The day brightened.

A boy banged out of a house, grinned up at the sky, and brought in the milk.

BIG WHEELS: A TALE OF THE LAUNDRY GAME
(Milkman #2)

Stephen King

Rocky and Leo, both drunk as the last lords of creation, cruised slowly down Culver Street and then out along Balfour Avenue toward Crescent. They were ensconced in Rocky's 1957 Chrysler. Between them, balanced with drunken care on the monstrous hump of the Chrysler's driveshaft, sat a case of Iron City beer. It was their second case of the evening—the evening had actually begun at four in the afternoon, which was punch-out time at the laundry.

“Shit on a shingle!” Rocky said, stopping at the red blinker-light above the intersection of Balfour Avenue and Highway 99. He did not look for traffic in either direction, but did cast a sly glance behind them. A half-full can of I.C., emblazoned with a colorful picture of Terry Bradshaw, rested against his crotch. He took a swig and then turned left on 99. The universal joint made a thick grunting sound as they started chuggingly off in second gear. The Chrysler had lost its first gear some two months ago.

“Gimme a shingle and I'll shit on it,” Leo said obligingly.

“What time is it?”

Leo held his watch up until it was almost touching the tip of his cigarette and then puffed madly until he could get a reading. “Almost eight.”

“Shit on a shingle!” They passed a sign which read PITTSBURGH 44.

“Nobody is going to inspect this here Detroit honey,” Leo said. “Nobody in his right mind, at least.”

Rocky fetched third gear. The universal moaned to itself, and the Chrysler began to have the automotive equivalent of a petit mal epileptic seizure. The spasm eventually passed, and the speedometer climbed tiredly to forty. It hung there precariously.

When they reached the intersection of Highway 99 and Devon Stream Road (Devon Stream formed the border between the townships of Crescent and Devon for some eight miles), Rocky turned onto the latter almost upon a whim—although perhaps even then some memory of ole Stiff Socks had begun to stir deep down in what passed for Rocky’s subconscious.

He and Leo had been driving more or less at random since leaving work. It was the last day of June, and the inspection sticker on Rocky’s Chrysler would become invalid at exactly 12:01 A.M. tomorrow. Four hours from right now. Less than four hours from right now. Rocky found this eventuality almost too painful to contemplate, and Leo didn’t care. It was not his car. Also, he had drunk enough Iron City beer to reach a state of deep cerebral paralysis.

Devon Road wound through the only heavily wooded area of Crescent. Great bunches of elms and oaks crowded in on both sides, lush and alive and full of moving shadows as night began to close over southwestern Pennsylvania. The area was known, in fact, as The Devon Woods. It had attained capital-letter status after the torture-murder of a young girl and her boyfriend in 1968. The couple had been parking out here and were found in the boyfriend’s 1959 Mercury. The Merc had real leather seats and a large chrome hood ornament. The occupants had been found in the back seat. Also in the front seat, the trunk, and the glove compartment. The killer had never been found.

“Jughumper better not stall out here,” Rocky said. “We’re ninety miles from noplac.”

“Bunk.” This interesting word had risen lately to the top forty of Leo’s vocabulary. “There’s town, right over there.”

Rocky sighed and sipped from his can of beer. The glow was not really town, but the kid was close enough to make argument worthless. It was the new shopping center. Those high-intensity arc sodium lights really threw a glare. While looking in that direction, Rocky drove the car over to the left side of the road, looped back,

almost went into the right-hand ditch, and finally got back in his lane again.

“Whoops,” he said.

Leo burped and gurgled.

They had been working together at the New Adams Laundry since September, when Leo had been hired as Rocky’s washroom helper. Leo was a rodent-featured young man of twenty-two who looked as if he might have quite a lot of jail-time in his future. He claimed he was saving twenty dollars a week from his pay to buy a used Kawasaki motorcycle. He said he was going west on this bike when cold weather came. Leo had held a grand total of twelve jobs since he and the world of academics had parted company at the minimum age of sixteen. He liked the laundry fine. Rocky was teaching him the various wash cycles, and Leo believed he was finally Learning a Skill which would come in handy when he reached Flagstaff.

Rocky, an older hand, had been at New Adams for fourteen years. His hands, ghostlike and bleached as he handled the steering wheel, proved it. He had done a four-month bit for carrying a concealed weapon in 1970. His wife, then puffily pregnant with their third child, announced 1) that it was not his, Rocky’s, child but the milkman’s child; and 2) that she wanted a divorce, on grounds of mental cruelty.

Two things about this situation had driven Rocky to carry a concealed weapon: 1) he had been cuckolded; and 2) he had been cuckolded by the fa chrissakes milkman, a trout-eyed long-haired piece of work named Spike Milligan. Spike drove for Cramer’s Dairy.

The milkman, for God’s sweet sake! The milkman, and could you die? Could you just fucking flop down into the gutter and die? Even to Rocky, who had never progressed much beyond reading the Fleeer’s Funnies that came wrapped around the bubble gum he chewed indefatigably at work, the situation had sonorous classical overtones.

As a result, he had duly informed his wife of two facts: 1) no divorce; and 2) he was going to let a large amount of daylight into Spike Milligan. He had purchased a .32-caliber pistol some ten years ago, which he used occasionally to shoot at bottles, tin cans, and small dogs. He left his house on Oak Street that morning and headed for the dairy, hoping to catch Spike when he finished his morning deliveries.

Rocky stopped at the Four Corners Tavern on the way to have a few beers—six, eight, maybe twenty. It was hard to remember. While he was drinking, his wife called the cops. They were waiting for him on the corner of Oak and Balfour. Rocky was searched, and one of the cops plucked the .32 from his waistband.

“I think you are going away for a while, my friend,” the cop who found the gun told him, and that was just what Rocky did. He spent the next four months washing sheets and pillowcases for the State of Pennsylvania. During this period his wife got a Nevada divorce, and when Rocky got out of the slam she was living with Spike Milligan in a Dakin Street apartment house with a pink flamingo on the front lawn. In addition to his two older children (Rocky still more or less assumed they were his), the couple were now possessed of an infant who was every bit as trout-eyed as his daddy. They were also possessed of fifteen dollars a week in alimony.

“Rocky, I think I’m gettin carsick,” Leo said. “Couldn’t we just pull over and drink?”

“I gotta get a sticker on my wheels,” Rocky said. “This is important. A man’s no good without his wheels.”

“Nobody in his right mind is gonna inspect this—I told you that. It ain’t got no turn signals.”

“They blink if I step on the brake at the same time, and anybody who don’t step on his brakes when he’s makin a turn is lookin to do a rollover.”

“Window on this side’s cracked.”

“I’ll roll it down.”

“What if the inspectionist asks you to roll it up so he can check it?”

“I’ll burn that bridge when I come to it,” Rocky said coolly. He tossed his beer can out and got a refill. This new one had Franco Harris on it. Apparently the Iron City company was playing the Steelers’ Greatest Hits this summer. He popped the top. Beer splurged.

“Wish I had a woman,” Leo said, looking into the dark. He smiled strangely.

“If you had a woman, you’d never get out west. What a woman does is keep a man from getting any further west. That’s how they operate. That is their mission. Dint you tell me you wanted to go out west?”

“Yeah, and I’m going, too.”

“You’ll never go,” Rocky said. “Pretty soon you’ll have a woman. Next you’ll have abalone. Alimony. You know. Women always lead up to alimony. Cars are better. Stick to cars.”

“Pretty hard to screw a car.”

“You’d be surprised,” Rocky said, and giggled.

The woods had begun to straggle away into new dwellings. Lights twinkled up on the left and Rocky suddenly slammed on the brakes. The brake lights and turn signals both went on at once; it was a home wiring job. Leo lurched forward, spilling beer on the seat. “What? What?”

“Look,” Rocky said. “I think I know that fella.”

There was a tumorous, ramshackle garage and Citgo filling station on the left side of the road. The sign in front said:BOB’S GAS &

SERVICE

BOB DRISCOLL, PROP.

FRONT END ALIGNMENT OUR SPECIALTY

DEFEND YOUR GOD-GIVEN RIGHT TO BEAR ARMS!

And, at the very bottom: STATE INSPECTION STATION #72

“Nobody in his right mind—” Leo began again.

“It’s Bobby Driscoll!” Rocky cried. “Me an Bobby Driscoll went to school together! We got it knocked! Bet your fur!”

He pulled in unevenly, headlights illuminating the open door of the garage bay. He popped the clutch and roared toward it. A stoop-shouldered man in a green coverall ran out, making frantic stopping gestures.

“Thass Bob!” Rocky yelled exultantly. “Heyyy, Stiff Socks!”

They ran into the side of the garage. The Chrysler had another seizure, grand mal this time. A small yellow flame appeared at the end of the sagging tailpipe, followed by a puff of blue smoke. The car stalled gratefully. Leo lurched forward, spilling more beer. Rocky keyed the engine and backed off for another try.

Bob Driscoll ran over, profanity spilling out of his mouth in colorful streamers. He was waving his arms. “—the hell you think you’re doing, you goddam sonofa—”

“Bobby!” Rocky yelled, his delight nearly orgasmic. “Hey Stiff Socks! Whatchoo say, buddy?”

Bob peered in through Rocky’s window. He had a twisted, tired face that was mostly hidden in the shadow thrown by the bill of his cap. “Who called me Stiff Socks?”

“Me!” Rocky fairly screamed. “It’s me, you ole finger-diddler! It’s your old buddy!”

“Who in the hell—”

“Johnny Rockwell! You gone blind as well as foolish?”

Cautiously: “Rocky?”

“Yeah, you sombitch!”

“Christ Jesus.” Slow, unwilling pleasure seeped across Bob’s face. “I ain’t seen you since ... well ... since the Catamounts game, anyway —”

“Shoosh! Wa’n’t that some hot ticket?” Rocky slapped his thigh, sending up a gusher of Iron City. Leo burped.

“Sure it was. Only time we ever won our class. Even then we couldn’t seem to win the championship. Say, you beat hell out of the side of my garage, Rocky. You—”

“Yeah, same ole Stiff Socks. Same old guy. You ain’t changed even a hair.” Rocky belatedly peeked as far under the visor of the baseball cap as he could see, hoping this was true. It appeared, however, that ole Stiff Socks had gone either partially or completely bald. “Jesus! Ain’t it somethin, runnin into you like this! Did you finally marry Marcy Drew?”

“Hell, yeah. Back in ‘70. Where were you?”

“Jail, most probably. Lissen, muhfuh, can you inspect this baby?”

Caution again: “You mean your car?”

Rocky cackled. “No—my ole hogleg! Sure, my car! Canya?”

Bob opened his mouth to say no.

“This here’s an old friend of mine. Leo Edwards. Leo, wantcha to meet the only basketball player from Crescent High who dint change his sweatsocks for four years.”

“Pleesdameetcha,” Leo said, doing his duty just as his mother had instructed on one of the occasions when that lady was sober.

Rocky cackled. “Want a beer, Stiffy?”

Bob opened his mouth to say no.

“Here’s the little crab-catcher!” Rocky exclaimed. He popped the top. The beer, crazied up by the headlong run into the side of Bob Driscoll’s garage, boiled over the top and down Rocky’s wrist. Rocky shoved it into Bob’s hand. Bob sipped quickly, to keep his own hand from being flooded.

“Rocky, we close at—”

“Just a second, just a second, lemme back up. I got somethin crazy here.”

Rocky dragged the gearshift lever up into reverse, popped the clutch, skinned a gas pump, and then drove the Chrysler jerkily inside. He was out in a minute, shaking Bob’s free hand like a politician. Bob looked dazed. Leo sat in the car, tipping a fresh beer. He was also farting. A lot of beer always made him fart.

“Hey!” Rocky said, staggering around a pile of rusty hubcaps. “You member Diana Rucklehouse?”

“Sure do,” Bob said. An unwilling grin came to his mouth. “She was the one with the—” He cupped his hands in front of his chest.

Rocky howled. “Thass her! You got it, muhfuh! She still in town?”

“I think she moved to—”

“Figures,” Rocky said. “The ones who don’t stay always move. You can put a sticker on this pig, cantcha?”

“Well, my wife said she’d wait supper and we close at—”

“Jesus, it’d sure put a help on me if you could. I’d sure appreciate it. I could do some personal laundry for your wife. Thass what I do. Wash. At New Adams.”

“And I am learning,” Leo said, and farted again.

“Wash her dainties, whatever you want. Whatchoo say, Bobby?”

“Well, I s’pose I could look her over.”

“Sure,” Rocky said, clapping Bob on the back and winking at Leo. “Same ole Stiff Socks. What a guy!”

“Yeah,” Bob said, sighing. He pulled on his beer, his oily fingers mostly obscuring Mean Joe Green’s face. “You beat hell out of your bumper, Rocky.”

“Give it some class. Goddam car needs some class. But it’s one big motherfuckin set of wheels, you know what I mean?”

“Yeah, I guess—”

“Hey! Wantcha to meet the guy I work with! Leo, this is the only basketball player from—”

“You introduced us already,” Bob said with a soft, despairing smile.

“Howdy doody,” Leo said. He fumbled for another can of Iron City. Silvery lines like railroad tracks glimpsed at high noon on a hot clear day were beginning to trace their way across his field of vision.

“—Crescent High who dint change his—”

“Want to show me your headlights, Rocky?” Bob asked.

“Sure. Great lights. Halogen or nitrogen or some fucking gen. They got class. Pop those little crab-catchers right the fuck on, Leo.”

Leo turned on the windshield wipers.

“That’s good,” Bob said patiently. He took a big swallow of beer. “Now how about the lights?”

Leo popped on the headlights.

“High beam?”

Leo tapped for the dimmer switch with his left foot. He was pretty sure it was down there someplace, and finally he happened upon it. The high beams threw Rocky and Bob into sharp relief, like exhibits in a police lineup.

“Fucking nitrogen headlights, what’d I tell you?” Rocky cried, and then cackled. “Goddam, Bobby! Seein you is better than gettin a check in the mail!”

“How about the turn signals?” Bob asked.

Leo smiled vaguely at Bob and did nothing.

“Better let me do it,” Rocky said. He bumped his head a good one as he got in behind the wheel. “The kid don’t feel too good, I don’t think.” He cramped down on the brake at the same time he flicked up the turn-blinker.

“Okay,” Bob said, “but does it work without the brake?”

“Does it say anyplace in the motor-vehicle-inspection manual that it hasta?” Rocky asked craftily.

Bob sighed. His wife was waiting dinner. His wife had large floppy breasts and blond hair that was black at the roots. His wife was partial to Donuts by the Dozen, a product sold at the local Giant Eagle store. When his wife came to the garage on Thursday nights for her bingo money her hair was usually done up in large green rollers under a green chiffon scarf. This made her head look like a futuristic AM/FM radio. Once, near three in the morning, he had wakened and looked at her slack paper face in the soulless

graveyard glare of the streetlight outside their bedroom window. He had thought how easy it could be—just jackknife over on top of her, just drive a knee into her gut so she would lose her air and be unable to scream, just screw both hands around her neck. Then just put her in the tub and whack her into prime cuts and mail her away someplace to Robert Driscoll, c/o General Delivery. Any old place. Lima, Indiana. North Pole, New Hampshire. Intercourse, Pennsylvania. Kunkle, Iowa. Any old place. It could be done. God knew it had been done in the past.

“No,” he told Rocky, “I guess it doesn’t say anyplace in the regs that they have to work on their own. Exactly. In so many words.” He upended the can and the rest of the beer gurgled down his throat. It was warm in the garage and he had had no supper. He could feel the beer rise immediately into his mind.

“Hey, Stiff Socks just came up empty!” Rocky said. “Hand up a brew, Leo.”

“No, Rocky, I really ...”

Leo, who was seeing none too well, finally happened on a can. “Want a wide receiver?” he asked, and passed the can to Rocky. Rocky handed it to Bob, whose demurrals petered out as he held the can’s cold actuality in his hand. It bore the smiling face of Lynn Swann. He opened it. Leo farted homily to close the transaction.

All of them drank from football-player cans for a moment.

“Horn work?” Bob finally asked, breaking the silence apologetically.

“Sure.” Rocky hit the ring with his elbow. It emitted a feeble squeak. “Battery’s a little low, though.”

They drank in silence.

“That goddam rat was as big as a cocker spaniel!” Leo exclaimed.

“Kid’s carrying quite a load,” Rocky explained.

Bob thought about it. “Yuh,” he said.

This struck Rocky’s funnybone and he cackled through a mouthful of beer. A little trickled out of his nose, and this made Bob laugh. It did Rocky good to hear him, because Bob had looked like one sad sack when they had rolled in.

They drank in silence awhile more.

“Diana Rucklehouse,” Bob said meditatively.

Rocky sniggered.

Bob chuckled and held his hands out in front of his chest.

Rocky laughed and held his own out even further.

Bob guffawed. “You member that picture of Ursula Andress that Tinker Johnson pasted on ole lady Freemantle’s bulletin board?”

Rocky howled. “And he drewed on those two big old jahoobies—”

“—and she just about had a heart-attack—”

“You two can laugh,” Leo said morosely, and farted.

Bob blinked at him. “Huh?”

“Laugh,” Leo said. “I said you two can laugh. Neither of you has got a hole in your back.”

“Don’t lissen to him,” Rocky said (a trifle uneasily). “Kid’s got a skinful.”

“You got a hole in your back?” Bob asked Leo.

“The laundry,” Leo said, smiling. “We got these big washers, see? Only we call ‘em wheels. They’re laundry wheels. That’s why we call ‘em wheels. I load ‘em, I pull ‘em, I load ‘em again. Put the shit in dirty, take the shit out clean. That’s what I do, and I do it with class.” He looked at Bob with insane confidence. “Got a hole in my back from doing it, though.”

“Yeah?” Bob was looking at Leo with fascination. Rocky shifted uneasily.

“There’s a hole in the roof,” Leo said. “Right over the third wheel. They’re round, see, so we call ‘em wheels. When it rains, the water comes down. Drop drop drop. Each drop hits me—whap!—in the back. Now I got a hole there. Like this.” He made a shallow curve with one hand. “Wanna see?”

“He don’t want to see any such deformity!” Rocky shouted. “We’re talkin about old times here and there ain’t no effing hole in your back anyway!”

“I wanna see it,” Bob said.

“They’re round so we call it the laundry,” Leo said.

Rocky smiled and clapped Leo on the shoulder. “No more of this talk or you could be walking home, my good little buddy. Now why don’t you hand me up my namesake if there’s one left?”

Leo peered down into the carton of beer, and after a while he handed up a can with Rocky Blier on it.

“Atta way to go!” Rocky said, cheerful again.

The entire case was gone an hour later, and Rocky sent Leo stumbling up the road to Pauline’s Superette for more. Leo’s eyes were ferret-red by this time, and his shirt had come untucked. He was trying with myopic concentration to get his Camels out of his

rolled-up shirt sleeve. Bob was in the bathroom, urinating and singing the school song.

“Doan wanna walk up there,” Leo muttered.

“Yeah, but you’re too fucking drunk to drive.”

Leo walked in a drunken semicircle, still trying to coax his cigarettes out of his shirt sleeve. ” ‘Z dark. And cold.”

“You wanna get a sticker on that car or not?” Rocky hissed at him. He had begun to see weird things at the edges of his vision. The most persistent was a huge bug wrapped in spider-silk in the far corner.

Leo looked at him with his scarlet eyes. “Ain’t my car,” he said with bogus cunning.

“And you’ll never ride in it again, neither, if you don’t go and get that beer,” Rocky said. He glanced fearfully at the dead bug in the corner. “You just try me and see if I’m kidding.”

“Okay,” Leo whined. “Okay, you don’t have to get pissy about it.”

He walked off the road twice on his way up to the corner and once on the way back. When he finally achieved the warmth and light of the garage again, both of them were singing the school song. Bob had managed, by hook or by crook, to get the Chrysler up on the lift. He was wandering around underneath it, peering at the rusty exhaust system.

“There’s some holes in your stray’ pipe,” he said.

“Ain no stray pipes under there,” Rocky said. They both found this spit-sprayingly funny.

“Beer’s here!” Leo announced, put the case down, sat on a wheel rim, and fell immediately into a half-doze. He had swallowed three himself on the way back to lighten the load.

Rocky handed Bob a beer and held one himself.

“Race? Just like ole times?”

“Sure,” Bob said. He smiled tightly. In his mind’s eye he could see himself in the cockpit of a low-to-the-ground, streamlined Formula One racer, one hand resting cockily on the wheel as he waited for the drop of the flag, the other touching his lucky piece—the hood ornament from a ‘59 Mercury. He had forgotten Rocky’s straight pipe and his blowsy wife with her transistorized hair curlers.

They opened their beers and chugged them. It was a dead heat; both dropped their cans to the cracked concrete and raised their middle fingers at the same time. Their belches echoed off the walls like rifle shots.

“Just like ole times,” Bob said, sounding forlorn. “Nothing’s just like ole times, Rocky.”

“I know it,” Rocky agreed. He struggled for a deep, luminous thought and found it. “We’re gettin older by the day, Stiffy.”

Bob sighed and belched again. Leo farted in the corner and began to hum “Get Off My Cloud.”

“Try again?” Rocky asked, handing Bob another beer.

“Mi’ as well,” Bob said; “mi’ jus’ as well, Rocky m’boy”.

The case Leo had brought back was gone by midnight, and the new inspection was affixed on the left side of Rocky’s windshield at a slightly crazy angle. Rocky had made out the pertinent information himself before slapping the sticker on, working carefully to copy over the numbers from the tattered and greasy registration he had finally found in the glove compartment. He had to work carefully, because he was seeing triple. Bob sat cross-legged on the floor like a yoga master, a half-empty can of I.C. in front of him. He was staring fixedly at nothing.

“Well, you sure saved my life, Bob,” Rocky said. He kicked Leo in the ribs to wake him up. Leo grunted and whoofed. His lids flickered briefly, closed, then flew open wide when Rocky footed him again.

“We home yet, Rocky? We—”

“You just shake her easy, Bobby,” Rocky cried cheerfully. He hooked his fingers into Leo’s armpit and yanked. Leo came to his feet, screaming. Rocky half-carried him around the Chrysler and shoved him into the passenger seat. “We’ll stop back and do her again sometime.”

“Those were the days,” Bob said. He had grown wet-eyed. “Since then everything just gets worse and worse, you know it?”

“I know it,” Rocky said. “Everything has been refitted and beshitted. But you just keep your thumb on it, and don’t do anything I wouldn’t d—”

“My wife ain’t laid me in a year and a half,” Bob said, but the words were blanketed by the coughing misfire of Rocky’s engine. Bob got to his feet and watched the Chrysler back out of the bay, taking a little wood from the left side of the door.

Leo hung out the window, smiling like an idiot saint. “Come by the laundry sometime, skinner. I’ll show you the hole in my back. I’ll show you my wheels! I’ll show y—” Rocky’s arm suddenly shot out like a vaudeville hook and pulled him into the dimness.

“Bye, fella!” Rocky yelled.

The Chrysler did a drunken slalom around the three gaspump islands and bucketed off into the night. Bob watched until the taillights were only flickerflies and then walked carefully back inside the garage. On his cluttered workbench was a chrome ornament from some old car. He began to play with it, and soon he was crying cheap tears for the old days. Later, some time after three in the

morning, he strangled his wife and then burned down the house to make it look like an accident.

“Jesus,” Rocky said to Leo as Bob’s garage shrank to a point of white light behind them. “How about that? Ole Stiffy.” Rocky had reached that stage of drunkenness where every part of himself seemed gone except for a tiny, glowing coal of sobriety somewhere deep in the middle of his mind.

Leo did not reply. In the pale green light thrown by the dashboard instruments, he looked like the dormouse at Alice’s tea party.

“He was really bombarded,” Rocky went on. He drove on the left side of the road for a while and then the Chrysler wandered back. “Good thing for you—he prob’ly won’t remember what you tole him. Another time it could be different. How many times do I have to tell you? You got to shut up about this idea that you got a fucking hole in your back.”

“You know I got a hole in my back.”

“Well, so what?”

“It’s my hole, that’s so what. And I’ll talk about my hole whenever I—”

He looked around suddenly.

“Truck behind us. Just pulled out of that side road. No lights.”

Rocky looked up into the rearview mirror. Yes, the truck was there, and its shape was distinctive. It was a milk truck. He didn’t have to read CRAMER’S DAIRY on the side to know whose it was, either.

“It’s Spike,” Rocky said fearfully. “It’s Spike Milligan! Jesus, I thought he only made morning deliveries!”

“Who?”

Rocky didn't answer. A tight, drunk grin spread over his lower face. It did not touch his eyes, which were now huge and red, like spirit lamps.

He suddenly floored the Chrysler, which belched blue oil smoke and reluctantly creaked its way up to sixty.

"Hey! You're too drunk to go this fast! You're ..." Leo paused vaguely, seeming to lose track of his message. The trees and houses raced by them, vague blurs in the graveyard of twelve-fifteen. They blew by a stop sign and flew over a large bump, leaving the road for a moment afterwards. When they came down, the low-hung muffler struck a spark on the asphalt. In the back, cans clinked and rattled. The faces of Pittsburgh Steeler players rolled back and forth, sometimes in the light, sometimes in shadow.

"I was fooling!" Leo said wildly. "There ain't no truck!"

"It's him and he kills people!" Rocky screamed. "I seen his bug back in the garage! God damn!"

They roared up Southern Hill on the wrong side of the road. A station wagon coming in the other direction skidded crazily over the gravel shoulder and down into the ditch getting out of their way. Leo looked behind him. The road was empty.

"Rocky—"

"Come and get me, Spike!" Rocky screamed. "You just come on and get me!"

The Chrysler had reached eighty, a speed which Rocky in a more sober frame of mind would not have believed possible. They came around the turn which leads onto the Johnson Flat Road, smoke spurting up from Rocky's bald tires. The Chrysler screamed into the night like a ghost, lights searching the empty road ahead.

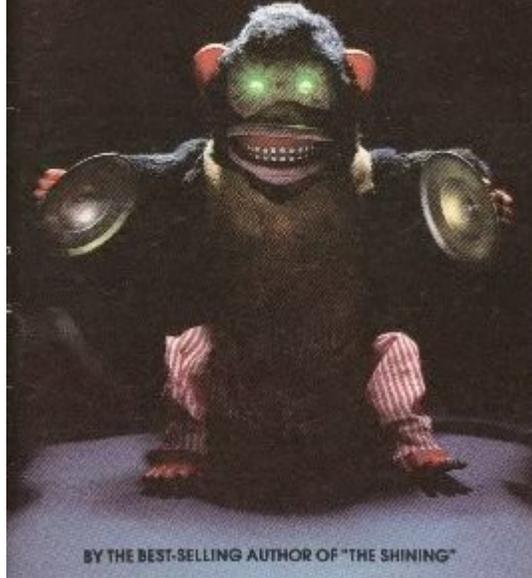
Suddenly a 1959 Mercury roared at them out of the dark, straddling the center line. Rocky screamed and threw his hands up in front of his face. Leo had just time to see the Mercury was missing its hood ornament before the crash came.

Half a mile behind, lights flickered on at a side crossing, and a milk truck with CRAMER'S DAIRY written on the side pulled out and began to move toward the pillar of flame and the twisted blackening hulks in the center of the road. It moved at a sedate speed. The transistor dangling by its strap from the meathook played rhythm and blues.

"That's it," Spike said. "Now we're going over to Bob Driscoll's house. He thinks he's got gasoline out in his garage, but I'm not sure he does. This has been one very long day, wouldn't you agree?" But when he turned around, the back of the truck was empty. Even the bug was gone.

THE MONKEY

STEPHEN KING



BY THE BEST-SELLING AUTHOR OF "THE SHINING"

THE MONKEY

Stephen King

When Hal Shelbum saw it, when his son Dennis pulled it out of a mouldering Ralston-Purina carton that had been pushed far back under one attic eave, such a feeling of horror and dismay rose in him that for one moment he thought he would scream. He put one fist to his mouth, as if to cram it back ... and then merely coughed into his fist. Neither Terry nor Dennis noticed, but Petey looked around, momentarily curious.

“Hey, neat,” Dennis said respectfully. It was a tone Hal rarely got from the boy anymore himself. Dennis was twelve.

“What is it?” Peter asked. He glanced at his father again before his eyes were dragged back to the thing his big brother had found.

“What is it, Daddy?”

“It’s a monkey, fartbrains,” Dennis said. “Haven’t you ever seen a monkey before?”

“Don’t call your brother fartbrains,” Terry said automatically, and began to examine a box of curtains. The curtains were slimy with mildew and she dropped them quickly. “Uck.”

“Can I have it, Daddy?” Petey asked. He was nine.

“What do you mean?” Dennis cried. “I found it!”

“Boys, please,” Terry said. “I’m getting a headache.”

Hal barely heard them. The monkey glimmered up at him from his older son’s hands, grinning its old familiar grin. The same grin that had haunted his nightmares as a kid, haunted them until he had—

Outside a cold gust of wind rose, and for a moment lips with no flesh blew a long note through the old, rusty gutter outside. Petey stepped closer to his father, eyes moving uneasily to the rough attic roof through which nailheads poked.

“What was that, Daddy?” he asked as the whistle died to a guttural buzz.

“Just the wind,” Hal said, still looking at the monkey. Its cymbals, crescents of brass rather than full circles in the weak light of the one naked bulb, were moveless, perhaps a foot apart, and he added automatically, “Wind can whistle, but it can’t carry a tune.” Then he realized that was a saying of Uncle Will’s, and a goose ran over his grave.

The note came again, the wind coming off Crystal Lake in a long, droning swoop and then wavering in the gutter. Half a dozen small drafts puffed cold October air into Hal’s face—God, this place was so much like the back closet of the house in Hartford that they might all have been transported thirty years back in time.

I won’t think about that.

But now of course it was all he could think about.

In the back closet where I found that goddammed monkey in that same box.

Terry had moved away to examine a wooden crate filled with knickknacks, duck-walking because the pitch of the eaves was so sharp.

“I don’t like it,” Petey said, and felt for Hal’s hand. “Dennis c’n have it if he wants. Can we go, Daddy?”

“Worried about ghosts, chickenguts?” Dennis inquired.

“Dennis, you stop it,” Terry said absently. She picked up a waferthin cup with a Chinese pattern. “This is nice. This—”

Hal saw that Dennis had found the wind-up key in the monkey’s back. Terror flew through him on dark wings.

“Don’t do that!”

It came out more sharply than he had intended, and he had snatched the monkey out of Dennis's hands before he was really aware he had done it. Dennis looked around at him, startled. Terry had also glanced back over her shoulder, and Petey looked up. For a moment they were all silent, and the wind whistled again, very low this time, like an unpleasant invitation.

"I mean, it's probably broken," Hal said.

It used to be broken ... except when it wanted not to be.

"Well, you didn't have to grab," Dennis said.

"Dennis, shut up."

Dennis blinked and for a moment looked almost uneasy. Hal hadn't spoken to him so sharply in a long time. Not since he had lost his job with National Aerodyne in California two years before and they had moved to Texas. Dennis decided not to push it ... for now. He turned back to the Ralston-Purina carton and began to root through it again, but the other stuff was nothing but junk. Broken toys bleeding springs and stuffings.

The wind was louder now, hooting instead of whistling. The attic began to creak softly, making a noise like footsteps.

"Please, Daddy?" Petey asked, only loud enough for his father to hear.

"Yeah," he said. "Terry, let's go."

"I'm not through with this—"

"I said let's go."

It was her turn to look startled.

They had taken two adjoining rooms in a motel. By ten that night the boys were asleep in their room and Terry was asleep in the adults'

room. She had taken two Valiums on the ride back from the home place in Casco. To keep her nerves from giving her a migraine. Just lately she took a lot of Valium. It had started around the time National Aerodyne had laid Hal off. For the last two years he had been working for Texas Instruments—it was \$4,000 less a year, but it was work. He told Terry they were lucky. She agreed. There were plenty of software architects drawing unemployment, he said. She agreed. The company housing in Arnette was every bit as good as the place in Fresno, he said. She agreed, but he thought her agreement to all of it was a lie.

And he was losing Dennis. He could feel the kid going, achieving a premature escape velocity, so long, Dennis, byebye stranger, it was nice sharing this train with you. Terry said she thought the boy was smoking reefer. She smelled it sometimes. You have to talk to him, Hal. And he agreed, but so far he had not.

The boys were asleep. Terry was asleep. Hal went into the bathroom and locked the door and sat down on the closed lid of the john and looked at the monkey.

He hated the way it felt, that soft brown nappy fur, worn bald in spots. He hated its grin—that monkey grins just like a nigger, Uncle Will had said once, but it didn't grin like a nigger or like anything human. Its grin was all teeth, and if you wound up the key, the lips would move, the teeth would seem to get bigger, to become vampire teeth, the lips would writhe and the cymbals would bang, stupid monkey, stupid clockwork monkey, stupid, stupid—

He dropped it. His hands were shaking and he dropped it.

The key clicked on the bathroom tile as it struck the floor. The sound seemed very loud in the stillness. It grinned at him with its murky amber eyes, doll's eyes, filled with idiot glee, its brass cymbals poised as if to strike up a march for some band from hell. On the bottom the words MADE IN HONG KONG were stamped.

“You can’t be here,” he whispered. “I threw you down the well when I was nine.”

The monkey grinned up at him.

Outside in the night, a black capful of wind shook the motel.

Hal’s brother Bill and Bill’s wife Collette met them at Uncle Will’s and Aunt Ida’s the next day. “Did it ever cross your mind that a death in the family is a really lousy way to renew the family connection?” Bill asked him with a bit of a grin. He had been named for Uncle Will. Will and Bill, champions of the rodayo, Uncle Will used to say, and ruffle Bill’s hair. It was one of his sayings ... like the wind can whistle but it can’t carry a tune. Uncle Will had died six years before, and Aunt Ida had lived on here alone, until a stroke had taken her just the previous week. Very sudden, Bill had said when he called long distance to give Hal the news. As if he could know; as if anyone could know. She had died alone.

“Yeah,” Hal said. “The thought crossed my mind.”

They looked at the place together, the home place where they had finished growing up. Their father, a merchant mariner, had simply disappeared as if from the very face of the earth when they were young; Bill claimed to remember him vaguely, but Hal had no memories of him at all. Their mother had died when Bill was ten and Hal eight. Aunt Ida had brought them here on a Greyhound bus which left from Hartford, and they had been raised here, and gone to college from here. This had been the place they were homesick for. Bill had stayed in Maine and now had a healthy law practice in Portland.

Hal saw that Petey had wandered off toward the blackberry tangles that lay on the eastern side of the house in a mad jumble. “Stay away from there, Petey,” he called.

Petey looked back, questioning. Hal felt simple love for the boy rush him ... and he suddenly thought of the monkey again.

“Why, Dad?”

“The old well’s back there someplace,” Bill said. “But I’ll be damned if I remember just where. Your dad’s right, Petey—it’s a good place to stay away from. Thorns’ll do a job on you. Right, Hal?”

“Right,” Hal said automatically. Petey moved away, not looking back, and then started down the embankment toward the small shingle of beach where Dennis was skipping stones over the water. Hal felt something in his chest loosen a little.

Bill might have forgotten where the old well was, but late that afternoon Hal went to it unerringly, shouldering his way through the brambles that tore at his old flannel jacket and hunted for his eyes. He reached it and stood there, breathing hard, looking at the rotted, warped boards that covered it. After a moment’s debate, he knelt (his knees fired twin pistol shots) and moved two of the boards aside.

From the bottom of that wet, rock-lined throat a drowning face stared up at him, wide eyes, grimacing mouth. A moan escaped him. It was not loud, except in his heart. There it had been very loud.

It was his own face in the dark water.

Not the monkey’s. For a moment he had thought it was the monkey’s.

He was shaking. Shaking all over.

I threw it down the well. I threw it down the well, please God don’t let me be crazy, I threw it down the well.

The well had gone dry the summer Johnny McCabe died, the year after Bill and Hal came to stay with Uncle Will and Aunt Ida. Uncle Will had borrowed money from the bank to have an artesian well sunk, and the blackberry tangles had grown up around the old dug well. The dry well.

Except the water had come back. Like the monkey.

This time the memory would not be denied. Hal sat there helplessly, letting it come, trying to go with it, to ride it like a surfer riding a monster wave that will crush him if he falls off his board, just trying to get through it so it would be gone again.

He had crept out here with the monkey late that summer, and the blackberries had been out, the smell of them thick and cloying. No one came in here to pick, although Aunt Ida would sometimes stand at the edge of the tangles and pick a cupful of berries into her apron. In here the blackberries had gone past ripe to overripe, some of them were rotting, sweating a thick white fluid like pus, and the crickets sang maddeningly in the high grass underfoot, their endless cry: ReeEEEE—

The thorns tore at him, brought dots of blood onto his cheeks and bare arms. He made no effort to avoid their sting. He had been blind with terror—so blind that he had come within inches of stumbling onto the rotten boards that covered the well, perhaps within inches of crashing thirty feet to the well's muddy bottom. He had pinwheeled his arms for balance, and more thorns had branded his forearms. It was that memory that had caused him to call Petey back sharply.

That was the day Johnny McCabe died—his best friend. Johnny had been climbing the rungs up to his treehouse in his backyard. The two of them had spent many hours up there that summer, playing pirate, seeing make-believe galleons out on the lake, unlimbering the cannons, reefing the stuns'l (whatever that was), preparing to board. Johnny had been climbing up to the treehouse as he had done a thousand times before, and the rung just below the trapdoor in the bottom of the treehouse had snapped off in his hands and Johnny had fallen thirty feet to the ground and had broken his neck and it was the monkey's fault, the monkey, the goddam hateful monkey. When the phone rang, when Aunt Ida's mouth dropped open and then formed an O of horror as her friend Milly from down the road told her the news, when Aunt Ida said, "Come out on the porch, Hal,

I have to tell you some bad news—” he had thought with sick horror, The monkey! What’s the monkey done now?

There had been no reflection of his face trapped at the bottom of the well the day he threw the monkey down, only stone cobbles and the stink of wet mud. He had looked at the monkey lying there on the wiry grass that grew between the blackberry tangles, its cymbals poised, its grinning teeth huge between its splayed lips, its fur rubbed away in balding, mangy patches here and there, its glazed eyes.

“I hate you,” he hissed at it. He wrapped his hand around its loathsome body, feeling the nappy fur crinkle. It grinned at him as he held it up in front of his face. “Go on!” he dared it, beginning to cry for the first time that day. He shook it. The poised cymbals trembled minutely. The monkey spoiled everything good. Everything. “Go on, clap them! Clap them!”

The monkey only grinned.

“Go on and clap them!” His voice rose hysterically. “Fraidycat, fraidycat, go on and clap them! I dare you! DOUBLE DARE YOU!”

Its brownish-yellow eyes. Its huge gleeful teeth.

He threw it down the well then, mad with grief and terror. He saw it turn over once on its way down, a simian acrobat doing a trick, and the sun glinted one last time on those cymbals. It struck the bottom with a thud, and that must have joggled its clockwork, for suddenly the cymbals did begin to beat. Their steady, deliberate, and tinny banging rose to his ears, echoing and fey in the stone throat of the dead well: jang-jang-jang-jang—

Hal clapped his hands over his mouth, and for a moment he could see it down there, perhaps only in the eye of imagination ... lying there in the mud, eyes glaring up at the small circle of his boy’s face peering over the lip of the well (as if marking that face forever), lips

expanding and contracting around those grinning teeth, cymbals clapping, funny wind-up monkey.

Jang-jang-jang-jang, who's dead? Jang-jang-jang-jang, is it Johnny McCabe, falling with his eyes wide, doing his own acrobatic somersault as he falls through the bright summer vacation air with the splintered rung still held in his hands to strike the ground with a single bitter snapping sound, with blood flying out of his nose and mouth and wide eyes? Is it Johnny, Hal? Or is it you?

Moaning, Hal had shoved the boards across the hole, getting splinters in his hands, not caring, not even aware of them until later. And still he could hear it, even through the boards, muffled now and somehow all the worse for that: it was down there in stone-faced dark, clapping its cymbals and jerking its repulsive body, the sound coming up like sounds heard in a dream.

Jang-jang-jang-jang, who's dead this time?

He fought and battered his way back through the blackberry creepers. Thorns stitched fresh lines of welling blood briskly across his face and burdocks caught in the cuffs of his jeans, and he fell full-length once, his ears still jangling, as if it had followed him. Uncle Will found him later, sitting on an old tire in the garage and sobbing, and he had thought Hal was crying for his dead friend. So he had been; but he had also cried in the aftermath of terror.

He had thrown the monkey down the well in the afternoon. That evening, as twilight crept in through a shimmering mantle of ground-fog, a car moving too fast for the reduced visibility had run down Aunt Ida's Manx cat in the road and gone right on. There had been guts everywhere, Bill had thrown up, but Hal had only turned his face away, his pale, still face, hearing Aunt Ida's sobbing (this on top of the news about the McCabe boy had caused a fit of weeping that was almost hysterics, and it was almost two hours before Uncle Will could calm her completely) as if from miles away. In his heart there was a cold and exultant joy. It hadn't been his turn. It had been Aunt Ida's Manx, not him, not his brother Bill or his Uncle Will (just two

champions of the rodayo). And now the monkey was gone, it was down the well, and one scruffy Manx cat with ear mites was not too great a price to pay. If the monkey wanted to clap its hellish cymbals now, let it. It could clap and clash them for the crawling bugs and beetles, the dark things that made their home in the well's stone gullet. It would rot down there. Its loathsome cogs and wheels and springs would rust down there. It would die down there. In the mud and the darkness. Spiders would spin it a shroud.

But ... it had come back.

Slowly, Hal covered the well again, as he had on that day, and in his ears he heard the phantom echo of the monkey's cymbals: Jang-jang-jang-jang, who's dead, Hal? Is it Terry? Dennis? Is it Petey, Hal? He's your favorite, isn't he? Is it him? Jang-jang-jang—

“Put that down!”

Petey flinched and dropped the monkey, and for one nightmare moment Hal thought that would do it, that the jolt would jog its machinery and the cymbals would begin to beat and clash.

“Daddy, you scared me.”

“I'm sorry. I just ... I don't want you to play with that.”

The others had gone to see a movie, and he had thought he would beat them back to the motel. But he had stayed at the home place longer than he would have guessed; the old, hateful memories seemed to move in their own eternal time zone.

Terry was sitting near Dennis, watching *The Beverly Hillbillies*. She watched the old, grainy print with a steady, bemused concentration that spoke of a recent Valium pop. Dennis was reading a rock magazine with *Culture Club* on the cover. Petey had been sitting cross-legged on the carpet goofing with the monkey.

“It doesn’t work anyway,” Petey said. Which explains why Dennis let him have it, Hal thought, and then felt ashamed and angry at himself. He felt this uncontrollable hostility toward Dennis more and more often, but in the aftermath he felt demeaned and tacky ... helpless.

“No,” he said. “It’s old. I’m going to throw it away. Give it to me.”

He held out his hand and Peter, looking troubled, handed it over.

Dennis said to his mother, “Pop’s turning into a friggin schizophrenic.”

Hal was across the room even before he knew he was going, the monkey in one hand, grinning as if in approbation. He hauled Dennis out of his chair by the shirt. There was a purring sound as a seam came adrift somewhere. Dennis looked almost comically shocked. His copy of *Rock Wave* fell to the floor.

“Hey!”

“You come with me,” Hal said grimly, pulling his son toward the door to the connecting room.

“Hal!” Terry nearly screamed. Petey just goggled.

Hal pulled Dennis through. He slammed the door and then slammed Dennis against the door. Dennis was starting to look scared. “You’re getting a mouth problem,” Hal said.

“Let go of me! You tore my shirt, you—”

Hal slammed the boy against the door again. “Yes,” he said. “A real mouth problem. Did you learn that in school? Or back in the smoking area?”

Dennis flushed, his face momentarily ugly with guilt. “I wouldn’t be in that shitty school if you didn’t get canned!” he burst out.

Hal slammed Dennis against the door again. “I didn’t get canned, I got laid off, you know it, and I don’t need any of your shit about it. You have problems? Welcome to the world, Dennis. Just don’t lay all of them off on me. You’re eating. Your ass is covered. You are twelve years old, and at twelve, I don’t ... need any ... shit from you.” He punctuated each phrase by pulling the boy forward until their noses were almost touching and then slamming Dennis back into the door. It was not hard enough to hurt, but Dennis was scared—his father had not laid a hand on him since they moved to Texas—and now he began to cry with a young boy’s loud, braying, healthy sobs.

“Go ahead, beat me up!” he yelled at Hal, his face twisted and blotchy. “Beat me up if you want, I know how much you fucking hate me!”

“I don’t hate you. I love you a lot, Dennis. But I’m your dad and you’re going to show me respect or I’m going to bust you for it.”

Dennis tried to pull away. Hal pulled the boy to him and hugged him; Dennis fought for a moment and then put his face against Hal’s chest and wept as if exhausted. It was the sort of cry Hal hadn’t heard from either of his children in years. He closed his eyes, realizing that he felt exhausted himself.

Terry began to hammer on the other side of the door. “Stop it, Hal! Whatever you’re doing to him, stop it!”

“I’m not killing him,” Hal said. “Go away, Terry.”

“Don’t you—”

“It’s all right, Mom,” Dennis said, muffled against Hal’s chest.

He could feel her perplexed silence for a moment, and then she went. Hal looked at his son again.

“I’m sorry I bad-mouthed you, Dad,” Dennis said reluctantly.

“Okay. I accept that with thanks. When we get home next week, I’m going to wait two or three days and then I’m going to go through all your drawers, Dennis. If there’s something in them you don’t want me to see, you better get rid of it.”

That flash of guilt again. Dennis lowered his eyes and wiped away snot with the back of his hand.

“Can I go now?” He sounded sullen once more.

“Sure,” Hal said, and let him go. Got to take him camping in the spring, just the two of us. Do some fishing, like Uncle Will used to do with Bill and me. Got to get close to him. Got to try.

He sat down on the bed in the empty room, and looked at the monkey. You’ll never be close to him again, Hal, its grin seemed to say. Count on it. I am back to take care of business, just like you always knew I would be, someday.

Hal laid the monkey aside and put a hand over his eyes.

That night Hal stood in the bathroom, brushing his teeth, and thought. It was in the same box. How could it be in the same box?

The toothbrush jabbed upward, hurting his gums. He winced.

He had been four, Bill six, the first time he saw the monkey. Their missing father had bought a house in Hartford, and it had been theirs, free and clear, before he died or fell into a hole in the middle of the world or whatever it had been. Their mother worked as a secretary at Holmes Aircraft, the helicopter plant out in Westville, and a series of sitters came in to stay with the boys, except by then it was just Hal that the sitters had to mind through the day—Bill was in first grade, big school. None of the babysitters stayed for long. They got pregnant and married their boyfriends or got work at Holmes, or Mrs. Shelburn would discover they had been at the cooking sherry or her bottle of brandy which was kept in the sideboard for special

occasions. Most were stupid girls who seemed only to want to eat or sleep. None of them wanted to read to Hal as his mother would do.

The sitter that long winter was a huge, sleek black girl named Beulah. She fawned over Hal when Hal's mother was around and sometimes pinched him when she wasn't. Still, Hal had some liking for Beulah, who once in a while would read him a lurid tale from one of her confession or true-detective magazines ("Death Came for the Voluptuous Redhead," Beulah would intone ominously in the dozy daytime silence of the living room, and pop another Reese's peanut butter cup into her mouth while Hal solemnly studied the grainy tabloid pictures and drank milk from his Wish-Cup). The liking made what happened worse.

He found the monkey on a cold, cloudy day in March. Sleet ticked sporadically off the windows, and Beulah was asleep on the couch, a copy of My Story tented open on her admirable bosom.

Hal had crept into the back closet to look at his father's things.

The back closet was a storage space that ran the length of the second floor on the left side, extra space that had never been finished off. You got into it by using a small door—a down-the-rabbit-hole sort of door—on Bill's side of the boys' bedroom. They both liked to go in there, even though it was chilly in winter and hot enough in summer to wring a bucketful of sweat out of your pores. Long and narrow and somehow snug, the back closet was full of fascinating junk. No matter how much stuff you looked at, you never seemed to be able to look at it all. He and Bill had spent whole Saturday afternoons up here, barely speaking to each other, taking things out of boxes, examining them, turning them over and over so their hands could absorb each unique reality, putting them back. Now Hal wondered if he and Bill hadn't been trying, as best they could, to somehow make contact with their vanished father.

He had been a merchant mariner with a navigator's certificate, and there were stacks of charts in the closet, some marked with neat circles (and the dimple of the compass's swing-point in the center of

each). There were twenty volumes of something called Barron's Guide to Navigation. A set of cockeyed binoculars that made your eyes feel hot and funny if you looked through them too long. There were touristy things from a dozen ports of call—rubber hula-hula dolls, a black cardboard bowler with a torn band that said YOU PICK A GIRL AND I'LL PICCADILLY, a glass globe with a tiny Eiffel Tower inside. There were envelopes with foreign stamps tucked carefully away inside, and foreign coins; there were rock samples from the Hawaiian island of Maui, a glassy black—heavy and somehow ominous—and funny records in foreign languages.

That day, with the sleet ticking hypnotically off the roof just above his head, Hal worked his way all the way down to the far end of the back closet, moved a box aside, and saw another box behind it—a Ralston-Purina box. Looking over the top was a pair of glassy hazel eyes. They gave him a start and he skittered back for a moment, heart thumping, as if he had discovered a deadly pygmy. Then he saw its silence, the glaze in those eyes, and realized it was some sort of toy. He moved forward again and lifted it carefully from the box.

It grinned its ageless, toothy grin in the yellow light, its cymbals held apart.

Delighted, Hal had turned it this way and that, feeling the crinkle of its nappy fur. Its funny grin pleased him. Yet hadn't there been something else? An almost instinctive feeling of disgust that had come and gone almost before he was aware of it? Perhaps it was so, but with an old, old memory like this one, you had to be careful not to believe too much. Old memories could lie. But ... hadn't he seen that same expression on Petey's face, in the attic of the home place?

He had seen the key set into the small of its back, and turned it. It had turned far too easily; there were no winding-up clicks. Broken, then. Broken, but still neat.

He took it out to play with it.

“Whatchoo got, Hal?” Beulah asked, waking from her nap.

“Nothing,” Hal said. “I found it.”

He put it up on the shelf on his side of the bedroom. It stood atop his Lassie coloring books, grinning, staring into space, cymbals poised. It was broken, but it grinned nonetheless. That night Hal awakened from some uneasy dream, bladder full, and got up to use the bathroom in the hall. Bill was a breathing lump of covers across the room.

Hal came back, almost asleep again ... and suddenly the monkey began to beat its cymbals together in the darkness.

Jang-jang-jang-jang—

He came fully awake, as if snapped in the face with a cold, wet towel. His heart gave a staggering leap of surprise, and a tiny, mouselike squeak escaped his throat. He stared at the monkey, eyes wide, lips trembling.

Jang-jang-jang-jang—

Its body rocked and humped on the shelf. Its lips spread and closed, spread and closed, hideously gleeful, revealing huge and carnivorous teeth.

“Stop,” Hal whispered.

His brother turned over and uttered a loud, single snore. All else was silent ... except for the monkey. The cymbals clapped and clashed, and surely it would wake his brother, his mother, the world. It would wake the dead.

Jang-jang-jang-jang—

Hal moved toward it, meaning to stop it somehow, perhaps put his hand between its cymbals until it ran down, and then it stopped on its own. The cymbals came together one last time—jang!—and then

spread slowly apart to their original position. The brass glimmered in the shadows. The monkey's dirty yellowish teeth grinned.

The house was silent again. His mother turned over in her bed and echoed Bill's single snore. Hal got back into his own bed and pulled the covers up, his heart beating fast, and he thought: I'll put it back in the closet again tomorrow. I don't want it.

But the next morning he forgot all about putting the monkey back because his mother didn't go to work. Beulah was dead. Their mother wouldn't tell them exactly what happened. "It was an accident, just a terrible accident," was all she would say. But that afternoon Bill bought a newspaper on his way home from school and smuggled page four up to their room under his shirt. Bill read the article haltingly to Hal while their mother cooked supper in the kitchen, but Hal could read the headline for himself—TWO KILLED IN APARTMENT SHOOT-OUT. Beulah McCaffery, 19, and Sally Tremont, 20, had been shot by Miss McCaffery's boyfriend, Leonard White, 25, following an argument over who was to go out and pick up an order of Chinese food. Miss Tremont had expired at Hartford Receiving. Beulah McCaffery had been pronounced dead at the scene.

It was like Beulah just disappeared into one of her own detective magazines, Hal Shelburn thought, and felt a cold chill race up his spine and then circle his heart. And then he realized the shootings had occurred about the same time the monkey—

"Hal?" It was Terry's voice, sleepy. "Coming to bed?"

He spat toothpaste into the sink and rinsed his mouth. "Yes," he said.

He had put the monkey in his suitcase earlier, and locked it up. They were flying back to Texas in two or three days. But before they went, he would get rid of the damned thing for good.

Somehow.

“You were pretty rough on Dennis this afternoon,” Terry said in the dark.

“Dennis has needed somebody to start being rough on him for quite a while now, I think. He’s been drifting. I just don’t want him to start falling.”

“Psychologically, beating the boy isn’t a very productive—”

“I didn’t beat him, Terry—for Christ’s sake!”

“—way to assert parental authority—”

“Oh, don’t give me any of that encounter-group shit,” Hal said angrily.

“I can see you don’t want to discuss this.” Her voice was cold.

“I told him to get the dope out of the house, too.”

“You did?” Now she sounded apprehensive. “How did he take it? What did he say?”

“Come on, Terry! What could he say? You’re fired?”

“Hal, what’s the matter with you? You’re not like this—what’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” he said, thinking of the monkey locked away in his Samsonite. Would he hear it if it began to clap its cymbals? Yes, he surely would. Muffled, but audible. Clapping doom for someone, as it had for Beulah, Johnny McCabe, Uncle Will’s dog Daisy. Jang-jang-jang, is it you, Hal? “I’ve just been under a strain.”

“I hope that’s all it is. Because I don’t like you this way.”

“No?” And the words escaped before he could stop them: he didn’t even want to stop them. “So pop a Valium and everything will look okay again.”

He heard her draw breath in and let it out shakily. She began to cry then. He could have comforted her (maybe), but there seemed to be no comfort in him. There was too much terror. It would be better when the monkey was gone again, gone for good. Please God, gone for good.

He lay wakeful until very late, until morning began to gray the air outside. But he thought he knew what to do.

Bill had found the monkey the second time.

That was about a year and a half after Beulah McCaffery had been pronounced Dead at the Scene. It was summer. Hal had just finished kindergarten.

He came in from playing and his mother called, "Wash your hands, Senor, you are feelthy like a peeg." She was on the porch, drinking an iced tea and reading a book. It was her vacation; she had two weeks.

Hal gave his hands a token pass under cold water and printed dirt on the hand towel. "Where's Bill?"

"Upstairs. You tell him to clean his side of the room. It's a mess."

Hal, who enjoyed being the messenger of unpleasant news in such matters, rushed up. Bill was sitting on the floor. The small down-the-rabbit-hole door leading to the back closet was ajar. He had the monkey in his hands.

"That's busted," Hal said immediately.

He was apprehensive, although he barely remembered coming back from the bathroom that night and the monkey suddenly beginning to clap its cymbals. A week or so after that, he had had a bad dream about the monkey and Beulah—he couldn't remember exactly what—and had awakened screaming, thinking for a moment that the soft weight on his chest was the monkey, that he would open his eyes

and see it grinning down at him. But of course the soft weight had only been his pillow, clutched with panicky tightness. His mother came in to soothe him with a drink of water and two chalky-orange baby aspirin, those Valiums of childhood's troubled times. She thought it was the fact of Beulah's death that had caused the nightmare. So it was, but not in the way she thought.

He barely remembered any of this now, but the monkey still scared him, particularly its cymbals. And its teeth.

"I know that," Bill said, and tossed the monkey aside. "It's stupid." It landed on Bill's bed, staring up at the ceiling, cymbals poised. Hal did not like to see it there. "You want to go down to Teddy's and get Popsicles?"

"I spent my allowance already," Hal said. "Besides, Mom says you got to clean up your side of the room."

"I can do that later," Bill said. "And I'll loan you a nickel, if you want." Bill was not above giving Hal an Indian rope burn sometimes, and would occasionally trip him up or punch him for no particular reason, but mostly he was okay.

"Sure," Hal said gratefully. "I'll just put the busted monkey back in the closet first, okay?"

"Nah," Bill said, getting up. "Let's go-go-go."

Hal went. Bill's moods were changeable, and if he paused to put the monkey away, he might lose his Popsicle. They went down to Teddy's and got them, and not just any Popsicles, either, but the rare blueberry ones. Then they went down to the Rec where some kids were getting up a baseball game. Hal was too small to play, but he sat far out in foul territory, sucking his blueberry Popsicle and chasing what the big kids called "Chinese home runs." They didn't get home until almost dark, and their mother whacked Hal for getting the hand towel dirty and whacked Bill for not cleaning up his side of the room, and after supper there was TV, and by the time all of that

happened, Hal had forgotten all about the monkey. It somehow found its way up onto Bill's shelf, where it stood right next to Bill's autographed picture of Bill Boyd. And there it stayed for nearly two years.

By the time Hal was seven, babysitters had become an extravagance, and Mrs. Shelburn's parting shot each morning was, "Bill, look after your brother."

That day, however, Bill had to stay after school and Hal came home alone, stopping at each corner until he could see absolutely no traffic coming in either direction, and then skittering across, shoulders hunched, like a doughboy crossing no-man's-land. He let himself into the house with the key under the mat and went immediately to the refrigerator for a glass of milk. He got the bottle, and then it slipped through his fingers and crashed to smithereens on the floor, the pieces of glass flying everywhere.

Jang-jang-jang-jang, from upstairs, in their bedroom. Jang-jang-jang, hi, Hal! Welcome home! And by the way, Hal, is it you? Is it you this time? Are they going to find you Dead at the Scene?

He stood there, immobile, looking down at the broken glass and the puddle of milk, full of a terror he could not name or understand. It was simply there, seeming to ooze from his pores.

He turned and rushed upstairs to their room. The monkey stood on Bill's shelf, seeming to stare at him. The monkey had knocked the autographed picture of Bill Boyd facedown onto Bill's bed. The monkey rocked and grinned and beat its cymbals together. Hal approached it slowly, not wanting to, but not able to stay away. Its cymbals jerked apart and crashed together and jerked apart again. As he got closer, he could hear the clockwork running in the monkey's guts.

Abruptly, uttering a cry of revulsion and terror, he swatted it from the shelf as one might swat a bug. It struck Bill's pillow and then fell on

the floor, cymbals beating together, jang-jang-jang, lips flexing and closing as it lay there on its back in a patch of late April sunshine.

Hal kicked it with one Buster Brown, kicked it as hard as he could, and this time the cry that escaped him was one of fury. The clockwork monkey skittered across the floor, bounced off the wall and lay still. Hal stood staring at it, fists bunched, heart pounding. It grinned saucily back at him, the sun of a burning pinpoint in one glass eye. Kick me all you want, it seemed to tell him, I'm nothing but cogs and clockwork and a worm gear or two, kick me all you feel like, I'm not real, just a funny clockwork monkey is all I am, and who's dead? There's been an explosion at the helicopter plant! What's that rising up into the sky like a big bloody bowling ball with eyes where the finger-holes should be? Is it your mother's head, Hal? Whee! What a ride your mother's head is having! Or down at Brook Street Corner! Looky-here, pard! The car was going too fast! The driver was drunk! There's one Bill less in the world! Could you hear the crunching sound when the wheels ran over his skull and his brains squirted out his ears? Yes? No? Maybe? Don't ask me, I don't know, I can't know, all I know how to do is beat these cymbals together jang-jang-jang, and who's Dead at the Scene, Hal? Your mother? Your brother? Or is it you, Hal? Is it you?

He rushed at it again, meaning to stomp it, smash it, jump on it until cogs and gears flew and its horrible glass eyes rolled along the floor. But just as he reached it, its cymbals came together once more, very softly ... (jang) ... as a spring somewhere inside expanded one final, minute notch ... and a sliver of ice seemed to whisper its way through the walls of his heart, impaling it, stilling its fury and leaving him sick with terror again. The monkey almost seemed to know—how gleeful its grin seemed!

He picked it up, tweezing one of its arms between the thumb and first finger of his right hand, mouth drawn down in a bow of loathing, as if it were a corpse he held. Its mangy fake fur seemed hot and fevered against his skin. He fumbled open the tiny door that led to the back closet and turned on the bulb. The monkey grinned at him

as he crawled down the length of the storage area between boxes piled on top of boxes, past the set of navigation books and the photograph albums with their fume of old chemicals and the souvenirs and the old clothes, and Hal thought: If it begins to clap its cymbals together now and move in my hand, I'll scream, and if I scream, it'll do more than grin, it'll start to laugh, to laugh at me, and then I'll go crazy and they'll find me in here, drooling and laughing crazy, I'll be crazy, oh please dear God, please dear Jesus, don't let me go crazy—

He reached the far end and clawed two boxes aside, spilling one of them, and jammed the monkey back into the Ralston-Purina box in the farthest corner. And it leaned in there, comfortably, as if home at last, cymbals poised, grinning its simian grin, as if the joke were still on Hal. Hal crawled backward, sweating, hot and cold, all fire and ice, waiting for the cymbals to begin, and when they began, the monkey would leap from its box and scurry beetlelike toward him, clockwork whirring, cymbals clashing madly, and—

—and none of that happened. He turned off the light and slammed the small down-the-rabbit-hole door and leaned on it, panting. At last he began to feel a little better. He went downstairs on rubbery legs, got an empty bag, and began carefully to pick up the jagged shards and splinters of the broken milk bottle, wondering if he was going to cut himself and bleed to death, if that was what the clapping cymbals had meant. But that didn't happen, either. He got a towel and wiped up the milk and then sat down to see if his mother and brother would come home.

His mother came first, asking, "Where's Bill?"

In a low, colorless voice, now sure that Bill must be Dead at some Scene, Hal started to explain about the school play meeting, knowing that, even given a very long meeting, Bill should have been home half an hour ago.

His mother looked at him curiously, started to ask what was wrong, and then the door opened and Bill came in—only it was not Bill at all,

not really. This was a ghost-Bill, pale and silent.

“What’s wrong?” Mrs. Shelburn exclaimed. “Bill, what’s wrong?”

Bill began to cry and they got the story through his tears. There had been a car, he said. He and his friend Charlie Silverman were walking home together after the meeting and the car came around Brook Street Corner too fast and Charlie had frozen, Bill had tugged Charlie’s hand once but had lost his grip and the car—

Bill began to bray out loud, hysterical sobs, and his mother hugged him to her, rocking him, and Hal looked out on the porch and saw two policemen standing there. The squad car in which they had conveyed Bill home was standing at the curb. Then he began to cry himself ... but his tears were tears of relief.

It was Bill’s turn to have nightmares now—dreams in which Charlie Silverman died over and over again, knocked out of his Red Ryder cowboy boots and was flipped onto the hood of the rusty Hudson Hornet the drunk had been piloting. Charlie Silverman’s head and the Hudson’s windshield had met with explosive force. Both had shattered. The drunk driver, who owned a candy store in Milford, suffered a heart attack shortly after being taken into custody (perhaps it was the sight of Charlie Silverman’s brains drying on his pants), and his lawyer was quite successful at the trial with his “this man has been punished enough” theme. The drunk was given sixty days (suspended) and lost his privilege to operate a motor vehicle in the state of Connecticut for five years ... which was about as long as Bill Shelburn’s nightmares lasted. The monkey was hidden away again in the back closet. Bill never noticed it was gone from his shelf ... or if he did, he never said.

Hal felt safe for a while. He even began to forget about the monkey again, or to believe it had only been a bad dream. But when he came home from school on the afternoon his mother died, it was back on his shelf, cymbals poised, grinning down at him.

He approached it slowly, as if from outside himself—as if his own body had been turned into a wind-up toy at the sight of the monkey. He saw his hand reach out and take it down. He felt the nappy fur crinkle under his hand, but the feeling was muffled, mere pressure, as if someone had shot him full of Novocain. He could hear his breathing, quick and dry, like the rattle of wind through straw.

He turned it over and grasped the key and years later he would think that his drugged fascination was like that of a man who puts a six-shooter with one loaded chamber against a closed and jittering eyelid and pulls the trigger.

No don't—let it alone throw it away don't touch it—

He turned the key and in the silence he heard a perfect tiny series of winding-up clicks. When he let the key go, the monkey began to clap its cymbals together and he could feel its body jerking, bend-and-jerk, bend-and-jerk, as if it were alive, it was alive, writhing in his hand like some loathsome pygmy, and the vibration he felt through its balding brown fur was not that of turning cogs but the beating of its heart.

With a groan, Hal dropped the monkey and backed away, fingernails digging into the flesh under his eyes, palms pressed to his mouth. He stumbled over something and nearly lost his balance (then he would have been right down on the floor with it, his bulging blue eyes looking into its glassy hazel ones). He scrambled toward the door, backed through it, slammed it, and leaned against it. Suddenly he bolted for the bathroom and vomited.

It was Mrs. Stukey from the helicopter plant who brought the news and stayed with them those first two endless nights, until Aunt Ida got down from Maine. Their mother had died of a brain embolism in the middle of the afternoon. She had been standing at the water cooler with a cup of water in one hand and had crumpled as if shot, still holding the paper cup in one hand. With the other she had clawed at the water cooler and had pulled the great glass bottle of Poland water down with her. It had shattered ... but the plant doctor,

who came on the run, said later that he believed Mrs. Shelburn was dead before the water had soaked through her dress and her underclothes to wet her skin. The boys were never told any of this, but Hal knew anyway. He dreamed it again and again on the long nights following his mother's death. You still have trouble getting to sleep, little brother? Bill had asked him, and Hal supposed Bill thought all the thrashing and bad dreams had to do with their mother dying so suddenly, and that was right ... but only partly right. There was the guilt; the certain, deadly knowledge that he had killed his mother by winding the monkey up on that sunny after-school afternoon.

When Hal finally fell asleep, his sleep must have been deep. When he awoke, it was nearly noon. Petey was sitting cross-legged in a chair across the room, methodically eating an orange section by section and watching a game show on TV.

Hal swung his legs out of bed, feeling as if someone had punched him down into sleep ... and then punched him back out of it. His head throbbed. "Where's your mom, Petey?"

Petey glanced around. "She and Dennis went shopping. I said I'd hang out here with you. Do you always talk in your sleep, Dad?"

Hal looked at his son cautiously. "No. What did I say?"

"I couldn't make it out. It scared me, a little."

"Well, here I am in my right mind again," Hal said, and managed a small grin. Petey grinned back, and Hal felt simple love for the boy again, an emotion that was bright and strong and uncomplicated. He wondered why he had always been able to feel so good about Petey, to feel he understood Petey and could help him, and why Dennis seemed a window too dark to look through, a mystery in his ways and habits, the sort of boy he could not understand because he had never been that sort of boy. It was too easy to say that the move from California had changed Dennis, or that—

His thoughts froze. The monkey. The monkey was sitting on the windowsill, cymbals poised. Hal felt his heart stop dead in his chest and then suddenly begin to gallop. His vision wavered, and his throbbing head began to ache ferociously.

It had escaped from the suitcase and now stood on the windowsill, grinning at him. Thought you got rid of me, didn't you? But you've thought that before, haven't you?

Yes, he thought sickly. Yes, I have.

"Pete, did you take that monkey out of my suitcase?" he asked, knowing the answer already. He had locked the suitcase and had put the key in his overcoat pocket.

Petey glanced at the monkey, and something—Hal thought it was unease—passed over his face. "No," he said. "Mom put it there. "

"Mom did?"

"Yeah. She took it from you. She laughed."

"Took it from me? What are you talking about?"

"You had it in bed with you. I was brushing my teeth, but Dennis saw. He laughed, too. He said you looked like a baby with a teddy bear."

Hal looked at the monkey. His mouth was too dry to swallow. He'd had it in bed with him? In bed? That loathsome fur against his cheek, maybe against his mouth, those glaring eyes staring into his sleeping face, those grinning teeth near his neck? On his neck? Dear God.

He turned abruptly and went to the closet. The Samsonite was there, still locked. The key was still in his overcoat pocket.

Behind him, the TV snapped off. He came out of the closet slowly. Peter was looking at him soberly. "Daddy, I don't like that monkey," he said, his voice almost too low to hear.

“Nor do I,” Hal said.

Petey looked at him closely, to see if he was joking, and saw that he was not. He came to his father and hugged him tight. Hal could feel him trembling.

Petey spoke into his ear then, very rapidly, as if afraid he might not have courage enough to say it again ... or that the monkey might overhear.

“It’s like it looks at you. Like it looks at you no matter where you are in the room. And if you go into the other room, it’s like it’s looking through the wall at you. I kept feeling like it ... like it wanted me for something.”

Petey shuddered. Hal held him tight.

“Like it wanted you to wind it up,” Hal said.

Pete nodded violently. “It isn’t really broken, is it, Dad?”

“Sometimes it is,” Hal said, looking over his son’s shoulder at the monkey. “But sometimes it still works.”

“I kept wanting to go over there and wind it up. It was so quiet, and I thought, I can’t, it’ll wake up Daddy, but I still wanted to, and I went over and I ... I touched it and I hate the way it feels ... but I liked it, too ... and it was like it was saying, Wind me up, Petey, we’ll play, your father isn’t going to wake up, he’s never going to wake up at all, wind me up, wind me up ...”

The boy suddenly burst into tears.

“It’s bad, I know it is. There’s something wrong with it. Can’t we throw it out, Daddy? Please?”

The monkey grinned its endless grin at Hal. He could feel Petey’s tears between them. Late-morning sun glinted off the monkey’s

brass cymbals—the light reflected upward and put sun streaks on the motel’s plain white stucco ceiling.

“What time did your mother think she and Dennis would be back, Petey?”

“Around one.” He swiped at his red eyes with his shirt sleeve, looking embarrassed at his tears. But he wouldn’t look at the monkey. “I turned on the TV,” he whispered. “And I turned it up loud.”

“That was all right, Petey.”

How would it have happened? Hal wondered. Heart attack? An embolism, like my mother? What? It doesn’t really matter, does it?

And on the heels of that, another, colder thought: Get rid of it, he says. Throw it out. But can it be gotten rid of? Ever?

The monkey grinned mockingly at him, its cymbals held a foot apart. Did it suddenly come to life on the night Aunt Ida died? he wondered suddenly. Was that the last sound she heard, the muffled jang-jang-jang of the monkey beating its cymbals together up in the black attic while the wind whistled along the drainpipe?

“Maybe not so crazy,” Hal said slowly to his son. “Go get your flight bag, Petey.”

Petey looked at him uncertainly. “What are we going to do?”

Maybe it can be got rid of. Maybe permanently, maybe just for a while ... a long while or a short while. Maybe it’s just going to come back and come back and that’s all this is about ... but maybe I—we—can say good-bye to it for a long time. It took twenty years to come back this time. It took twenty years to get out of the well ...

“We’re going to go for a ride,” Hal said. He felt fairly calm, but somehow too heavy inside his skin. Even his eyeballs seemed to have gained weight. “But first I want you to take your flight bag out

there by the edge of the parking lot and find three or four good-sized rocks. Put them inside the bag and bring it back to me. Got it?"

Understanding flickered in Petey's eyes. "All right, Daddy."

Hal glanced at his watch. It was nearly 12:15. "Hurry. I want to be gone before your mother gets back."

"Where are we going?"

"To Uncle Will's and Aunt Ida's," Hal said. "To the home place."

Hal went into the bathroom, looked behind the toilet, and got the bowl brush leaning there. He took it back to the window and stood there with it in his hand like a cut-rate magic wand. He looked out at Petey in his melton shirt-jacket, crossing the parking lot with his flight bag, DELTA showing clearly in white letters against a blue field. A fly bumbled in an upper corner of the window, slow and stupid with the end of the warm season. Hal knew how it felt.

He watched Petey hunt up three good-sized rocks and then start back across the parking lot. A car came around the corner of the motel, a car that was moving too fast, much too fast, and without thinking, reaching with the kind of reflex a good shortstop shows going to his right, the hand holding the brush flashed down, as if in a karate chop ... and stopped.

The cymbals closed soundlessly on his intervening hand, and he felt something in the air. Something like rage.

The car's brakes screamed. Petey flinched back. The driver motioned to him, impatiently, as if what had almost happened was Petey's fault, and Petey ran across the parking lot with his collar flapping and into the motel's rear entrance.

Sweat was running down Hal's chest; he felt it on his forehead like a drizzle of oily rain. The cymbals pressed coldly against his hand, numbing it.

Go on, he thought grimly. Go on, I can wait all day. Until hell freezes over, if that's what it takes.

The cymbals drew apart and came to rest. Hal heard one faint click! from inside the monkey. He withdrew the brush and looked at it. Some of the white bristles had blackened, as if singed.

The fly bumbled and buzzed, trying to find the cold October sunshine that seemed so close.

Pete came bursting in, breathing quickly, cheeks rosy. "I got three good ones, Dad, I—" He broke off. "Are you all right, Daddy?"

"Fine," Hal said. "Bring the bag over."

Hal hooked the table by the sofa over to the window with his foot, so it stood below the sill, and put the flight bag on it. He spread its mouth open like lips. He could see the stones Petey had collected glimmering inside. He used the toilet-bowl brush to hook the monkey forward. It teetered for a moment and then fell into the bag. There was a faint jing! as one of its cymbals struck one of the rocks.

"Dad? Daddy?" Petey sounded frightened. Hal looked around at him. Something was different; something had changed. What was it?

Then he saw the direction of Petey's gaze and he knew. The buzzing of the fly had stopped. It lay dead on the windowsill.

"Did the monkey do that?" Petey whispered.

"Come on," Hal said, zipping the bag shut. "I'll tell you while we ride out to the home place."

"How can we go? Mom and Dennis took the car."

"Don't worry," Hal said, and ruffled Petey's hair.

He showed the desk clerk his driver's license and a twenty-dollar bill. After taking Hal's Texas Instruments digital watch as collateral, the

clerk handed Hal the keys to his own car—a battered AMC Gremlin. As they drove east on Route 302 toward Casco, Hal began to talk, haltingly at first, then a little faster. He began by telling Petey that his father had probably brought the monkey home with him from overseas, as a gift for his sons. It wasn't a particularly unique toy—there was nothing strange or valuable about it. There must have been hundreds of thousands of wind-up monkeys in the world, some made in Hong Kong, some in Taiwan, some in Korea. But somewhere along the line—perhaps even in the dark back closet of the house in Connecticut where the two boys had begun their growing up—something had happened to the monkey. Something bad. It might be, Hal said as he tried to coax the clerk's Gremlin up past forty, that some bad things—maybe even most bad things—weren't even really awake and aware of what they were. He left it there because that was probably as much as Petey could understand, but his mind continued on its own course. He thought that most evil might be very much like a monkey full of clockwork that you wind up; the clockwork turns, the cymbals begin to beat, the teeth grin, the stupid glass eyes laugh ... or appear to laugh... .

He told Petey about finding the monkey, but little more—he did not want to terrify his already scared boy any more than he was already. The story thus became disjointed, not really clear, but Petey asked no questions; perhaps he was filling in the blanks for himself, Hal thought, in much the same way that he had dreamed his mother's death over and over, although he had not been there.

Uncle Will and Aunt Ida had both been there for the funeral. Afterward, Uncle Will had gone back to Maine—it was harvesttime—and Aunt Ida had stayed on for two weeks with the boys to neaten up her sister's affairs before bringing them back to Maine. But more than that, she spent the time making herself known to them—they were so stunned by their mother's sudden death that they were nearly comatose. When they couldn't sleep, she was there with warm milk; when Hal woke at three in the morning with nightmares (nightmares in which his mother approached the water cooler without seeing the monkey that floated and bobbed in its cool sapphire

depths, grinning and clapping its cymbals, each converging pair of sweeps leaving trails of bubbles behind); she was there when Bill came down with first a fever and then a rash of painful mouth sores and then hives three days after the funeral; she was there. She made herself known to the boys, and before they rode the bus from Hartford to Portland with her, both Bill and Hal had come to her separately and wept on her lap while she held them and rocked them, and the bonding began.

The day before they left Connecticut for good to go “down Maine” (as it was called in those days), the rag-man came in his old rattly truck and picked up the huge pile of useless stuff that Bill and Hal had carried out to the sidewalk from the back closet. When all the junk had been set out by the curb for pickup, Aunt Ida had asked them to go through the back closet again and pick out any souvenirs or remembrances they wanted specially to keep. We just don’t have room for it all, boys, she told them, and Hal supposed Bill had taken her at her word and had gone through all those fascinating boxes their father had left behind one final time. Hal did not join his older brother. Hal had lost his taste for the back closet. A terrible idea had come to him during those first two weeks of mourning: perhaps his father hadn’t just disappeared, or run away because he had an itchy foot and had discovered marriage wasn’t for him.

Maybe the monkey had gotten him.

When he heard the rag-man’s truck roaring and farting and backfiring its way down the block, Hal nerved himself, snatched the monkey from his shelf where it had been since the day his mother died (he had not dared to touch it until then, not even to throw it back into the closet), and ran downstairs with it. Neither Bill nor Aunt Ida saw him. Sitting on top of a barrel filled with broken souvenirs and moldy books was the Ralston-Purina carton, filled with similar junk. Hal had slammed the monkey back into the box it had originally come out of, hysterically daring it to begin clapping its cymbals (go on, go on, I dare you, dare you, DOUBLE DARE YOU), but the

monkey only waited there, leaning back nonchalantly, as if expecting a bus, grinning its awful, knowing grin.

Hal stood by, a small boy in old corduroy pants and scuffed Buster Browns, as the rag-man, an Italian gent who wore a crucifix and whistled through the space in his teeth, began loading boxes and barrels into an ancient truck with wooden stake sides. Hal watched as he lifted both the barrel and the Ralston-Purina box balanced atop it; he watched the monkey disappear into the bed of the truck; he watched as the rag-man climbed back into the cab, blew his nose mightily into the palm of his hand, wiped his hand with a huge red handkerchief, and started the truck's engine with a roar and a blast of oily blue smoke; he watched the truck draw away. And a great weight had dropped away from his heart—he actually felt it go. He had jumped up and down twice, as high as he could jump, his arms spread, palms held out, and if any of the neighbors had seen him, they would have thought it odd almost to the point of blasphemy, perhaps—why is that boy jumping for joy (for that was surely what it was; a jump for joy can hardly be disguised), they surely would have asked themselves, with his mother not even a month in her grave?

He was doing it because the monkey was gone, gone forever.

Or so he had thought.

Not three months later Aunt Ida had sent him up into the attic to get the boxes of Christmas decorations, and as he crawled around looking for them, getting the knees of his pants dusty, he had suddenly come face to face with it again, and his wonder and terror had been so great that he had to bite sharply into the side of his hand to keep from screaming ... or fainting dead away. There it was, grinning its toothy grin, cymbals poised a foot apart and ready to clap, leaning nonchalantly back against one corner of a Ralston-Purina carton as if waiting for a bus, seeming to say: Thought you got rid of me, didn't you? But I'm not that easy to get rid of, Hal. I like you, Hal. We were made for each other, just a boy and his pet monkey, a couple of good old buddies. And somewhere south of here there's a stupid old Italian rag-man lying in a claw-foot tub with

his eyeballs bulging and his dentures half-popped out of his mouth, his screaming mouth, a ragman who smells like a burned-out Exide battery. He was saving me for his grandson, Hal, he put me on the bathroom shelf with his soap and his razor and his Burma-Shave and the Philco radio he listened to the Brooklyn Dodgers on, and I started to clap, and one of my cymbals hit that old radio and into the tub it went, and then I came to you, Hal, I worked my way along the country roads at night and the moonlight shone off my teeth at three in the morning and I left many people Dead at many Scenes. I came to you, Hal, I'm your Christmas present, so wind me up, who's dead? Is it Bill? Is it Uncle Will? Is it you, Hal? Is it you?

Hal had backed away, grimacing madly, eyes rolling, and nearly fell going downstairs. He told Aunt Ida he hadn't been able to find the Christmas decorations—it was the first lie he had ever told her, and she had seen the lie on his face but had not asked him why he had told it, thank God—and later when Bill came in she asked him to look and he brought the Christmas decorations down. Later, when they were alone, Bill hissed at him that he was a dummy who couldn't find his own ass with both hands and a flashlight. Hal said nothing. Hal was pale and silent, only picking at his supper. And that night he dreamed of the monkey again, one of its cymbals striking the Philco radio as it babbled out Dean Martin singing Whenna da moon hitta you eye like a big pizza pie ats-a moray, the radio tumbling into the bathtub as the monkey grinned and beat its cymbals together with a JANG and a JANG and a JANG; only it wasn't the Italian rag-man who was in the tub when the water turned electric.

It was him.

Hal and his son scrambled down the embankment behind the home place to the boathouse that jutted out over the water on its old pilings. Hal had the flight bag in his right hand. His throat was dry, his ears were attuned to an unnaturally keen pitch. The bag was very heavy.

Hal set down the flight bag. "Don't touch that," he said. Hal felt in his pocket for the ring of keys Bill had given him and found one neatly

labeled B'HOUSE on a scrap of adhesive tape.

The day was clear and cold, windy, the sky a brilliant blue. The leaves of the trees that crowded up to the verge of the lake had gone every bright fall shade from blood red to schoolbus yellow. They talked in the wind. Leaves swirled around Petey's sneakers as he stood anxiously by, and Hal could smell November just downwind, with winter crowding close behind it.

The key turned in the padlock and he pulled the swing doors open. Memory was strong; he didn't even have to look to kick down the wooden block that held the door open. The smell in here was all summer: canvas and bright wood, a lingering lusty warmth.

Uncle Will's rowboat was still here, the oars neatly shipped as if he had last loaded it with his fishing tackle and two six-packs of Black Label yesterday afternoon. Bill and Hal had both gone out fishing with Uncle Will many times, but never together. Uncle Will maintained the boat was too small for three. The red trim, which Uncle Will had touched up each spring, was now faded and peeling, though, and spiders had spun silk in the boat's bow.

Hal laid hold of the boat and pulled it down the ramp to the little shingle of beach. The fishing trips had been one of the best parts of his childhood with Uncle Will and Aunt Ida. He had a feeling that Bill felt much the same. Uncle Will was ordinarily the most taciturn of men, but once he had the boat positioned to his liking, some sixty or seventy yards offshore, lines set and bobbers floating on the water, he would crack a beer for himself and one for Hal (who rarely drank more than half of the one can Uncle Will would allow, always with the ritual admonition from Uncle Will that Aunt Ida must never be told because "she'd shoot me for a stranger if she knew I was givin you boys beer, don't you know"), and wax expansive. He would tell stories, answer questions, rebait Hal's hook when it needed rebaiting; and the boat would drift where the wind and the mild current wanted it to be.

“How come you never go right out to the middle, Uncle Will?” Hal had asked once.

“Look overside there,” Uncle Will had answered.

Hal did. He saw the blue water and his fish line going down into black.

“You’re looking into the deepest part of Crystal Lake,” Uncle Will said, crunching his empty beer can in one hand and selecting a fresh one with the other. “A hundred feet if she’s an inch. Amos Culligan’s old Studebaker is down there somewhere. Damn fool took it out on the lake one early December, before the ice was made. Lucky to get out of it alive, he was. They’ll never get that Stud out, nor see it until Judgment Trump blows. Lake’s one deep sonofawhore right here, it is. Big ones are right here, Hal. No need to go out no further. Let’s see how your worm looks. Reel that sonofawhore right in.”

Hal did, and while Uncle Will put a fresh crawler from the old Crisco tin that served as his bait box on his hook, he stared into the water, fascinated, trying to see Amos Culligan’s old Studebaker, all rust and waterweed drifting out of the open driver’s side window through which Amos had escaped at the absolute last moment, waterweed festooning the steering wheel like a rotting necklace, waterweed dangling from the rearview mirror and drifting back and forth in the currents like some strange rosary. But he could see only blue shading to black, and there was the shape of Uncle Will’s night crawler, the hook hidden inside its knots, hung up there in the middle of things, its own sun-shafted version of reality. Hal had a brief, dizzying vision of being suspended over a mighty gulf, and he had closed his eyes for a moment until the vertigo passed. That day, he seemed to recollect, he had drunk his entire can of beer.

... the deepest part of Crystal Lake ... a hundred feet if she’s an inch.

He paused a moment, panting, and looked up at Petey, still watching anxiously. “You want some help, Daddy?”

“In a minute.”

He had his breath again, and now he pulled the rowboat across the narrow strip of sand to the water, leaving a groove. The paint had peeled, but the boat had been kept under cover and it looked sound.

When he and Uncle Will went out, Uncle Will would pull the boat down the ramp, and when the bow was afloat, he would clamber in, grab an oar to push with and say: “Push me off, Hal ... this is where you earn your truss!”

“Hand that bag in, Petey, and then give me a push,” he said. And, smiling a little, he added: “This is where you earn your truss.”

Petey didn't smile back. “Am I coming, Daddy?”

“Not this time. Another time I'll take you out fishing, but ... not this time.”

Petey hesitated. The wind tumbled his brown hair and a few yellow leaves, crisp and dry, wheeled past his shoulders and landed at the edge of the water, bobbing like boats themselves.

“You should have stuffed 'em,” he said, low.

“What?” But he thought he understood what Petey had meant.

“Put cotton over the cymbals. Taped it on. So it couldn't ... make that noise.”

Hal suddenly remembered Daisy coming toward him—not walking but lurching—and how, quite suddenly, blood had burst from both of Daisy's eyes in a flood that soaked her ruff and pattered down on the floor of the barn, how she had collapsed on her forepaws ... and on the still, rainy spring air of that day he had heard the sound, not muffled but curiously clear, coming from the attic of the house fifty feet away: Jang-jang-jang-jang!

He had begun to scream hysterically, dropping the armload of wood he had been getting for the fire. He ran for the kitchen to get Uncle Will, who was eating scrambled eggs and toast, his suspenders not even up over his shoulders yet.

She was an old dog, Hal, Uncle Will had said, his face haggard and unhappy—he looked old himself. She was twelve, and that's old for a dog. You mustn't take on now—old Daisy wouldn't like that.

Old, the vet had echoed, but he had looked troubled all the same, because dogs don't die of explosive brain hemorrhages, even at twelve ("Like as if someone had stuck a firecracker in her head," Hal overheard the vet saying to Uncle Will as Uncle Will dug a hole in back of the barn not far from the place where he had buried Daisy's mother in 1950; "I never seen the beat of it, Will").

And later, terrified almost out of his mind but unable to help himself, Hal had crept up to the attic.

Hello, Hal, how you doing? The monkey grinned from its shadowy corner. Its cymbals were poised, a foot or so apart. The sofa cushion Hal had stood on end between them was now all the way across the attic. Something—some force—had thrown it hard enough to split its cover, and stuffing foamed out of it. Don't worry about Daisy, the monkey whispered inside his head, its glassy hazel eyes fixed on Hal Shelburn's wide blue ones. Don't worry about Daisy, she was old, Hal, even the vet said so, and by the way, did you see the blood coming out of her eyes, Hal? Wind me up, Hal. Wind me up, let's play, and who's dead, Hal? Is it you?

And when he came back to himself he had been crawling toward the monkey as if hypnotized. One hand had been outstretched to grasp the key. He scrambled backward then, and almost fell down the attic stairs in his haste—probably would have if the stairwell had not been so narrow. A little whining noise had been coming from his throat.

Now he sat in the boat, looking at Petey. "Muffling the cymbals doesn't work," he said. "I tried it once."

Petey cast a nervous glance at the flight bag. “What happened, Daddy?”

“Nothing I want to talk about now,” Hal said, “and nothing you want to hear about. Come on and give me a push.”

Petey bent to it, and the stem of the boat grated along the sand. Hal dug in with an oar, and suddenly that feeling of being tied to the earth was gone and the boat was moving lightly, its own thing again after years in the dark boathouse, rocking on the light waves. Hal unshipped the other oar and clicked the oarlocks shut.

“Be careful, Daddy,” Petey said.

“This won’t take long,” Hal promised, but he looked at the flight bag and wondered.

He began to row, bending to the work. The old, familiar ache in the small of his back and between his shoulder blades began. The shore receded. Petey was magically eight again, six, a four-year-old standing at the edge of the water. He shaded his eyes with one infant hand.

Hal glanced casually at the shore but would not allow himself to actually study it. It had been nearly fifteen years, and if he studied the shoreline carefully, he would see the changes rather than the similarities and become lost. The sun beat on his neck, and he began to sweat. He looked at the flight bag, and for a moment he lost the bend-and-pull rhythm. The flight bag seemed ... seemed to be bulging. He began to row faster.

The wind gusted, drying the sweat and cooling his skin. The boat rose and the bow slapped water to either side when it came down. Hadn’t the wind freshened, just in the last minute or so? And was Petey calling something? Yes. Hal couldn’t make out what it was over the wind. It didn’t matter. Getting rid of the monkey for another twenty years—or maybe

(please God forever)

forever—that was what mattered.

The boat reared and came down. He glanced left and saw baby whitecaps. He looked shoreward again and saw Hunter's Point and a collapsed wreck that must have been the Burdons' boathouse when he and Bill were kids. Almost there, then. Almost over the spot where Amos Culligan's famous Studebaker had plunged through the ice one long-ago December. Almost over the deepest part of the lake.

Petey was screaming something; screaming and pointing. Hal still couldn't hear. The rowboat rocked and rolled, flattening off clouds of thin spray to either side of its peeling bow. A tiny rainbow glowed in one, was pulled apart. Sunlight and shadow raced across the lake in shutters and the waves were not mild now; the whitecaps had grown up. His sweat had dried to gooseflesh, and spray had soaked the back of his jacket. He rowed grimly, eyes alternating between the shoreline and the flight bag. The boat rose again, this time so high that for a moment the left oar pawed at air instead of water.

Petey was pointing at the sky, his scream now only a faint, bright runner of sound.

Hal looked over his shoulder.

The lake was a frenzy of waves. It had gone a deadly dark shade of blue sewn with white seams. A shadow raced across the water toward the boat and something in its shape was familiar, so terribly familiar, that Hal looked up and then the scream was there, struggling in his tight throat.

The sun was behind the cloud, turning it into a hunched working shape with two gold-edged crescents held apart. Two holes were torn in one end of the cloud, and sunshine poured through in two shafts.

As the cloud crossed over the boat, the monkey's cymbals, barely muffled by the flight bag, began to beat. Jang-jang-jang-jang, it's you, Hal, it's finally you, you're over the deepest part of the lake now and it's your turn, your turn, your turn—

All the necessary shoreline elements had clicked into their places. The rotting bones of Amos Culligan's Studebaker lay somewhere below, this was where the big ones were, this was the place.

Hal shipped the oars to the locks in one quick jerk, leaned forward, unmindful of the wildly rocking boat, and snatched the flight bag. The cymbals made their wild, pagan music; the bag's sides bellowed as if with tenebrous respiration.

"Right here, you sonofawhore!" Hal screamed. "RIGHT HERE!"

He threw the bag over the side.

It sank fast. For a moment he could see it going down, sides moving, and for that endless moment he could still hear the cymbals beating. And for a moment the black waters seemed to clear and he could see down into that terrible gulf of waters to where the big ones lay; there was Amos Culligan's Studebaker, and Hal's mother was behind its slimy wheel, a grinning skeleton with a lake bass staring coldly from one fleshless eye socket. Uncle Will and Aunt Ida lolled beside her, and Aunt Ida's gray hair trailed upward as the bag fell, turning over and over, a few silver bubbles trailing up: jang-jang-jang-jang ...

Hal slammed the oars back into the water, scraping blood from his knuckles (and ah God the back of Amos Culligan's Studebaker had been full of dead children! Charlie Silverman ... Johnny McCabe ...), and began to bring the boat about.

There was a dry pistol-shot crack between his feet, and suddenly clear water was welling up between two boards. The boat was old; the wood had shrunk a bit, no doubt; it was just a small leak. But it hadn't been there when he rowed out. He would have sworn to it.

The shore and lake changed places in his view. Petey was at his back now. Overhead, that awful simian cloud was breaking up. Hal began to row. Twenty seconds was enough to convince him he was rowing for his life. He was only a so-so swimmer, and even a great one would have been put to the test in this suddenly angry water.

Two more boards suddenly shrank apart with that pistol-shot sound. More water poured into the boat, dousing his shoes. There were tiny metallic snapping sounds that he realized were nails breaking. One of the oarlocks snapped and flew off into the water—would the swivel itself go next?

The wind now came from his back, as if trying to slow him down or even drive him into the middle of the lake. He was terrified, but he felt a crazy kind of exhilaration through the terror. The monkey was gone for good this time. He knew it somehow. Whatever happened to him, the monkey would not be back to draw a shadow over Dennis's life or Petey's. The monkey was gone, perhaps resting on the roof or the hood of Amos Culligan's Studebaker at the bottom of Crystal Lake. Gone for good.

He rowed, bending forward and rocking back. That cracking, crimping sound came again, and now the rusty Crisco can that had been lying in the bow of the boat was floating in three inches of water. Spray blew in Hal's face. There was a louder snapping sound, and the bow seat fell in two pieces and floated next to the bait box. A board tore off the left side of the boat, and then another, this one at the waterline, tore off at the right. Hal rowed. Breath rasped in his mouth, hot and dry, and then his throat swelled with the coppery taste of exhaustion. His sweaty hair flew.

Now a crack zipped directly up the bottom of the rowboat, zigzagged between his feet, and ran up to the bow. Water gushed in; he was in water up to his ankles, then to the swell of calf. He, rowed, but the boat's shoreward movement was sludgy now. He didn't dare look behind him to see how close he was getting.

Another board tore loose. The crack running up the center of the boat grew branches, like a tree. Water flooded in.

Hal began to make the oars sprint, breathing in great failing gasps. He pulled once ... twice ... and on the third pull both oar swivels snapped off. He lost one oar, held on to the other. He rose to his feet and began to flail at the water with it. The boat rocked, almost capsized, and spilled him back onto his seat with a thump.

Moments later more boards tore loose, the seat collapsed, and he was lying in the water which filled the bottom of the boat, astounded at its coldness. He tried to get on his knees, desperately thinking: Petey must not see this, must not see his father drown right in front of his eyes, you're going to swim, dog-paddle if you have to, but do, do something—

There was another splintering crack—almost a crash—and he was in the water, swimming for the shore as he never had swum in his life ... and the shore was amazingly close. A minute later he was standing waist-deep in water, not five yards from the beach.

Petey splashed toward him, arms out, screaming and crying and laughing. Hal started toward him and floundered. Petey, chest-deep, floundered.

They caught each other.

Hal, breathing in great winded gasps, nevertheless hoisted the boy into his arms and carried him up to the beach, where both of them sprawled, panting.

“Daddy? Is it gone? That nastybad monkey?”

“Yes. I think it's gone. For good this time.”

“The boat fell apart. It just ... fell apart all around you.”

Hal looked at the boards floating loose on the water forty feet out. They bore no resemblance to the tight handmade rowboat he had pulled out of the boathouse.

“It’s all right now,” Hal said, leaning back on his elbows. He shut his eyes and let the sun warm his face.

“Did you see the cloud?” Petey whispered.

“Yes. But I don’t see it now ... do you?”

They looked at the sky. There were scattered white puffs here and there, but no large dark cloud. It was gone, as he had said.

Hal pulled Petey to his feet. “There’ll be towels up at the house. Come on.” But he paused, looking at his son. “You were crazy, running out there like that.”

Petey looked at him solemnly. “You were brave, Daddy.”

“Was I?” The thought of bravery had never crossed his mind. Only his fear. The fear had been too big to see anything else. If anything else had indeed been there. “Come on, Pete. “

“What are we going to tell Mom?”

Hal smiled. “I dunno, big guy. We’ll think of something.”

He paused a moment longer, looking at the boards floating on the water. The lake was calm again, sparkling with small wavelets. Suddenly Hal thought of summer people he didn’t even know—a man and his son, perhaps, fishing for the big one. I’ve got something, Dad! the boy screams. Well reel it up and let’s see, the father says, and coming up from the depths, weeds dragging from its cymbals, grinning its terrible, welcoming grin ... the monkey.

He shuddered—but those were only things that might be.

“Come on,” he said to Petey again, and they walked up the path through the flaming October woods toward the home place.

From The Bridgton News

October 24, 1980

MYSTERY OF THE DEAD FISH

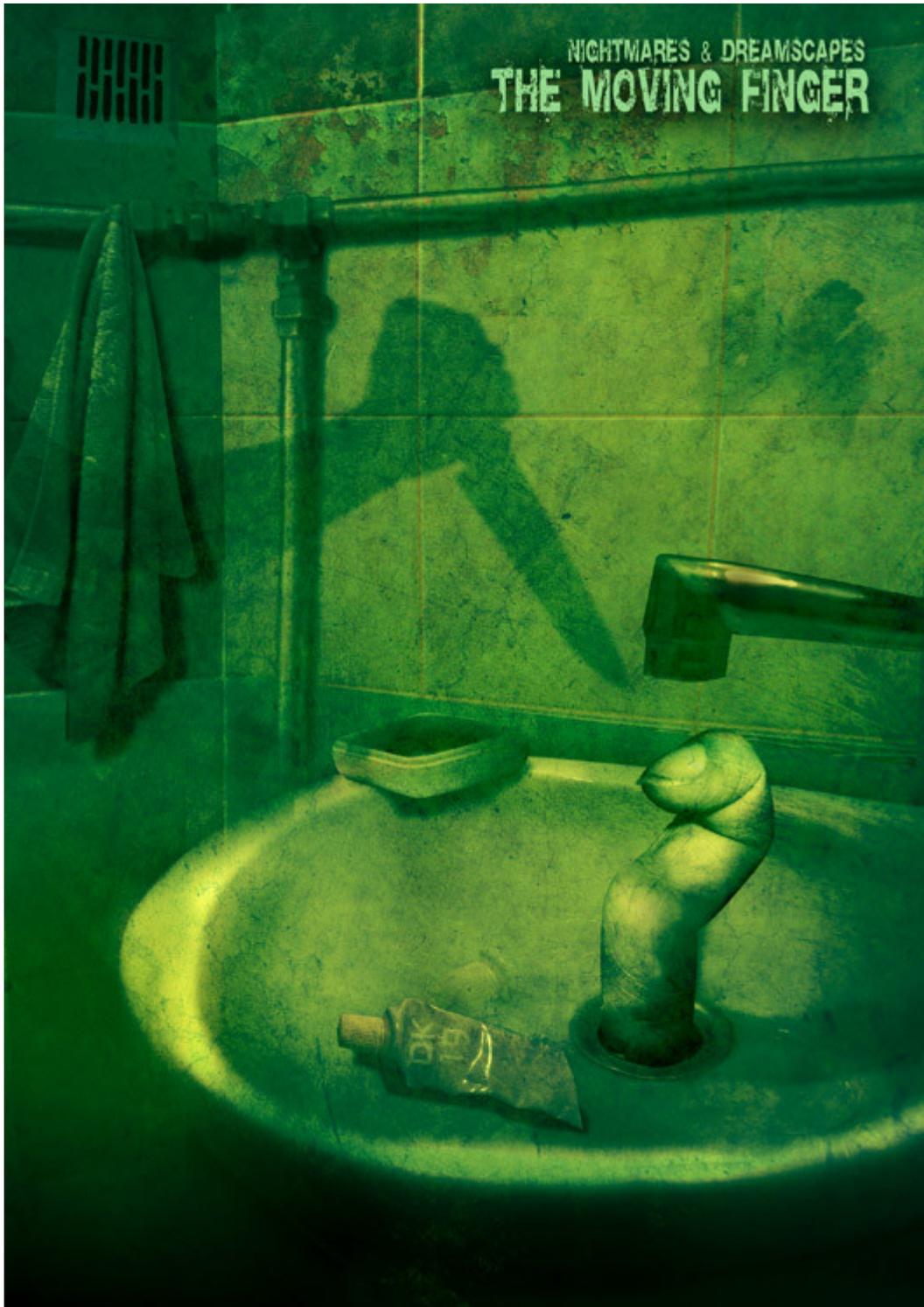
By Betsy Moriarty

HUNDREDS of dead fish were found floating belly-up on Crystal Lake in the neighboring township of Casco late last week. The largest numbers appeared to have died in the vicinity of Hunter's Point, although the lake's currents make this a bit difficult to determine. The dead fish included all types commonly found in these waters—bluegills, pickerel, sunnies, carp, hornpout, brown and rainbow trout, even one landlocked salmon. Fish and Game authorities say they are mystified ...

*

"The Monkey"—I was in New York City on business about four years ago. I was walking back to my hotel after visiting my people at New American Library when I saw a guy selling wind-up monkeys on the street. There was a platoon of them standing on a gray blanket he'd spread on the sidewalk at the corner of Fifth and Forty-fourth, all bending and grinning and clapping their cymbals. They looked really scary to me, and I spent the rest of my walk back to the hotel wondering why. I decided it was because they reminded me of the lady with the shears ... the one who cuts everyone's thread one day. So keeping that idea in mind, I wrote the story, mostly longhand, in a hotel room.

NIGHTMARES & DREAMSCAPES
THE MOVING FINGER



THE MOVING FINGER

Stephen King

When the scratching started, Howard Mitla was sitting alone in the Queens apartment where he lived with his wife. Howard was one of New York's lesser-known certified public accountants. Violet Mitla, one of New York's lesser-known dental assistants, had waited until the news was over before going down to the store on the corner to get a pint of ice cream. Jeopardy was on after the news, and she didn't care for that show. She said it was because Alex Trebek looked like a crooked evangelist, but Howard knew the truth: Jeopardy made her feel dumb.

The scratching sound was coming from the bathroom just off the short squib of hall that led to the bedroom. Howard tightened up as soon as he heard it. It wasn't a junkie or a burglar in there, not with the heavy-gauge mesh he had put over all the windows two years ago at his own expense. It sounded more like a mouse in the basin or the tub. Maybe even a rat.

He waited through the first few questions, hoping the scratching sound would go away on its own, but it didn't. When the commercial came on, he got reluctantly up from his chair and walked to the bathroom door. It was standing ajar, allowing him to hear the scratching sound even better.

Almost certainly a mouse or a rat. Little paws clicking against the porcelain.

"Damn," Howard said, and went into the kitchen.

Standing in the little space between the gas stove and the refrigerator were a few cleaning implements—a mop, a bucket filled with old rags, a broom with a dustpan snugged down over the handle. Howard took the broom in one hand, holding it well down toward the bristles, and the dustpan in the other. Thus armed, he walked reluctantly back through the small living room to the bathroom door. He cocked his head forward. Listened.

Scratch, scratch, scritch-scratch.

A very small sound. Probably not a rat. Yet that was what his mind insisted on conjuring up. Not just a rat but a New York rat, an ugly, bushy thing with tiny black eyes and long whiskers like wire and snaggle teeth protruding from below its V-shaped upper lip. A rat with attitude.

The sound was tiny, almost delicate, but nevertheless—

Behind him, Alex Trebek said, “This Russian madman was shot, stabbed, and strangled ... all in the same night.”

“Who was Lenin?” one of the contestants responded.

“Who was Rasputin, peabrain,” Howard Mitla murmured. He transferred the dustpan to the hand holding the broom, then snaked his free hand into the bathroom and turned on the light. He stepped in and moved quickly to the tub crammed into the corner below the dirty, mesh-covered window. He hated rats and mice, hated all little furry things that squeaked and scuttered (and sometimes bit), but he had discovered as a boy growing up in Hell’s Kitchen that if you had to dispatch one of them, it was best to do it quickly. It would do him no good to sit in his chair and ignore the sound; Vi had helped herself to a couple of beers during the news, and the bathroom would be her first stop when she returned from the market. If there was a mouse in the tub, she would raise the roof ... and demand he do his manly duty and dispatch it anyway. Posthaste.

The tub was empty save for the hand-held shower attachment. Its hose lay on the enamel like a dead snake.

The scratching had stopped either when Howard turned on the light or when he entered the room, but now it started again. Behind him. He turned and took three steps toward the bathroom basin, raising the broomhandle as he moved.

The fist wrapped around the handle got to the level of his chin and then froze. He stopped moving. His jaw came unhinged. If he had looked at himself in the toothpaste-spotted mirror over the basin, he

would have seen shiny strings of spittle, as gossamer as strands of spiderweb, gleaming between his tongue and the roof of his mouth.

A finger had poked its way out of the drain-hole in the basin.

A human finger.

For a moment it froze, as if aware it had been discovered. Then it began to move again, feeling its wormlike way around the pink porcelain. It reached the white rubber plug, felt its way over it, then descended to the porcelain again. The scratching noise hadn't been made by the tiny claws of a mouse after all. It was the nail on the end of that finger, tapping the porcelain as it circled and circled.

Howard gave voice to a rusty, bewildered scream, dropped the broom, and ran for the bathroom door. He hit the tile wall with his shoulder instead, rebounded, and tried again. This time he got out, swept the door shut behind him, and only stood there with his back pressed against it, breathing hard. His heartbeat was hard, toneless Morse code high up in one side of his throat.

He couldn't have stood there for long—when he regained control of his thoughts, Alex Trebek was still guiding that evening's three contestants through Single Jeopardy—but while he did, he had no sense of time passing, where he was, or even who he was.

What brought him out of it was the electronic whizzing sound that signalled a Daily Double square. "The category is Space and Aviation," Alex was saying. "You currently have seven hundred dollars, Mildred—how much do you wish to wager?" Mildred, who did not have game-show-host projection, muttered something inaudible in response.

Howard moved away from the door and back into the living room on legs which felt like pogo-sticks. He still had the dustpan in one hand. He looked at it for a moment and then let it fall to the carpet. It hit with a dusty little thump.

“I didn’t see that,” Howard Mitla said in a trembling little voice, and collapsed into his chair.

“All right, Mildred—for five hundred dollars: This Air Force test site was originally known as Miroc Proving Ground.”

Howard peered at the TV. Mildred, a mousy little woman with a hearing aid as big as a clock-radio screwed into one ear, was thinking deeply.

“I didn’t see that,” he said with a little more conviction.

“What is ... Vandenberg Air Base?” Mildred asked.

“What is Edwards Air Base, birdbrain,” Howard said. And, as Alex Trebek confirmed what Howard Mitla already knew, Howard repeated: “I didn’t see that at all.”

But Violet would be back soon, and he had left the broom in the bathroom.

*

Alex Trebek told the contestants—and the viewing audience—that it was still anybody’s game, and they would be back to play Double Jeopardy, where the scores could really change, in two shakes of a lamb’s tail. A politician came on and began explaining why he should be re-elected. Howard got reluctantly to his feet. His legs felt a little more like legs and a little less like pogo-sticks with metal fatigue now, but he still didn’t want to go back into the bathroom.

Look, he told himself, this is perfectly simple. Things like this always are. You had a momentary hallucination, the sort of thing that probably happens to people all the time. The only reason you don’t hear about them more often is because people don’t like to talk about them ... having hallucinations is embarrassing. Talking about them makes people feel the way you’re going to feel if that broom is

still on the floor in there when Vi comes back and asks what you were up to.

“Look,” the politician on TV was saying in rich, confidential tones. “When you get right down to cases, it’s perfectly simple: do you want an honest, competent man running the Nassau County Bureau of Records, or do you want a man from upstate, a hired gun who’s never even—”

“It was air in the pipes, I bet,” Howard said, and although the sound which had taken him into the bathroom in the first place had not sounded the slightest bit like air in the pipes, just hearing his own voice—reasonable, under control again—got him moving with a little more authority.

And besides—Vi would be home soon. Any minute, really.

He stood outside the door, listening.

Scratch, scratch, scratch. It sounded like the world’s smallest blind man tapping his cane on the porcelain in there, feeling his way around, checking out the old surroundings.

“Air in the pipes!” Howard said in a strong, declamatory voice, and boldly threw the bathroom door open. He bent low, grabbed the broomhandle, and snatched it back out the door. He did not have to take more than two steps into the little room with its faded, lumpy linoleum and its dingy, mesh-crisscrossed view on the airshaft, and he most certainly did not look into the bathroom sink.

He stood outside, listening.

Scratch, scratch. Scritch-scratch.

He returned the broom and dustpan to the little nook in the kitchen between the stove and the refrigerator and then returned to the living room. He stood there for a moment, looking at the bathroom door. It stood ajar, spilling a fan of yellow light into the little squib of hall.

You better go turn off the light. You know how Vi raises the roof about stuff like that. You don't even have to go in. Just reach through the door and flick it off.

But what if something touched his hand while he was reaching for the light switch?

What if another finger touched his finger?

How about that, fellows and girls?

He could still hear that sound. There was something terribly relentless about it. It was maddening.

Scratch. Scritch. Scratch.

On the TV, Alex Trebek was reading the Double Jeopardy categories. Howard went over and turned up the sound a little. Then he sat down in his chair again and told himself he didn't hear anything from the bathroom, not a single thing.

Except maybe a little air in the pipes.

*

Vi Mitla was one of those women who move with such dainty precision that they seem almost fragile... but Howard had been married to her for twenty-one years, and he knew there was nothing fragile about her at all. She ate, drank, worked, danced, and made love in exactly the same way: con brio. She came into the apartment like a pocket hurricane. One large arm curled a brown paper sack against the right side of her bosom. She carried it through into the kitchen without pausing. Howard heard the bag crackle, heard the refrigerator door open and then close again. When she came back, she tossed Howard her coat. "Hang this up for me, will you?" she asked. "I've got to pee. Do I ever! Whew!"

Whew! was one of Vi's favorite exclamations. Her version rhymed with P.U., the child's exclamation for something smelly.

"Sure, Vi," Howard said, and rose slowly to his feet with Vi's dark-blue coat in his arms. His eyes never left her as she went down the hall and through the bathroom door.

"Con Ed loves it when you leave the lights on, Howie," she called back over her shoulder.

"I did it on purpose," he said. "I knew that'd be your first stop."

She laughed. He heard the rustle of her clothes. "You know me too well—people will say we're in love."

You ought to tell her—warn her, Howard thought, and knew he could do nothing of the kind. What was he supposed to say? Watch out, Vi, there's a finger coming out of the basin drain-hole, don't let the guy it belongs to poke you in the eye if you bend over to get a glass of water?

Besides, it had just been a hallucination, one brought on by a little air in the pipes and his fear of rats and mice. Now that some minutes had gone by, this seemed almost plausible to him.

Just the same, he only stood there with Vi's coat in his arms, waiting to see if she would scream. And, after ten or fifteen endless seconds, she did.

"My God, Howard!"

Howard jumped, hugging the coat more tightly to his chest. His heart, which had begun to slow down, began to do its Morse-code number again. He struggled to speak, but at first his throat was locked shut.

"What?" he managed finally. "What, Vi? What is it?"

"The towels! Half of em are on the floor! Sheesh! What happened?"

“I don’t know,” he called back. His heart was thumping harder than ever, and it was impossible to tell if the sickish, pukey feeling deep down in his belly was relief or terror. He supposed he must have knocked the towels off the shelf during his first attempt to exit the bathroom, when he had hit the wall.

“It must be spookies,” she said. “Also, I don’t mean to nag, but you forgot to put the ring down again.”

“Oh—sorry,” he said.

“Yeah, that’s what you always say,” her voice floated back. “Sometimes I think you want me to fall in and drown. I really do!” There was a clunk as she put it down herself. Howard waited, heart thumping away, her coat still hugged against his chest.

“He holds the record for the most strikeouts in a single game,” Alex Trebek read.

“Who was Tom Seaver?” Mildred snapped right back.

“Roger Clemens, you nitwit,” Howard said.

Pwoosh! There went the flush. And the moment he was waiting for (Howard had just realized this consciously) was now at hand. The pause seemed almost endless. Then he heard the squeak of the washer in the bathroom faucet marked H (he kept meaning to replace that washer and kept forgetting), followed by water flowing into the basin, followed by the sound of Vi briskly washing her hands.

No screams.

Of course not, because there was no finger.

“Air in the pipes,” Howard said with more assurance, and went to hang up his wife’s coat.

*

She came out, adjusting her skirt. “I got the ice cream,” she said, “cherry-vanilla, just like you wanted. But before we try it, why don’t you have a beer with me, Howie? It’s this new stuff. American Grain, it’s called. I never heard of it, but it was on sale so I bought a six-pack. Nothing ventured, nothing grained, am I right?”

“Hardy-har,” he said, wrinkling his nose. Vi’s penchant for puns had struck him as cute when he first met her, but it had staled somewhat over the years. Still, now that he was over his fright, a beer sounded like just the thing. Then, as Vi went out into the kitchen to get him a glass of her new find, he realized he wasn’t over his fright at all. He supposed that having a hallucination was better than seeing a real finger poking out of the drain of the bathroom basin, a finger that was alive and moving around, but it wasn’t exactly an evening-maker, either.

Howard sat down in his chair again. As Alex Trebek announced the Final Jeopardy category—it was The Sixties—he found himself thinking of various TV shows he’d seen where it turned out that a character who was having hallucinations either had (a) epilepsy or (b) a brain tumor. He found he could remember a lot of them.

“You know,” Vi said, coming back into the room with two glasses of beer, “I don’t like the Vietnamese people who run that market. I don’t think I’ll ever like them. I think they’re sneaky.”

“Have you ever caught them doing anything sneaky?” Howard asked. He himself thought the Lahs were exceptional people... but tonight he didn’t care much one way or the other.

“No,” Vi said, “not a thing. And that makes me all the more suspicious. Also, they smile all the time. My father used to say, ‘Never trust a smiling man.’ He also said ... Howard, are you feeling all right?”

“He said that?” Howard asked, making a rather feeble attempt at levity.

“Tres amusant, cheri. You look as pale as milk. Are you coming down with something?”

No, he thought of saying, I’m not coming down with something—that’s too mild a term for it. I think I might have epilepsy or maybe a brain tumor, Vi—how’s that for coming down with something?

“It’s just work, I guess,” he said. “I told you about the new tax account. St. Anne’s Hospital.”

“What about it?”

“It’s a rat’s nest,” he said, and that immediately made him think of the bathroom again—the sink and the drain. “Nuns shouldn’t be allowed to do bookkeeping. Someone ought to have put it in the Bible just to make sure.”

“You let Mr. Lathrop push you around too much,” Vi told him firmly. “It’s going to go on and on unless you stand up for yourself. Do you want a heart attack?”

“No.” And I don’t want epilepsy or a brain tumor, either. Please, God, make it a one-time thing. Okay? Just some weird mental burp that happens once and never again. Okay? Please? Pretty please? With some sugar on it?

“You bet you don’t,” she said grimly. “Arlene Katz was saying just the other day that when men under fifty have heart attacks, they almost never come out of the hospital again. And you’re only forty-one. You have to stand up for yourself, Howard. Stop being such a pushover.”

“I guess so,” he said glumly.

Alex Trebek came back on and gave the Final Jeopardy answer: “This group of hippies crossed the United States in a bus with writer Ken Kesey.” The Final Jeopardy music began to play. The two men contestants were writing busily. Mildred, the woman with the

microwave oven in her ear, looked lost. At last she began to scratch something. She did it with a marked lack of enthusiasm.

Vi took a deep swallow from her glass. "Hey!" she said. "Not bad! And only two-sixty-seven a six-pack!"

Howard drank some himself. It was nothing special, but it was wet, at least, and cool. Soothing.

Neither of the male contestants was even close. Mildred was also wrong, but she, at least, was in the ball-park. "Who were the Merry Men?" she had written.

"Merry Pranksters, you dope," Howard said.

Vi looked at him admiringly. "You know all the answers, Howard, don't you?"

"I only wish I did," Howard said, and sighed.

*

Howard didn't care much for beer, but that night he helped himself to three cans of Vi's new find nevertheless. Vi commented on it, said that if she had known he was going to like it that much, she would have stopped by the drugstore and gotten him an IV hookup. Another time-honored Vi-ism. He forced a smile. He was actually hoping the beer would send him off to sleep quickly. He was afraid that, without a little help, he might be awake for quite awhile, thinking about what he had imagined he'd seen in the bathroom sink. But, as Vi had often informed him, beer was full of vitamin P, and around eight-thirty, after she had retired to the bedroom to put on her nightgown, Howard went reluctantly into the bathroom to relieve himself.

First he walked over to the bathroom sink and forced himself to look in.

Nothing.

This was a relief (in the end, a hallucination was still better than an actual finger, he had discovered, despite the possibility of a brain tumor), but he still didn't like looking down the drain. The brass cross-hatch inside that was supposed to catch things like clots of hair or dropped bobby-pins had disappeared years ago, and so there was only a dark hole rimmed by a circle of tarnished steel. It looked like a staring eyesocket.

Howard took the rubber plug and stuck it into the drain.

That was better.

He stepped away from the sink, put up the toilet ring (Vi complained bitterly if he forgot to put it down when he was through, but never seemed to feel any pressing need to put it back up when she was), and addressed the john. He was one of those men who only began to urinate immediately when the need was extreme (and who could not urinate at all in crowded public lavatories—the thought of all those men standing in line behind him just shut down his circuits), and he did now what he almost always did in the few seconds between the aiming of the instrument and the commencement of target practice: he recited prime numbers in his mind.

He had reached thirteen and was on the verge of flowing when there was a sudden sharp sound from behind him: pwuck! His bladder, recognizing the sound of the rubber plug being forced sharply out of the drain even before his brain did, clamped shut immediately (and rather painfully).

A moment later that sound—the sound of the nail clipping lightly against the porcelain as the questing finger twisted and turned—began again. Howard's skin went cold and seemed to shrink until it was too small to cover the flesh beneath. A single drop of urine spilled from him and plinked in the bowl before his penis actually seemed to shrink in his hand, retreating like a turtle seeking the safety of its shell.

Howard walked slowly and not quite steadily over to the washbasin. He looked in.

The finger was back. It was a very long finger, but seemed otherwise normal. Howard could see the nail, which was neither bitten nor abnormally long, and the first two knuckles. As he watched, it continued to tap and feel its way around the basin.

Howard bent down and looked under the sink. The pipe which came out of the floor was no more than three inches in diameter. It was not big enough for an arm. Besides, it made a severe bend at the place where the sink trap was. So just what was that finger attached to? What could it be attached to?

Howard straightened up again, and for one alarming moment he felt that his head might simply detach itself from his neck and float away. Small black specks flocked across his field of vision.

I'm going to faint! he thought. He grabbed his right earlobe and yanked it once, hard, the way a frightened passenger who has seen trouble up the line might yank the Emergency Stop cord of a railroad car. The dizziness passed ... but the finger was still there.

It was not a hallucination. How could it be? He could see a tiny bead of water on the nail, and a tiny thread of whiteness beneath it—soap, almost surely soap. Vi had washed her hands after using the john.

It could be a hallucination, though. It still could be. Just because you see soap and water on it, does that mean you can't be imagining it? And listen, Howard—if you're not imagining it, what's it doing in there? How did it get there in the first place? And how come Vi didn't see it?

Call her, then—call her in! his mind instructed, and in the next microsecond countermanded its own order. No! Don't do that! Because if you go on seeing it and she doesn't—

Howard shut his eyes tight and for a moment lived in a world where there were only red flashes of light and his own crazy heartbeat.

When he opened them again, the finger was still there.

“What are you?” he whispered through tightly stretched lips. “What are you, and what are you doing here?”

The finger stopped its blind explorations at once. It swivelled—and then pointed directly at Howard. Howard blundered a step backward, his hands rising to his mouth to stifle a scream. He wanted to tear his eyes away from the wretched, awful thing, wanted to flee the bathroom in a rush (and never mind what Vi might think or say or see) ... but for the moment he was paralyzed and unable to tear his gaze away from the pink-white digit, which now resembled nothing so much as an organic periscope.

Then it curled at the second knuckle. The end of the finger dipped, touched the porcelain, and resumed its tapping circular explorations once more.

“Howie?” Vi called. “Did you fall in?”

“Be right out!” he called back in an insanely cheery voice.

He flushed away the single drop of pee which had fallen into the toilet, then moved toward the door, giving the sink a wide berth. He did catch sight of himself in the bathroom mirror, however; his eyes were huge, his skin wretchedly pale. He gave each of his cheeks a brisk pinch before leaving the bathroom, which had become, in the space of one short hour, the most horrible and inexplicable place he had ever visited in his life.

*

When Vi came out into the kitchen to see what was taking him so long, she found Howard looking into the refrigerator.

“What do you want?” she asked.

“A Pepsi. I think I’ll go down to Lah’s and get one.”

“On top of three beers and a bowl of cherry-vanilla ice cream? You’ll bust, Howard!”

“No, I won’t,” he said. But if he wasn’t able to offload what his kidneys were holding, he might.

“Are you sure you feel all right?” Vi was looking at him critically, but her tone was gentler now—tinged with real concern. “Because you look terrible. Really.”

“Well,” he said reluctantly, “there’s been some flu going around the office. I suppose—”

“I’ll go get you the damned soda, if you really need it,” she said.

“No you won’t,” Howard interposed hastily. “You’re in your nightgown. Look—I’ll put on my coat.”

“When was the last time you had a soup-to-nuts physical, Howard? It’s been so long I’ve forgotten.”

“I’ll look it up tomorrow,” he said vaguely, going into the little foyer where their coats were hung. “It must be in one of the insurance folders.”

“Well you better! And if you insist on being crazy and going out, wear my scarf!”

“Okay. Good idea.” He pulled on his topcoat and buttoned it facing away from her, so she wouldn’t see how his hands were shaking. When he turned around, Vi was just disappearing back into the bathroom. He stood there in fascinated silence for several moments, waiting to hear if she would scream this time, and then the water began to run in the basin. This was followed by the sound of Vi brushing her teeth in her usual manner: *con brio*.

He stood there a moment longer, and his mind suddenly offered its verdict in four flat, non-nonsense words: I'm losing my grip.

It might be ... but that didn't change the fact that if he didn't take a whiz very soon, he was going to have an embarrassing accident. That, at least, was a problem he could solve, and Howard took a certain comfort in the fact. He opened the door, began to step out, then paused to pull Vi's scarf off the hook.

When are you going to tell her about this latest fascinating development in the life of Howard Mitla? his mind inquired suddenly.

Howard shut the thought out and concentrated on tucking the ends of the scarf into the lapels of his overcoat.

*

The Mitla apartment was on the fourth floor of a nine-story building on Hawking Street. To the right and half a block down, on the corner of Hawking and Queens Boulevard, was Lah's Twenty-Four-Hour Delicatessen and Convenience Market. Howard turned left and walked to the end of the building. Here was a narrow alleyway which gave on the airshaft at the rear of the building. Trash-bins lined both sides of the alley. Between them were littery spaces where homeless people—some but by no means all of them winos—often made their comfortless newspaper beds. No one seemed to have taken up residence in the alley this evening, for which Howard was profoundly grateful.

He stepped between the first and second bins, unzipped, and urinated copiously. At first the relief was so great that he felt almost blessed in spite of the evening's trials, but as the flow slackened and he began to consider his position again, anxiety started creeping back in.

His position was, in a word, untenable.

Here he was, peeing against the wall of the building in which he had a warm, safe apartment, looking over his shoulder all the while to see if he was being observed. The arrival of a junkie or a mugger while he was in such a defenseless position would be bad, but he wasn't sure that the arrival of someone he knew—the Fensters from 2C, for instance, or the Dattlebaums from 3F—wouldn't be even worse. What could he say? And what might that motormouth Alicia Fenster say to Vi?

He finished, zipped his pants, and walked back to the mouth of the alley. After a prudent look in both directions, he proceeded down to Lah's and bought a can of Pepsi-Cola from the smiling, olive-skinned Mrs. Lah.

"You look pale tonight, Mr. Mit-ra," she said through her constant smile. "Feering all right?"

Oh yes, he thought. I'm feering just fine, thank you, Mrs. Lah. Never better on that score.

"I think I might have caught a little bug at the sink," he told her. She began to frown through her smile and he realized what he had said. "At the office, I mean."

"Better bunder up walm," she said. The frown line had smoothed out of her almost ethereal forehead. "Radio say cold weather is coming."

"Thank you," he said, and left. On his way back to the apartment, he opened the Pepsi and poured it out on the sidewalk. Considering the fact that his bathroom had apparently become hostile territory, the last thing he needed tonight was any more to drink.

When he let himself in again, he could hear Vi snoring softly in the bedroom. The three beers had sent her off quickly and efficiently. He put the empty soda can on the counter in the kitchen, then paused outside the bathroom door. After a moment or two, he tilted his head against the wood.

Scratch-scratch. Scritch-scratch-scratch.

“Dirty son of a bitch,” he whispered.

He went to bed without brushing his teeth for the first time since his two-week stint at Camp High Pines, when he had been twelve and his mother had forgotten to pack his toothbrush.

*

And lay in bed beside Vi, wakeful.

He could hear the sound of the finger making its ceaseless exploratory rounds in the bathroom sink, the nail clicking and tap-dancing. He couldn't really hear it, not with both doors closed, and he knew this, but he imagined he heard it, and that was just as bad.

No, it isn't, he told himself. At least you know you're imagining it. With the finger itself you're not sure.

This was but little comfort. He still wasn't able to get to sleep, and he was no closer to solving his problem. He did know he couldn't spend the rest of his life making excuses to go outside and pee in the alley next to the building. He doubted if he could manage that for even forty-eight hours. And what was going to happen the next time he had to take a dump, friends and neighbors? There was a question he'd never seen asked in a round of Final Jeopardy, and he didn't have a clue what the answer might be. Not the alley, though—he was sure of that much, at least.

Maybe, the voice in his head suggested cautiously, you'll get used to the damned thing.

No. The idea was insane. He had been married to Vi for twenty-one years, and he still found it impossible to go to the bathroom when she was in there with him. Those circuits just overloaded and shut down. She could sit there cheerily on the john, peeing and talking to

him about her day at Dr. Stone's while he shaved, but he could not do the same. He just wasn't built that way.

If that finger doesn't go away on its own, you better be prepared to make some changes in the way you're built, then, the voice told him, because I think you're going to have to make some modifications in the basic structure.

He turned his head and glanced at the clock on the bed-table. It was quarter to two in the morning ... and, he realized dolefully, he had to pee again.

He got up carefully, stole from the bedroom, passed the closed bathroom door with the ceaseless scratching, tapping sounds still coming from behind it, and went into the kitchen. He moved the step-stool in front of the kitchen sink, mounted it, and aimed carefully into the drain, ears cocked all the while for the sound of Vi getting out of bed.

He finally managed ... but not until he had reached three hundred and forty-seven in his catalogue of prime numbers. It was an all-time record. He replaced the step-stool and shuffled back to bed, thinking: I can't go on like this. Not for long. I just can't.

He bared his teeth at the bathroom door as he passed it.

*

When the alarm went off at six-thirty the next morning, he stumbled out of bed, shuffled down to the bathroom, and went inside.

The drain was empty.

"Thank God," he said in a low, trembling voice. A sublime gust of relief—relief so great it felt like some sort of sacred revelation—blew through him. "Oh, thank G—"

The finger popped up like a Jack popping out of a Jack-in-the-box, as if the sound of his voice had called it. It spun around three times, fast, and then bent as stiffly as an Irish setter on point. And it was pointing straight at him.

Howard retreated, his upper lip rising and falling rapidly in an unconscious snarl.

Now the tip of the finger curled up and down, up and down... as if it were waving at him. Good morning, Howard, so nice to be here.

“Fuck you,” he muttered. He turned and faced the toilet. He tried resolutely to pass water ... and nothing. He felt a sudden lurid rush of rage ... an urge to simply whirl and pounce on the nasty intruder in the sink, to rip it out of its cave, throw it on the floor, and stamp on it in his bare feet.

“Howard?” Vi asked blearily. She knocked on the door. “Almost done?”

“Yes,” he said, trying his best to make his voice normal. He flushed the toilet.

It was clear that Vi would not have known or much cared if he sounded normal or not, and she took very little interest in how he looked. She was suffering from an unplanned hangover.

“Not the worst one I ever had, but still pretty bad,” she mumbled as she brushed past him, hiked her nightdress, and plopped onto the jakes. She propped her forehead in one hand. “No more of that stuff, please and thank you. American Grain, my rosy red ass. Someone should have told those babies you put the fertilizer on the hops before you grow em, not after. A headache on three lousy beers! Gosh! Well—you buy cheap, you get cheap. Especially when it’s those creepy Lahs doing the selling. Be a dollface and get me some aspirin, will you, Howie?”

“Sure,” he said, and approached the sink carefully. The finger was gone again. Vi, it seemed, had once more frightened it off. He got the aspirin out of the medicine cabinet and removed two. When he reached to put the bottle back, he saw the tip of the finger protrude momentarily from the drain. It came out no more than a quarter of an inch. Again it seemed to execute that miniature wave before diving back out of sight.

I’m going to get rid of you, my friend, he thought suddenly. The feeling that accompanied the thought was anger—pure, simple anger—and it delighted him. The emotion cruised into his battered, bewildered mind like one of those huge Soviet ice-breakers that crush and slice their way through masses of pack-ice with almost casual ease. I am going to get you. I don’t know how yet, but I will.

He handed Vi the aspirin and said, “Just a minute—I’ll get you a glass of water.”

“Don’t bother,” Vi said drearily, and crunched both tablets between her teeth. “Works faster this way.”

“I’ll bet it plays hell on your insides, though,” Howard said. He found he didn’t mind being in the bathroom very much at all, as long as Vi was in here with him.

“Don’t care,” she said, more drearily still. She flushed the toilet. “How are you this morning?”

“Not great,” he said truthfully.

“You got one, too?”

“A hangover? No. I think it’s that flu-bug I told you about. My throat’s sore, and I think I’m running a fever.”

“What?”

“Fever,” he said. “Fever’s what I meant to say.”

“Well, you better stay home.” She went to the sink, selected her toothbrush from the holder, and began to brush vigorously.

“Maybe you better, too,” he said. He did not want Vi to stay home, however; he wanted her right by Dr. Stone’s side while Dr. Stone filled cavities and did root canals, but it would have been unfeeling not to have said something.

She glanced up at him in the mirror. Already a little color was returning to her cheeks, a little sparkle to her eye. Vi also recovered con brio. “The day I call in sick at work because I’ve got a hangover will be the day I quit drinking altogether,” she said. “Besides, the doc’s gonna need me. We’re pulling a complete set of uppers. Dirty job, but somebody’s gotta do it.”

She spat directly into the drain and Howard thought, fascinated: The next time it pops up, it’ll have toothpaste on it. Jesus!

“You stay home and keep warm and drink plenty of fluids,” Vi said. She had adopted her Head Nurse Tone now, the tone which said If you’re not taking all this down, be it on your own head. “Catch up on your reading. And, by the bye, show that Mr. Hot Shit Lathrop what he’s missing when you don’t come in. Make him think twice.”

“That’s not a bad idea at all,” Howard said.

She kissed him on the way by and dropped him a wink. “Your Shrinking Violet knows a few of the answers, too,” she said. By the time she left to catch her bus half an hour later, she was singing lustily, her hangover forgotten.

*

The first thing Howard did following Vi’s departure was to haul the step-stool over to the kitchen sink and whiz into the drain again. It was easier with Vi out of the house; he had barely reached twenty-three, the ninth prime number, before getting down to business.

With that problem squared away—at least for the next few hours—he walked back into the hall and poked his head through the bathroom door. He saw the finger at once, and that was wrong. It was impossible, because he was way over here, and the basin should have cut off his view. But it didn't and that meant—

“What are you doing, you bastard?” Howard croaked, and the finger, which had been twisting back and forth as if to test the wind, turned toward him. There was toothpaste on it, just as he had known there would be. It bent in his direction ... only now it bent in three places, and that was impossible, too, quite impossible, because when you got to the third knuckle of any given finger, you were up to the back of the hand.

It's getting longer, his mind gibbered. I don't know how that can happen, but it is—if I can see it over the top of the basin from here, it must be at least three inches long ... maybe more!

He closed the bathroom door gently and staggered back into the living room. His legs had once again turned into malfunctioning pogo-sticks. His mental ice-breaker was gone, flattened under a great white weight of panic and bewilderment. No iceberg this; it was a whole glacier.

Howard Mitla sat down in his chair and closed his eyes. He had never felt more alone, more disoriented, or more utterly powerless in his entire life. He sat that way for quite some time, and at last his fingers began to relax on the arms of his chair. He had spent most of the previous night wide awake. Now he simply drifted off to sleep while the lengthening finger in his bathroom drain tapped and circled, circled and tapped.

*

He dreamed he was a contestant on Jeopardy—not the new, big-money version but the original daytime show. Instead of computer screens, a stagehand behind the game-board simply pulled up a card when a contestant called for a particular answer. Alex Trebek

had been replaced by Art Fleming with his slicked-back hair and somehow prissy poor-boy-at-the-party smile. The woman in the middle was still Mildred, and she still had a satellite downlink in her ear, but her hair was teased up into a Jacqueline Kennedy bouffant and her wire-rimmed glasses had been replaced by a pair of cat's-eye frames.

And everyone was in black and white, him included.

“Okay, Howard,” Art said, and pointed at him. His index finger was a grotesque thing, easily a foot long; it stuck out of his loosely curled fist like a pedagogue's pointer. There was dried toothpaste on the nail. “It's your turn to select.”

Howard looked at the board and said, “I'd like Pests and Vipers for one hundred, Art.”

The square with \$100 on it was removed, revealing an answer which Art now read: “The best way to get rid of those troublesome fingers in your bathroom drain.”

“What is ...” Howard said, and then came up blank. A black-and-white studio audience stared silently at him. A black-and-white camera man dollied in for a close-up of his sweat-streaked black-and-white face. “What is ... um ...”

“Hurry up, Howard, you're almost out of time,” Art Fleming cajoled, waving his grotesquely elongated finger at Howard, but Howard was a total blank. He was going to miss the question, the hundred bucks would be deducted from his score, he was going to go into the minus column, he was going to be a complete loser, they probably wouldn't even give him the lousy set of encyclopedias ...

*

A delivery truck on the street below backfired loudly. Howard sat up with a jerk which almost pitched him out of his chair.

“What is liquid drain-cleaner?” he screamed. “What is liquid drain-cleaner?”

It was, of course, the answer. The correct answer.

He began to laugh. He was still laughing five minutes later, as he shrugged into his topcoat and stepped out the door.

*

Howard picked up the plastic bottle the toothpick-chewing clerk in the Queens Boulevard Happy Handyman Hardware Store had just set down on the counter. There was a cartoon woman in an apron on the front. She stood with one hand on her hip while she used the other hand to pour a gush of drain-cleaner into something that was either an industrial sink or Orson Welles’s bidet. DRAIN-EYE the label proclaimed. TWICE the strength of most leading brands! Opens bathroom sinks, showers, and drains IN MINUTES! Dissolves hair and organic matter!

“Organic matter,” Howard said. “Just what does that mean?”

The clerk, a bald man with a lot of warts on his forehead, shrugged. The toothpick poking out between his lips rolled from one side of his mouth to the other. “Food, I guess. But I wouldn’t stand the bottle next to the liquid soap, if you know what I mean.”

“Would it eat holes in your hands?” Howard asked, hoping he sounded properly horrified.

The clerk shrugged again. “I guess it ain’t as powerful as the stuff we used to sell—the stuff with lye in it—but that stuff ain’t legal anymore. At least I don’t think it is. But you see that, don’tcha?” He tapped the skull-and-crossbones poison logo with one short, stubby finger. Howard got a good look at that finger. He had found himself noticing a lot of fingers on his walk down to the Happy Handyman.

“Yes,” Howard said. “I see it.”

“Well, they don’t put that on just because it looks, you know, sporty. If you got kids, keep it out of their reach. And don’t gargle with it.” He burst out laughing, the toothpick riding up and down on his lower lip.

“I won’t,” Howard said. He turned the bottle and read the fine print. Contains sodium hydroxide and potassium hydroxide. Causes severe burns on contact. Well, that was pretty good. He didn’t know if it was good enough, but there was a way to find out, wasn’t there?

The voice in his head spoke up dubiously. What if you only make it mad, Howard? What then?

Well... so what? It was in the drain, wasn’t it?

Yes... but it appears to be growing.

Still—what choice did he have? On this subject the little voice was silent.

“I hate to hurry you over such an important purchase,” the clerk said, “but I’m by myself this morning and I have some invoices to go over, so—”

“I’ll take it,” Howard said, reaching for his wallet. As he did so, his eye caught something else—a display below a sign which read FALL CLEARANCE SALE. “What are those?” he asked. “Over there?”

“Those?” the clerk asked. “Electric hedgeclippers. We got two dozen of em last June, but they didn’t move worth a damn.”

“I’ll take a pair,” said Howard Mitla. He began to smile, and the clerk later told police he didn’t like that smile. Not one little bit.

*

Howard put his new purchases on the kitchen counter when he got home, pushing the box containing the electric hedgeclippers over to one side, hoping it would not come to those. Surely it wouldn’t. Then he carefully read the instructions on the bottle of Drain-Eze.

Slowly pour 1/4 bottle into drain ... let stand fifteen minutes. Repeat application if necessary.

But surely it wouldn't come to that, either ... would it?

To make sure it wouldn't, Howard decided he would pour half the bottle into the drain. Maybe a little bit more.

He struggled with the safety cap and finally managed to get it off. He then walked through the living room and into the hall with the white plastic bottle held out in front of him and a grim expression—the expression of a soldier who knows he will be ordered over the top of the trench at any moment—on his usually mild face.

Wait a minute! the voice in his head cried out as he reached for the doorknob, and his hand faltered. This is crazy! You KNOW it's crazy! You don't need drain-cleaner, you need a psychiatrist! You need to lie down on a couch somewhere and tell someone you imagine—that's right, that's the word, IMAGINE—there's a finger stuck in the bathroom sink, a finger that's growing!

“Oh no,” Howard said, shaking his head firmly back and forth. “No way.”

He could not—absolutely could not—visualize himself telling this story to a psychiatrist ... to anyone, in fact. Suppose Mr. Lathrop got wind of it? He might, too, through Vi's father. Bill DeHorne had been a CPA in the firm of Dean, Green, and Lathrop for thirty years. He had gotten Howard his initial interview with Mr. Lathrop, had written him a glowing recommendation... had, in fact, done everything but give him the job himself. Mr. DeHorne was retired now, but he and John Lathrop still saw a lot of each other. If Vi found out her Howie was going to see a shrink (and how could he keep it from her, a thing like that?), she would tell her mother—Vi told her mother everything. Mrs. DeHorne would tell her husband, of course. And Mr. DeHorne—

Howard found himself imagining the two men, his father-in-law and his boss, sitting in leather wingback chairs in some mythic club or

other, the kind of wingback chairs that were studded with little gold nailheads. He saw them sipping sherry in this vision; the cut-glass decanter stood on the little table by Mr. Lathrop's right hand.

(Howard had never seen either man actually drink sherry, but this morbid fantasy seemed to demand it.) He saw Mr. DeHorne—who was now doddering into his late seventies and had all the discretion of a housefly—lean confidentially forward and say, You'll never believe what my son-in-law Howard's up to, John. He's going to see a psychiatrist! He thinks there's a finger in his bathroom sink, you see. Do you suppose he might be taking drugs of some sort?

And maybe Howard didn't really think all that would happen. He thought there was a possibility it might—if not in just that way then in some other—but suppose it didn't? He still couldn't see himself going to a psychiatrist. Something in him—a close neighbor of that something that would not allow him to urinate in a public bathroom if there was a line of men behind him, no doubt—simply refused the idea. He would not get on one of those couches and supply the answer—There's a finger sticking out of the bathroom sink—so that some goatee-wearing head-shrinker could pelt him with questions. It would be like Jeopardy in hell.

He reached for the knob again.

Call a plumber, then! the voice yelled desperately. At least do that much! You don't have to tell him what you see! Just tell him the pipe's clogged! Or tell him your wife lost her wedding ring down the drain! Tell him ANYTHING!

But that idea was, in a way, even more useless than the idea of calling a shrink. This was New York, not Des Moines. You could lose the Hope Diamond down your bathroom sink and still wait a week for a plumber to make a housecall. He did not intend to spend the next seven days slinking around Queens, looking for gas stations where an attendant would accept five dollars for the privilege of allowing Howard Mitla to move his bowels in a dirty men's room underneath this year's Bardahl calendar.

Then do it fast, the voice said, giving up. At least do it fast.

On this Howard's two minds were united. He was, in truth, afraid that if he didn't act fast—and keep on acting—he would not act at all.

And surprise it, if you can. Take off your shoes.

Howard thought this was an extremely useful idea. He acted upon it at once, easing off first one loafer and then the other. He found himself wishing he had thought to put on some rubber gloves in case of backsplatter, and wondered if Vi still kept a pair under the kitchen sink. Never mind, though. He was screwed up to the sticking point. If he paused to go back for the rubber gloves now, he might lose his courage ... maybe temporarily, maybe for good.

He eased open the bathroom door and slipped inside.

The Mitla bathroom was never what one would call a cheery place, but at this time of day, almost noon, it was at least fairly bright. Visibility wouldn't be a problem ... and there was no sign of the finger. At least, not yet. Howard tiptoed across the room with the bottle of drain-cleaner clutched tightly in his right hand. He bent over the sink and looked into the round black hole in the center of the faded pink porcelain.

Except it wasn't dark. Something was rushing up through that blackness, hurrying up that small-bore, oozy pipe to greet him, to greet its good friend Howard Mitla.

"Take this!" Howard screamed, and tilted the bottle of Drain-Eze over the sink. Greenish-blue sludge spilled out and struck the drain just as the finger emerged.

The result was immediate and terrifying. The glop coated the nail and the tip of the finger. It went into a frenzy, whirling like a dervish around and around the limited circumference of the drain, spraying off small blue-green fans of Drain-Eze. Several droplets struck the light-blue cotton shirt Howard was wearing and immediately ate

holes in it. These holes fizzed brown lace at the edges, but the shirt was rather too large for him, and none of the stuff got through to his chest or belly. Other drops stippled the skin of his right wrist and palm, but he did not feel these until later. His adrenaline was not just flowing; it was at flood tide.

The finger blurted up from the drain—joint after impossible joint of it. It was now smoking, and it smelled like a rubber boot sizzling on a hot barbecue grill.

“Take this! Lunch is served, you bastard!” Howard screamed, continuing to pour as the finger rose to a height of just over a foot, rising out of the drain like a cobra from a snake-charmer’s basket. It had almost reached the mouth of the plastic bottle when it wavered, seemed to shudder, and suddenly reversed its field, zipping back down into the drain. Howard leaned farther over the basin to watch it go and saw just a retreating flash of white far down in the dark. Lazy tendrils of smoke drifted up.

He drew a deep breath, and this was a mistake. He inhaled a great double lungful of Drain-Eze fumes. He was suddenly, violently sick. He vomited forcefully into the basin and then staggered away, still gagging and trying to retch.

“I did it!” he shouted deliriously. His head swam with the combined stench of corrosive chemicals and burned flesh. Still, he felt almost exalted. He had met the enemy and the enemy, by God and all the saints, was his. His!

“Hidey-ho! Hidey-fucking-ho! I did it! I—”

His gorge rose again. He half-knelt, half-swooned in front of the toilet, the bottle of Drain-Eze still held stiffly out in his right hand, and realized too late that Vi had put both the ring and the lid down this morning when she vacated the throne. He vomited all over the fuzzy pink toilet-seat cover and then fell forward into his own gloop in a dead faint.

*

He could not have been unconscious for long, because the bathroom enjoyed full daylight for less than half an hour even in the middle of summer—then the other buildings cut off the direct sunlight and plunged the room into gloom again.

Howard raised his head slowly, aware he was coated from hairline to chinline with sticky, foul-smelling stuff. He was even more aware of something else. A clittering sound. It was coming from behind him, and it was getting closer.

He turned his head, which felt like an overfilled sandbag, slowly to his left. His eyes slowly widened. He hitched in breath and tried to scream, but his throat locked.

The finger was coming for him.

It was easily seven feet long now, and getting longer all the time. It curved out of the sink in a stiff arc made by perhaps a dozen knuckles, descended to the floor, then curved again (Doublejointed! some distant commentator in his disintegrating mind reported with interest). Now it was tapping and feeling its way across the tile floor toward him. The last nine or ten inches were discolored and smoking. The nail had turned a greenish-black color. Howard thought he could see the whitish shine of bone just below the first of its knuckles. It was quite badly burned, but it was not by any stretch of the imagination dissolved.

“Get away,” Howard whispered, and for a moment the entire grotesque, jointed contraption came to a halt. It looked like a lunatic’s conception of a New Year’s Eve party-favor. Then it slithered straight toward him. The last half a dozen knuckles flexed and the tip of the finger wrapped itself around Howard Mitla’s ankle.

“No!” he screamed as the smoking Hydroxide Twins—Sodium and Potassium—ate through his nylon sock and sizzled his skin. He gave his foot a tremendous yank. For a moment the finger held—it was

very strong—and then he pulled free. He crawled toward the door with a huge clump of vomit-loaded hair hanging in his eyes. As he crawled he tried to look back over his shoulder, but he could see nothing through his coagulated hair. Now his chest had unlocked and he gave voice to a series of barking, frightful screams.

He could not see the finger, at least temporarily, but he could hear the finger, and now it was coming fast, tictictictic right behind him. Still trying to look back over his shoulder, he ran into the wall to the left of the bathroom door with his shoulder. The towels fell off the shelf again. He went sprawling and at once the finger was around his other ankle, flexing tight with its charred and burning tip.

It began to pull him back toward the sink. It actually began to pull him back.

Howard uttered a deep and primitive howl—a sound such as had never before escaped his polite set of CPA vocal cords—and flailed at the edge of the door. He caught it with his right hand and gave a huge, panicky yank. His shirttail pulled free all the way around and the seam under his right arm tore loose with a low purring sound, but he managed to get free, losing only the ragged lower half of one sock.

He stumbled to his feet, turned, and saw the finger feeling its way toward him again. The nail at the end was now deeply split and bleeding.

Need a manicure, bud, Howard thought, and uttered an anguished laugh. Then he ran for the kitchen.

*

Someone was pounding on the door. Hard.

“Mitla! Hey, Mitla! What’s going on in there?”

Feeney, from down the hall. A big loud Irish drunk. Correction: a big loud nosy Irish drunk.

“Nothing I can’t handle, my bog-trotting friend!” Howard shouted as he went into the kitchen. He laughed again and tossed his hair off his forehead. It went, but fell back in exactly the same jellied clump a second later. “Nothing I can’t handle, you better believe that! You can take that right to the bank and put it in your NOW account!”

“What did you call me?” Feeney responded. His voice, which had been truculent, now became ominous as well.

“Shut up!” Howard yelled. “I’m busy!”

“I want the yelling to stop or I’m calling the cops!”

“Fuck off!” Howard screamed at him. Another first. He tossed his hair off his forehead, and clump! Back down it fell.

“I don’t have to listen to your shit, you little four-eyes creep!”

Howard raked his hands through his vomit-loaded hair and then flung them out in front of him in a curiously Gallic gesture—Et voila! it seemed to say. Warm juice and shapeless gobbets splattered across Vi’s white kitchen cabinets. Howard didn’t even notice. The hideous finger had seized each of his ankles once, and they burned as if they were wearing circlets of fire. Howard didn’t care about that, either. He seized the box containing the electric hedgeclippers. On the front, a smiling dad with a pipe parked in his gob was trimming the hedge in front of an estate-sized home.

“You having a little drug-party in there?” Feeney inquired from the hall.

“You better get out of here, Feeney, or I’ll introduce you to a friend of mine!” Howard yelled back. This struck him as incredibly witty. He threw his head back and yodeled at the kitchen ceiling, his hair standing up in strange jags and quills and glistening with stomach

juices. He looked like a man who has embarked upon a violent love-affair with a tube of Brylcreem.

“Okay, that’s it,” Feeney said. “That’s it. I’m callin the cops.”

Howard barely heard him. Dennis Feeney would have to wait; he had bigger fish to fry. He had ripped the electric hedgeclippers from the box, examined them feverishly, saw the battery compartment, and pried it open.

“C-cells,” he muttered, laughing. “Good! That’s good! No problem there!”

He yanked open one of the drawers to the left of the sink, pulling with such force that the stop broke off and the drawer flew all the way across the kitchen, striking the stove and landing upside down on the linoleum floor with a bang and a clatter. Amid the general rick-rack—tongs, peelers, graters, paring knives, and garbage-bag ties—was a small treasure-trove of batteries, mostly C-cells and square nine-volts. Still laughing—it seemed he could no longer stop laughing—Howard fell on his knees and grubbed through the litter. He succeeded in cutting the pad of his right palm quite badly on the blade of a paring knife before seizing two of the C-cells, but he felt this no more than he felt the burns he had sustained when he had been backsplashed. Now that Feeney had at last shut his braying Irish donkey’s mouth, Howard could hear the tapping again. Not coming from the sink now, though—huh-uh, no way. The ragged nail was tapping on the bathroom door ... or maybe the hall floor. He had neglected to close the door, he now remembered.

“Who gives a fuck?” Howard asked, and then he screamed: “WHO GIVES A FUCK, I SAID! I’M READY FOR YOU, MY FRIEND! I’M COMING TO KICK ASS AND CHEW BUBBLEGUM, AND I’M ALL OUT OF BUBBLEGUM! YOU’LL WISH YOU’D STAYED DOWN THE DRAIN!”

He slammed the batteries into the compartment set into the handle of the hedgeclippers and tried the power switch. Nothing.

“Bite my crank!” Howard muttered. He pulled one of the batteries out, reversed it, and put it back in. This time the blades buzzed to life when he pushed the switch, snicking back and forth so rapidly they were only a blur.

He started for the kitchen door, then made himself switch the gadget off and go back to the counter. He didn’t want to waste time putting the battery cover back in place—not when he was primed for battle—but the last bit of sanity still flickering in his mind assured him that he had no choice. If his hand slipped while he was dealing with the thing, the batteries might pop out of the open compartment, and then where would he be? Why, facing the James Gang with an unloaded gun, of course.

So he fiddled the battery cover back on, cursing when it wouldn’t fit and turning it in the other direction.

“You wait for me, now!” he called back over his shoulder. “I’m coming! We’re not done yet!”

At last the battery cover snapped down. Howard strode briskly back through the living room with the hedgeclippers held at port arms. His hair still stood up in punk-rock quills and spikes. His shirt—now torn out under one arm and burned in several places—flapped against his round, tidy stomach. His bare feet slapped on the linoleum. The tattered remains of his nylon socks swung and dangled about his ankles.

Feeney yelled through the door, “I called them, birdbrain! You got that? I called the cops, and I hope the ones who show up are all bog-trotting Irishmen, just like me!”

“Blow it out your old tan tailpipe,” Howard said, but he was really paying no attention to Feeney. Dennis Feeney was in another universe; this was just his quacking, unimportant voice coming in over the sub-etheric.

Howard stood to one side of the bathroom door, looking like a cop in a TV show ... only someone had handed him the wrong prop and he was packing a hedgeclipper instead of a .38. He pressed his thumb firmly on the power button set high on the handle of the hedgeclippers. He took a deep breath... and the voice of sanity, now down to a mere gleam, offered a final thought before packing up for good.

Are you sure you want to trust your life to a pair of electric hedgeclippers you bought on sale?

“I have no choice,” Howard muttered, smiling tightly, and lunged inside.

*

The finger was still there, still arced out of the sink in that stiff curve that reminded Howard of a New Year's Eve party-favor, the kind that makes a farting, honking sound and then unrolls toward the unsuspecting bystander when you blow on it. It had filched one of Howard's loafers. It was picking the shoe up and slamming it petulantly down on the tiles again and again. From the look of the towels scattered about, Howard guessed the finger had tried to kill several of those before finding the shoe.

A weird joy suddenly suffused Howard—it felt as if the inside of his aching, woozy head had been filled with green light.

“Here I am, you nitwit!” he yelled. “Come and get me!”

The finger popped out of the shoe, rose in a monstrous ripple of joints (Howard could actually hear some of its many knuckles cracking), and floated rapidly through the air toward him. Howard turned on the hedgeclippers and they buzzed into hungry life. So far, so good.

The burned, blistered tip of the finger wavered in front of his face, the split nail weaving mystically back and forth. Howard lunged for it.

The finger feinted to the left and slipped around his left ear. The pain was amazing. Howard simultaneously felt and heard a grisly ripping sound as the finger tried to tear his ear from the side of his head. He sprang forward, seized the finger in his left fist, and sheared through it. The clippers lugged down as the blades hit the bone, the high buzzing of the motor becoming a rough growl, but it had been built to clip through small, tough branches and there was really no problem. No problem at all. This was Round Two, this was Double Jeopardy, where the scores could really change, and Howard Mitla was racking up a bundle. Blood flew in a fine haze and then the stump pulled back. Howard blundered after it, the last ten inches of the finger hanging from his ear like a coathanger for a moment before dropping off.

The finger lunged at him. Howard ducked and it went over his head. It was blind, of course. That was his advantage. Grabbing his ear like that had just been a lucky shot. He lunged with the clippers, a gesture which looked almost like a fencing thrust, and sheared off another two feet of the finger. It thumped to the tiles and lay there, twitching.

Now the rest of it was trying to pull back.

“No you don’t,” Howard panted. “No you don’t, not at all!”

He ran for the sink, slipped in a puddle of blood, almost fell, then caught his balance. The finger was blurring back down the drain, knuckle after knuckle, like a freight-train going into a tunnel. Howard seized it, tried to hold it, and couldn’t—it went sliding through his hand like a greased and burning length of clothesline. He sliced forward again nevertheless, and managed to cut off the last three feet of the thing just above the point where it was whizzing through his fist.

He leaned over the sink (holding his breath this time) and stared down into the blackness of the drain. Again he caught just a glimpse of retreating white.

“Come on back anytime!” Howard Mitla shouted. “Come back anytime at all! I’ll be right here, waiting for you!”

He turned around, releasing his breath in a gasp. The room still smelled of drain-cleaner. Couldn’t have that, not while there was still work to do. There was a wrapped cake of Dial soap behind the hot-water tap. Howard picked it up and threw it at the bathroom window. It broke the glass and bounced off the crisscross of mesh behind it. He remembered putting that mesh in—remembered how proud of it he had been. He, Howard Mitla, mild-mannered accountant, had been TAKING CARE OF THE OLD HOMESTEAD. Now he knew what TAKING CARE OF THE OLD HOMESTEAD was really all about. Had there been a time when he had been afraid to go into the bathroom because he thought there might be a mouse in the tub, and he would have to beat it to death with a broomhandle? He believed so, but that time—and that version of Howard Mitla—seemed long ago now.

He looked slowly around the bathroom. It was a mess. Pools of blood and two chunks of finger lay on the floor. Another leaned askew in the basin. Fine sprays of blood fanned across the walls and stippled the bathroom mirror. The basin was streaked with it.

“All right,” Howard sighed. “Clean-up time, boys and girls.” He turned the hedgeclippers on again and began to saw the various lengths of finger he had cut off into pieces small enough to flush down the toilet.

*

The policeman was young and he was Irish—O’Bannion was his name. By the time he finally arrived at the closed door of the Mitla apartment, several tenants were standing behind him in a little knot. With the exception of Dennis Feeney, who wore an expression of high outrage, they all looked worried.

O’Bannion knocked on the door, then rapped, and finally hammered.

“You better break it down,” Mrs. Javier said. “I heard him all the way up on the seventh floor.”

“The man’s insane,” Feeney said. “Probably killed his wife.”

“No,” said Mrs. Dattlebaum. “I saw her leave this morning, just like always.”

“Doesn’t mean she didn’t come back again, does it?” Mr. Feeney asked truculently, and Mrs. Dattlebaum subsided.

“Mr. Mitter?” O’Bannion called.

“It’s Mitla,” Mrs. Dattlebaum said. “With an I.”

“Oh, crap,” O’Bannion said, and hit the door with his shoulder. It burst open and he went inside, closely followed by Mr. Feeney. “You stay here, sir,” O’Bannion instructed.

“The hell I will,” Feeney said. He was looking into the kitchen, with its strew of implements on the floor and the splatters of vomit on the kitchen cabinets. His eyes were small and bright and interested. “The guy’s my neighbor. And after all, I was the one who made the call.”

“I don’t care if you made the call on your own private hotline to the Commish,” O’Bannion said. “Get the hell out of here or you’re going down to the station with this guy Mittle.”

“Mitla,” Feeney said, and slunk unwillingly toward the door to the hallway, casting glances back at the kitchen as he went.

O’Bannion had sent Feeney back mostly because he didn’t want Feeney to see how nervous he was. The mess in the kitchen was one thing. The way the place smelled was another—some sort of chemistry-lab stink on top, some other smell underneath it. He was afraid the underneath smell might be blood.

He glanced behind him to make sure that Feeney had gone back all the way—that he was not lingering in the foyer where the coats were hung—and then he advanced slowly across the living room. When he was beyond the view of the onlookers, he unsnapped the strap across the butt of his pistol and drew it. He went to the kitchen and looked all the way in. Empty. A mess, but empty. And ... what was that splattered across the cabinets? He wasn't sure, but judging by the smell—

A noise from behind him, a little shuffling sound, broke the thought off and he turned quickly, bringing his gun up.

“Mr. Mitla?”

There was no answer, but the little shuffling sound came again. From down the hall. That meant the bathroom or the bedroom. Officer O'Bannion advanced in that direction, raising his gun and pointing its muzzle at the ceiling. He was now carrying it in much the same way Howard had carried the hedgeclippers.

The bathroom door was ajar. O'Bannion was quite sure this was where the sound had come from, and he knew it was where the worst of the smell was coming from. He crouched, then pushed the door open with the muzzle of his gun.

“Oh my God,” he said softly.

The bathroom looked like a slaughterhouse after a busy day. Blood sprayed the walls and ceiling in scarlet bouquets of spatter. There were puddles of blood on the floor, and more blood had run down the inside and outside curves of the bathroom basin in thick trails; that was where the worst of it appeared to be. He could see a broken window, a discarded bottle of what appeared to be drain-cleaner (which would explain the awful smell in here), and a pair of men's loafers lying quite a distance apart from each other. One of them was quite badly scuffed.

And, as the door swung wider, he saw the man.

Howard Mitla had crammed himself as far into the space between the bathtub and the wall as he could get when he had finished his disposal operation. He held the electric hedgeclippers on his lap, but the batteries were flat; bone was a little tougher than branches after all, it seemed. His hair still stood up in its wild spikes. His cheeks and brow were smeared with bright streaks of blood. His eyes were wide but almost totally empty—it was an expression Officer O’Bannion associated with speed-freaks and crackheads.

Holy Jesus, he thought. The guy was right—he did kill his wife. He killed somebody, at least. So where’s the body?

He glanced toward the tub but couldn’t see in. It was the most likely place, but it also seemed to be the one object in the room which wasn’t streaked and splattered with gore.

“Mr. Mitla?” he asked. He wasn’t pointing his gun directly at Howard, but the muzzle was most certainly in the neighborhood.

“Yes, that’s my name,” Howard said in a hollow, courteous voice. “Howard Mitla, CPA, at your service. Did you come to use the toilet? Go right ahead. There’s nothing to disturb you now. I think that problem’s been taken care of. At least for the time being.”

“Uh, would you mind getting rid of the weapon, sir?”

“Weapon?” Howard looked at him vacantly for a moment, then seemed to understand. “These?” He raised the hedgeclippers, and the muzzle of Officer O’Bannion’s gun for the first time came to rest on Howard himself.

“Yes, sir.”

“Sure,” Howard said. He tossed the clippers indifferently into the bathtub. There was a clatter as the battery-hatch popped out. “Doesn’t matter. The batteries are flat, anyway. But ... what I said about using the toilet? On more mature consideration, I guess I’d advise against it.”

“You would?” Now that the man was disarmed, O’Bannion wasn’t sure exactly how to proceed. It would have been a lot easier if the victim were on view. He supposed he’d better cuff the guy and then call for backup. All he knew for sure was that he wanted to get out of this smelly, creepy bathroom.

“Yes,” Howard said. “After all, consider this, Officer: there are five fingers on a hand ... just one hand, mind you ... and... have you ever thought about how many holes to the underworld there are in an ordinary bathroom? Counting the holes in the faucets, that is? I make it seven.” Howard paused and then added, “Seven is a prime—which is to say, a number divisible only by one and itself.”

“Would you want to hold out your hands for me, sir?” Officer O’Bannion said, taking his handcuffs from his belt.

“Vi says I know all the answers,” Howard said, “but Vi’s wrong.” He slowly held out his hands.

O’Bannion knelt before him and quickly snapped a cuff on Howard’s right wrist. “Who’s Vi?”

“My wife,” Howard said. His blank, shining eyes looked directly into Officer O’Bannion’s. “She’s never had any problem going to the bathroom while someone else is in the room, you know. She could probably go while you were in the room.”

Officer O’Bannion began to have a terrible yet weirdly plausible idea: that this strange little man had killed his wife with a pair of hedgeclippers and then somehow dissolved her body with drain-cleaner—and all because she wouldn’t get the hell out of the bathroom while he was trying to drain the dragon.

He snapped the other cuff on.

“Did you kill your wife, Mr. Mitla?”

For a moment Howard looked almost surprised. Then he lapsed back into that queer, plastic state of apathy again. “No,” he said. “Vi’s at Dr. Stone’s. They’re pulling a complete set of uppers. Vi says it’s a dirty job, but somebody has to do it. Why would I kill Vi?”

Now that he had the cuffs on the guy, O’Bannion felt a little better, a little more in control of the situation. “Well, it looks like you offed someone.”

“It was just a finger,” Howard said. He was still holding his hands out in front of him. Light twinkled and ran along the chain between the handcuffs like liquid silver. “But there are more fingers than one on a hand. And what about the hand’s owner?” Howard’s eyes shifted around the bathroom, which had now gone well beyond gloom; it was filling up with shadows again. “I told it to come back anytime,” Howard whispered, “but I was hysterical. I have decided I ... I am not capable. It grew, you see. It grew when it hit the air.”

Something suddenly splashed inside the closed toilet. Howard’s eyes shifted in that direction. So did Officer O’Bannion’s. The splash came again. It sounded as if a trout had jumped in there.

“No, I most definitely wouldn’t use the toilet,” Howard said. “I’d hold it, if I were you, Officer. I’d hold it just as long as I possibly could, and then use the alley beside the building.”

O’Bannion shivered.

Get hold of yourself, boyo, he told himself sternly. You get hold of yourself, or you’ll wind up as nutty as this guy.

He got up to check the toilet.

“Bad idea,” Howard said. “A really bad idea.”

“What exactly happened in here, Mr. Mitla?” O’Bannion asked. “And what have you stored in the toilet?”

“What happened? it was like ... like ...” Howard trailed off, and then began to smile. It was a relieved smile... but his eyes kept creeping back to the closed lid of the toilet. “It was like Jeopardy,” he said. “In fact, it was like Final Jeopardy. The category is The Inexplicable. The Final Jeopardy answer is, ‘Because they can.’ Do you know what the Final Jeopardy question is, Officer?”

Fascinated, unable to take his eyes from Howard’s, Officer O’Bannion shook his head.

“The Final Jeopardy question,” Howard said in a voice that was cracked and roughened from screaming, “is: ‘Why do terrible things sometimes happen to the nicest people?’ That’s the Final Jeopardy question. It’s all going to take a lot of thought. But I have plenty of time. As long as I stay away from the ... the holes.”

The splash came again. It was heavier this time. The vomitous toilet seat bumped sharply up and down. Officer O’Bannion got up, walked over, and bent down. Howard looked at him with some interest.

“Final Jeopardy, Officer,” said Howard Mitla. “How much do you wish to wager?”

O’Bannion thought about it for a moment ... then grasped the toilet seat and wagered it all.

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MRS. TODD'S SHORTCUT

Stephen King

“There goes the Todd woman,” I said.

Homer Buckland watched the little Jaguar go by and nodded. The woman raised her hand to Homer. Homer nodded his big, shaggy head to her but didn't raise his own hand in return. The Todd family had a big summer home on Castle Lake, and Homer had been their caretaker since time out of mind. I had an idea that he disliked Worth Todd's second wife every bit as much as he'd liked 'Phelia Todd, the first one.

This was just about two years ago and we were sitting on a bench in front of Bell's Market, me with an orange soda-pop, Homer with a glass of mineral water. It was October, which is a peaceful time in Castle Rock. Lots of the lake places still get used on the weekends, but the aggressive, boozy summer socializing is over by then and the hunters with their big guns and their expensive nonresident permits pinned to their orange caps haven't started to come into town yet. Crops have been mostly laid by. Nights are cool, good for sleeping, and old joints like mine haven't yet started to complain. In October the sky over the lake is passing fair, with those big white clouds that move so slow; I like how they seem so flat on the bottoms, and how they are a little gray there, like with a shadow of sundown foretold, and I can watch the sun sparkle on the water and not be bored for some space of minutes. It's in October, sitting on the bench in front of Bell's and watching the lake from afar off, that I still wish I was a smoking man.

“She don't drive as fast as 'Phelia,” Homer said. “I swan I used to think what an old-fashion name she had for a woman that could put a car through its paces like she could.”

Summer people like the Todds are nowhere near as interesting to the year-round residents of small Maine towns as they themselves believe. Year-round folk prefer their own love stones and hate stories and scandals and rumors of scandal. When that textile fellow from Amesbury shot himself, Estonia Corbridge found that after a week or so she couldn't even get invited to lunch on her story of how she

found him with the pistol still in one stiffening hand. But folks are still not done talking about Joe Camber, who got killed by his own dog.

Well, it don't matter. It's just that they are different racecourses we run on. Summer people are trotters; us others that don't put on ties to do our week's work are just pacers. Even so there was quite a lot of local interest when Ophelia Todd disappeared back in 1973. Ophelia was a genuinely nice woman, and she had done a lot of things in town. She worked to raise money for the Sloan Library, helped to refurbish the war memorial, and that sort of thing. But all the summer people like the idea of raising money. You mention raising money and their eyes light up and commence to gleam. You mention raising money and they can get a committee together and appoint a secretary and keep an agenda. They like that. But you mention time (beyond, that is, one big long walloper of a combined cocktail party and committee meeting) and you're out of luck. Time seems to be what summer people mostly set a store by. They lay it by, and if they could put it up in Ball jars like preserves, why, they would. But 'Phelia Todd seemed willing to spend time-to do desk duty in the library as well as to raise money for it. When it got down to using scouring pads and elbow grease on the war memorial, 'Phelia was right out there with town women who had lost sons in three different wars, wearing an overall with her hair done up in a kerchief. And when kids needed ferrying to a summer swim program, you'd be as apt to see her as anyone headed down Landing Road with the back of Worth Todd's big shiny pickup full of kids. A good woman. Not a town woman, but a good woman. And when she disappeared, there was concern. Not grieving, exactly, because a disappearance is not exactly like a death. It's not like chopping something off with a cleaver; more like something running down the sink so slow you don't know it's all gone until long after it is.

" 'Twas a Mercedes she drove," Homer said, answering the question I hadn't asked. "Two-seater sportster. Todd got it for her in sixty-four or sixty-five, I guess. You remember her taking the kids to the lake all those years they had Frogs and Tadpoles?"

“Ayuh.”

“She’d drive ‘em no more than forty, mindful they was in the back. But it chafed her. That woman had lead in her foot and a ball bearing sommers in the back of her ankle.”

It used to be that Homer never talked about his summer people. But then his wife died. Five years ago it was. She was plowing a grade and the tractor tipped over on her and Homer was taken bad off about it. He grieved for two years or so and then seemed to feel better. But he was not the same. He seemed waiting for something to happen, waiting for the next thing. You’d pass his neat little house sometimes at dusk and he would be on the porch smoking a pipe with a glass of mineral water on the porch rail and the sunset would be in his eyes and pipe smoke around his head and you’d think-I did, anyway-Homer is waiting for the next thing. This bothered me over a wider range of my mind than I liked to admit, and at last I decided it was because if it had been me, I wouldn’t have been waiting for the next thing, like a groom who has put on his morning coat and finally has his tie right and is only sitting there on a bed in the upstairs of his house and looking first at himself in the mirror and then at the clock on the mantel and waiting for it to be eleven o’clock so he can get married. If it had been me, I would not have been waiting for the next thing; I would have been waiting for the last thing.

But in that waiting period-which ended when Homer went to Vermont a year later-he sometimes talked about those people. To me, to a few others.

“She never even drove fast with her husband, s’far as I know. But when I drove with her, she made that Mercedes strut.”

A fellow pulled in at the pumps and began to fill up his car. The car had a Massachusetts plate.

“It wasn’t one of these new sports cars that run on unleaded gasoline and hitch every time you step on it; it was one of the old ones, and the speedometer was calibrated all the way up to a hundred and

sixty. It was a funny color of brown and I ast her one time what you called that color and she said it was Champagne. Ain't that good, I says, and she laughs fit to split. I like a woman who will laugh when you don't have to point her right at the joke, you know."

The man at the pumps had finished getting his gas.

"Afternoon, gentlemen," he says as he comes up the steps.

"A good day to you," I says, and he went inside.

"Phelia was always lookin for a shortcut," Homer went on as if we had never been interrupted. "That woman was mad for a shortcut. I never saw the beat of it. She said if you can save enough distance, you'll save time as well. She said her father swore by that scripture. He was a salesman, always on the road, and she went with him when she could, and he was always lookin for the shortest way. So she got in the habit.

"I ast her one time if it wasn't kinda funny-here she was on the one hand, spendin her time rubbin up that old statue in the Square and takin the little ones to their swimmin lessons instead of playing tennis and swimming and getting boozed up like normal summer people, and on the other hand bein so damn set on savin fifteen minutes between here and Fryeburg that thinkin about it probably kep her up nights. It just seemed to me the two things went against each other's grain, if you see what I mean. She just looks at me and says, 'I like being helpful, Homer. I like driving, too-at least sometimes, when it's a challenge-but I don't like the time it takes. It's like mending clothes-sometimes you take tucks and sometimes you let things out. Do you see what I mean?'

"I guess so, missus,' I says, kinda dubious.

"If sitting behind the wheel of a car was my idea of a really good time all the time, I would look for long-cuts,' she says, and that tickled me s'much I had to laugh."

The Massachusetts fellow came out of the store with a six-pack in one hand and some lottery tickets in the other.

“You enjoy your weekend,” Homer says.

“I always do,” the Massachusetts fellow says. “I only wish I could afford to live here all year round.”

“Well, we’ll keep it all in good order for when you can come,” Homer says, and the fellow laughs.

We watched him drive off toward someplace, that Massachusetts plate showing. It was a green one. My Marcy says those are the ones the Massachusetts Motor Registry gives to drivers who ain’t had a accident in that strange, angry, fuming state for two years. If you have, she says, you got to have a red one so people know to watch out for you when they see you on the roll.

“They was in-state people, you know, the both of them,” Homer said, as if the Massachusetts fellow had reminded him of the fact.

“I guess I did know that,” I said.

“The Todds are just about the only birds we got that fly north in the winter. The new one, I don’t think she likes flying north too much.”

He sipped his mineral water and fell silent a moment, thinking.

“She didn’t mind it, though,” Homer said. “At least, I judge she didn’t although she used to complain about it something fierce. The complaining was just a way to explain why she was always lookin for a shortcut.”

“And you mean her husband didn’t mind her traipsing down every wood-road in tarnation between here and Bangor just so she could see if it was nine-tenths of a mile shorter?”

“He didn’t care piss-all,” Homer said shortly, and got up, and went in the store. There now, Owens, I told myself, you know it ain’t safe to

ask him questions when he's yarning, and you went right ahead and asked one, and you have bugged a story that was starting to shape up promising.

I sat there and turned my face up into the sun and after about ten minutes he came out with a boiled egg and sat down. He ate her and I took care not to say nothing and the water on Castle Lake sparkled as blue as something as might be told of in a story about treasure. When Homer had finished his egg and had a sip of mineral water, he went on. I was surprised, but still said nothing. It wouldn't have been wise.

"They had two or three different chunks of rolling iron," he said. "There was the Cadillac, and his truck, and her little Mercedes go-devil. A couple of winters he left the truck, 'case they wanted to come down and do some skiin. Mostly when the summer was over he'd drive the Caddy back up and she'd take her go-devil."

I nodded but didn't speak. In truth, I was afraid to risk another comment. Later I thought it would have taken a lot of comments to shut Homer Buckland up that day. He had been wanting to tell the story of Mrs. Todd's shortcut for a long time.

"Her little go-devil had a special odometer in it that told you how many miles was in a trip, and every time she set off from Castle Lake to Bangor she'd set it to 000-point-O and let her clock up to whatever. She had made a game of it, and she used to chafe me with it."

He paused, thinking that back over.

"No, that ain't right."

He paused more and faint lines showed up on his forehead like steps on a library ladder.

"She made like she made a game of it, but it was a serious business to her. Serious as anything else, anyway." He flapped a hand and I

think he meant the husband. “The glovebox of the little go-devil was filled with maps, and there was a few more in the back where there would be a seat in a regular car. Some was gas station maps, and some was pages that had been pulled from the Rand-McNally Road Atlas; she had some maps from Appalachian Trail guidebooks and a whole mess of topographical survey-squares, too. It wasn’t her having those maps that made me think it wa’n’t a game; it was how she’d drawn lines on all of them, showing routes she’d taken or at least tried to take.

“She’d been stuck a few times, too, and had to get a pull from some farmer with a tractor and chain.

“I was there one day laying tile in the bathroom, sitting there with grout squittering out of every damn crack you could see-I dreamed of nothing but squares and cracks that was bleeding grout that night-and she come stood in the doorway and talked to me about it for quite a while. I used to chafe her about it, but I was also sort of interested, and not just because my brother Franklin used to live down-Bangor and I’d traveled most of the roads she was telling me of. I was interested just because a man like me is always uncommon interested in knowing the shortest way, even if he don’t always want to take it. You that way too?”

“Ayuh,” I said. There’s something powerful about knowing the shortest way, even if you take the longer way because you know your mother-in-law is sitting home. Getting there quick is often for the birds, although no one holding a Massachusetts driver’s license seems to know it. But knowing how to get there quick-or even knowing how to get there a way that the person sitting beside you don’t know ... that has power.

“Well, she had them roads like a Boy Scout has his knots,” Homer said, and smiled his large, sunny grin. “She says, ‘Wait a minute, wait a minute,’ like a little girl, and I hear her through the wall rummaging through her desk, and then she comes back with a little notebook that looked like she’d had it a good long time. Cover was

all rumpled, don't you know, and some of the pages had pulled loose from those little wire rings on one side.

" The way Worth goes-the way most people go-is Route 97 to Mechanic Falls, then Route 11 to Lewiston, and then the Interstate to Bangor. 156.4 miles.' "

I nodded.

" 'If you want to skip the turnpike-and save some distance-you'd go to Mechanic Falls, Route 11 to Lewiston, Route 202 to Augusta, then up Route 9 through China Lake and Unity and Haven to Bangor. That's 144.9 miles.'

" 'You won't save no time that way, missus,' I says, 'not going through Lewiston and Augusta. Although I will admit that drive up the Old Derry Road to Bangor is real pretty.'

" 'Save enough miles and soon enough you'll save time,' she says. 'And I didn't say that's the way I'd go, although I have a good many times; I'm just running down the routes most people use. Do you want me to go on?'

" 'No,' I says, 'just leave me in this cussed bathroom all by myself starin at all these cussed cracks until I start to rave.

" 'There are four major routes in all,' she says. The one by Route 2 is 163.4 miles. I only tried it once. Too long.'

" That's the one I'd hosey if my wife called and told me it was leftovers,' I says, kinda low.

" 'What was that?' she says.

" 'Nothin,' I says. Talkin to the grout.'

" 'Oh. Well, the fourth-and there aren't too many who know about it, although they are all good roads-paved, anyway-is across Speckled Bird Mountain on 219 to 202 beyond Lewiston. Then, if you take

Route 19, you can get around Augusta. Then you take the Old Derry Road. That way is just 129.2.'

"I didn't say nothing for a little while and p'raps she thought I was doubting her because she says, a little pert, 'I know it's hard to believe, but it's so.'

"I said I guessed that was about right, and I thought-looking back-it probably was. Because that's the way I'd usually go when I went down to Bangor to see Franklin when he was still alive. I hadn't been that way in years, though. Do you think a man could just-well-forget a road, Dave?"

I allowed it was. The turnpike is easy to think of. After a while it almost fills a man's mind, and you think not how could I get from here to there but how can I get from here to the turnpike ramp that's closest to there. And that made me think that maybe there are lots of roads all over that are just going begging; roads with rock walls beside them, real roads with blackberry bushes growing alongside them but nobody to eat the berries but the birds and gravel pits with old rusted chains hanging down in low curves in front of their entry-ways, the pits themselves as forgotten as a child's old toys with scumgrass growing up their deserted unremembered sides. Roads that have just been forgot except by the people who live on them and think of the quickest way to get off them and onto the turnpike where you can pass on a hill and not fret over it. We like to joke in Maine that you can't get there from here, but maybe the joke is on us. The truth is there's about a damn thousand ways to do it and man doesn't bother.

Homer continued: "I grouted tile all afternoon in that hot little bathroom and she stood there in the doorway all that time, one foot crossed behind the other, bare-legged, wearin loafers and a khaki-colored skirt and a sweater that was some darker. Hair was drawed back in a hosstail. She must have been thirty-four or -five then, but her face was lit up with what she was tellin me and I swan she looked like a sorority girl home from school on vacation.

“After a while she musta got an idea of how long she’d been there cuttin the air around her mouth because she says, ‘I must be boring the hell out of you, Homer.’

” ‘Yes’m,’ I says, ‘you are. I druther you went away and left me to talk to this damn grout.’

” ‘Don’t be sma’at, Homer,’ she says.

” ‘No, missus, you ain’t borin me,’ I says.

“So she smiles and then goes back to it, pagin through her little notebook like a salesman checkin his orders. She had those four main ways-well, really three because she gave up on Route 2 right away-but she must have had forty different other ways that were play-offs on those. Roads with state numbers, roads without, roads with names, roads without. My head fair spun with ‘em. And finally she says to me, ‘You ready for the blue-ribbon winner, Homer?’

” ‘I guess so,’ I says.

” ‘At least it’s the blue-ribbon winner so far,’ she says. ‘Do you know, Homer, that a man wrote an article in Science Today in 1923 proving that no man could run a mile in under four minutes? He proved it, with all sorts of calculations based on the maximum length of the male thigh-muscles, maximum length of stride, maximum lung capacity, maximum heart-rate, and a whole lot more. I was taken with that article! I was so taken that I gave it to Worth and asked him to give it to Professor Murray in the math department at the University of Maine. I wanted those figures checked because I was sure they must have been based on the wrong postulates, or something. Worth probably thought I was being silly-“Ophelia’s got a bee in her bonnet” is what he says-but he took them. Well, Professor Murray checked through the man’s figures quite carefully ... and do you know what, Homer?’

” ‘No, missus.’

” Those figures were right. The man’s criteria were solid. He proved, back in 1923, that a man couldn’t run a mile in under four minutes. He proved that. But people do it all the time, and do you know what that means?’

” ‘No, missus,’ I said, although I had a glimmer.

” ‘It means that no blue ribbon is forever,’ she says. ‘Someday-if the world doesn’t explode itself in the meantime-someone will run a two-minute mile in the Olympics. It may take a hundred years or a thousand, but it will happen. Because there is no ultimate blue ribbon. There is zero, and there is eternity, and there is mortality, but there is no ultimate.’ “And there she stood, her face clean and scrubbed and shinin, that darkish hair of hers pulled back from her brow, as if to say ‘Just you go ahead and disagree if you can.’ But I couldn’t. Because I believe something like that. It is much like what the minister means, I think, when he talks about grace.

” ‘You ready for the blue-ribbon winner for now?’ she says.

” ‘Ayuh,’ I says, and I even stopped groutin for the time bein. I’d reached the tub anyway and there wasn’t nothing left but a lot of those frikkin squirrelly little corners. She drewed a deep breath and then spieled it out at me as fast as that auctioneer goes over in Gates Falls when he has been putting the whiskey to himself, and I can’t remember it all, but it went something like this.”

Homer Buckland shut his eyes for a moment, his big hands lying perfectly still on his long thighs, his face turned up toward the sun. Then he opened his eyes again and for a moment I swan he looked like her, yes he did, a seventy-year-old man looking like a woman of thirty-four who was at that moment in her time looking like a college girl of twenty, and I can’t remember exactly what he said any more than he could remember exactly what she said, not just because it was complex but because I was so fetched by how he looked sayin it, but it went close enough like this:

” ‘You set out Route 97 and then cut up Denton Street to the Old Townhouse Road and that way you get around Castle Rock downtown but back to 97. Nine miles up you can go an old logger’s road a mile and a half to Town Road #6, which takes you to Big Anderson Road by Sites’ Cider Mill. There’s a cut-road the old-timers call Bear Road, and that gets you to 219. Once you’re on the far side of Speckled Bird Mountain you grab the Stanhouse Road, turn left onto the Bull Pine Road-there’s a swampy patch there but you can spang right through it if you get up enough speed on the gravel-and so you come out on Route 106. 106 cuts through Alton’s Plantation to the Old Derry Road-and there’s two or three woods roads there that you follow and so come out on Route 3 just beyond Derry Hospital. From there it’s only four miles to Route 2 in Etna, and so into Bangor.’

“She paused to get her breath back, then looked at me. ‘Do you know how long that is, all told?’

” ‘No’m,’ I says, thinking it sounds like about a hundred and ninety miles and four bust springs.

” ‘It’s 116.4 miles,’ she says.”

I laughed. The laugh was out of me before I thought I wasn’t doing myself any favor if I wanted to hear this story to the end. But Homer grinned himself and nodded.

“I know. And you know I don’t like to argue with anyone, Dave. But there’s a difference between having your leg pulled and getting it shook like a damn apple tree.

” ‘You don’t believe me,’ she says.

” ‘Well, it’s hard to believe, missus,’ I said.

” ‘Leave that grout to dry and I’ll show you,’ she says. ‘You can finish behind the tub tomorrow. Come on, Homer. I’ll leave a note for Worth-he may not be back tonight anyway-and you can call your

wife! We'll be sitting down to dinner in the Pilot's Grille in'-she looks at her watch- 'two hours and forty-five minutes from right now. And if it's a minute longer, I'll buy you a bottle of Irish Mist to take home with you. You see, my dad was right. Save enough miles and you'll save time, even if you have to go through every damn bog and sump in Kennebec County to do it. Now what do you say?'

"She was lookin at me with her brown eyes just like lamps, there was a devilish look in them that said turn your cap around back'rds, Homer, and climb aboard this hoss, I be first and you be second and let the devil take the hindmost, and there was a grin on her face that said the exact same thing, and I tell you, Dave, I wanted to go. I didn't even want to top that damn can of grout. And I certain sure didn't want to drive that go-devil of hers. I wanted just to sit in it on the shotgun side and watch her get in, see her skirt come up a little, see her pull it down over her knees or not, watch her hair shine."

He trailed off and suddenly let off a sarcastic, choked laugh. That laugh of his sounded like a shotgun loaded with rock salt.

"Just call up Megan and say, 'You know 'Phelia Todd, that woman you're halfway to being so jealous of now you can't see straight and can't ever find a good word to say about her? Well, her and me is going to make this speed-run down to Bangor in that little champagne-colored go-devil Mercedes of hers, so don't wait dinner.'

"Just call her up and say that. Oh yes. Oh ayuh."

And he laughed again with his hands lying there on his legs just as natural as ever was and I seen something in his face that was almost hateful and after a minute he took his glass of mineral water from the railing there and got outside some of it.

"You didn't go," I said.

"Not then."

He laughed, and this laugh was gentler.

“She must have seen something in my face, because it as like she found herself again. She stopped looking like a sorority girl and just looked like ‘Phelia Todd again. She looked down at the notebook like she didn’t know what it was she had been holding and put it down by her side, almost behind her skirt.

“I says, ‘I’d like to do just that thing, missus, but I got to finish up here, and my wife has got a roast on for dinner.’

“She says, ‘I understand, Homer-I just got a little carried away. I do that a lot. All the time, Worth says.’ Then she kinda straightened up and says, ‘But the offer holds, any time you want to go. You can even throw your shoulder to the back end if we get stuck somewhere. Might save me five dollars.’ And she laughed.

” ‘I’ll take you up on it, missus,’ I says, and she seen that I meant what I said and wasn’t just being polite.

” ‘And before you just go believing that a hundred and sixteen miles to Bangor is out of the question, get out your own map and see how many miles it would be as the crow flies.’

“I finished the tiles and went home and ate leftovers-there wa’n’t no roast, and I think ‘Phelia Todd knew it-and after Megan was in bed, I got out my yardstick and a pen and my Mobil map of the state, and I did what she had told me ... because it had laid hold of my mind a bit, you see. I drew a straight line and did out the calculations accordin to the scale of miles. I was some surprised. Because if you went from Castle Rock up there to Bangor like one of those little Piper Cubs could fly on a clear day-if you didn’t have to mind lakes, or stretches of lumber company woods that was chained off, or bogs, or crossing rivers where there wasn’t no bridges, why, it would just be seventy-nine miles, give or take.”

I jumped a little.

“Measure it yourself, if you don’t believe me,” Homer said. “I never knew Maine was so small until I seen that.”

He had himself a drink and then looked around at me.

“There come a time the next spring when Megan was away in New Hampshire visiting with her brother. I had to go down to the Todds’ house to take off the storm doors and put on the screens, and her little Mercedes go-devil was there. She was down by herself.

“She come to the door and says: ‘Homer! Have you come to put on the screen doors?’

“And right off I says: ‘No, missus, I come to see if you want to give me a ride down to Bangor the short way.’

“Well, she looked at me with no expression on her face at all, and I thought she had forgotten all about it. I felt my face gettin red, the way it will when you feel you just pulled one hell of a boner. Then, just when I was getting ready to ‘pologize, her face busts into that grin again and she says, ‘You just stand right there while I get my keys. And don’t change your mind, Homer!’

“She come back a minute later with ‘em in her hand. ‘If. we get stuck, you’ll see mosquitoes just about the size of dragonflies.’

” ‘I’ve seen ‘em as big as English sparrows up in Rangely, missus,’ I said, ‘and I guess we’re both a spot too heavy to be carried off.’

“She laughs. ‘Well, I warned you, anyway. Come on, Homer.’

” ‘And if we ain’t there in two hours and forty-five minutes,’ I says, kinda sly, ‘you was gonna buy me a bottle of Irish Mist.’

“She looks at me kinda surprised, the driver’s door of the go-devil open and one foot inside. ‘Hell, Homer,’ she says, ‘I told you that was the Blue Ribbon for then. I’ve found a way up there that’s shorter. We’ll be there in two and a half hours. Get in here, Homer. We are going to roll.’ “

He paused again, hands lying calm on his thighs, his eyes dulling, perhaps seeing that champagne-colored two-seater heading up the Todds' steep driveway.

“She stood the car still at the end of it and says, ‘You sure?’

” ‘Let her rip,’ I says. The ball bearing in her ankle rolled and that heavy foot come down. I can’t tell you nothing much about whatall happened after that. Except after a while I couldn’t hardly take my eyes off her. There was somethin wild that crep into her face, Dave-something wild and something free, and it frightened my heart. She was beautiful, and I was took with love for her, anyone would have been, any man, anyway, and maybe any woman too, but I was scairt of her too, because she looked like she could kill you if her eye left the road and fell on you and she decided to love you back. She was wearin blue jeans and a old white shirt with the sleeves rolled up-I had a idea she was maybe fixin to paint somethin on the back deck when I came by-but after we had been goin for a while seemed like she was dressed in nothin but all this white billowy stuff like a pitcher in one of those old gods-and-goddesses books.”

He thought, looking out across the lake, his face very somber.

“Like the huntress that was supposed to drive the moon across the sky.” “Diana?”

“Ayuh. Moon was her go-devil. ‘Phelia looked like that to me and I just tell you fair out that I was stricken in love for her and never would have made a move, even though I was some younger then than I am now. I would not have made a move even had I been twenty, although I suppose I might of at sixteen, and been killed for it-killed if she looked at me was the way it felt.

“She was like that woman drivin the moon across the sky, halfway up over the splashboard with her gossamer stoles all flyin out behind her in silver cobwebs and her hair streamin back to show the dark little hollows of her temples, lashin those horses and tellin me to get

along faster and never mind how they blowed, just faster, faster, faster.

“We went down a lot of woods roads-the first two or three I knew, and after that I didn’t know none of them. We must have been a sight to those trees that had never seen nothing with a motor in it before but big old pulp-trucks and snowmobiles; that little go-devil that would most likely have looked more at home on the Sunset Boulevard than shooting through those woods, spitting and bulling its way up one hill and then slamming down the next through those dusty green bars of afternoon sunlight-she had the top down and I could smell everything in those woods, and you know what an old fine smell that is, like something which has been mostly left alone and is not much troubled. We went on across corduroy which had been laid over some of the boggiest parts, and black mud squelched up between some of those cut logs and she laughed like a kid. Some of the logs was old and rotted, because there hadn’t been nobody down a couple of those roads-except for her, that is-in I’m going to say five or ten years. We was alone, except for the birds and whatever animals seen us.’ The sound of that go-devil’s engine, first buzzin along and then windin up high and fierce when she punched in the clutch and shifted down ... that was the only motor-sound I could hear. And although I knew we had to be close to someplace all the time-I mean, these days you always are-I started to feel like we had gone back in time, and there wasn’t nothing. That if we stopped and I climbed a high tree, I wouldn’t see nothing in any direction but woods and woods and more woods. And all the time she’s just hammering that thing along, her hair all out behind her, smilin, her eyes flashin. So we come out on the Speckled Bird Mountain Road and for a while I known where we were again, and then she turned off and for just a little bit I thought I knew, and then I didn’t even bother to kid myself no more. We went cut-slam down another woods road, and then we come out-1 swear it-on a nice paved road with a sign that said MOTORWAY B. You ever heard of a road in the state of Maine that was called MOTORWAY B?”

“No,” I says. “Sounds English.”

“Ayuh. Looked English. These trees like willows overhung the road. ‘Now watch out here, Homer,’ she says, ‘one of those nearly grabbed me a month ago and gave me an Indian burn.’

“I didn’t know what she was talkin about and started to say so, and then I seen that even though there was no wind, the branches of those trees was dippin down-they was waverin down. They looked black and wet inside the fuzz of green on them. I couldn’t believe what I was seein. Then one of em snatched off my cap and I knew I wasn’t asleep. ‘Hi!’ I shouts. ‘Give that back!’

” Too late now, Homer,’ she says, and laughs. ‘There’s daylight, just up ahead ... we’re okay.’

“Then another one of ‘em comes down, on her side this time, and snatches at her-I swear it did. She ducked, and it caught in her hair and pulled a lock of it out. ‘Ouch, dammit that hurts!’ she yells, but she was laughin, too. The car swerved a little when she ducked and I got a look into the woods and holy God, Dave! Every thin in there was movin. There was grasses wavin and plants that was all knotted together so it seemed like they made faces, and I seen somethin sittin in a squat on top of a stump, and it looked like a tree-toad, only it was as big as a full-growed cat.

“Then we come out of the shade to the top of a hill and she says, ‘There! That was exciting, wasn’t it?’ as if she was talkin about no more than a walk through the Haunted House at the Fryeburg Fair.

“About five minutes later we swung onto another of her woods roads. I didn’t want no more woods right then-I can tell you that for sure-but these were just plain old woods. Half an hour after that, we was pulling into the parking lot of the Pilot’s Grille in Bangor. She points to that little odometer for trips and says, ‘Take a gander, Homer.’ I did, and it said 111.6. ‘What do you think now? Do you believe in my shortcut?’

“That wild look had mostly faded out of her, and she was just ‘Phelia Todd again. But that other look wasn’t entirely gone. It was like she

was two women, 'Phelia and Diana, and the part of her that was Diana was so much in control when she was driving the back roads that the part that was 'Phelia didn't have no idea that her shortcut was taking her through places ... places that ain't on any map of Maine, not even on those survey-squares.

"She says again, 'What do you think of my shortcut,

Homer?'

"And I says the first thing to come into my mind, which ain't something you'd usually say to a lady like 'Phelia Todd. 'It's a real piss-cutter, missus,' I says.

"She laughs, just as pleased as punch, and I seen it then, just as clear as glass: She didn't remember none of the funny stuff. Not the willow-branches-except they weren't willows, not at all, not really anything like em, or anything else-that grabbed off m'hat, not that MOTORWAY B sign, or that awful-lookin toad-thing. She didn't remember none of that funny stuff! Either I had dreamed it was there or she had dreamed it wasn't. All I knew for sure, Dave, was that we had rolled only a hundred and eleven miles and gotten to Bangor, and that wasn't no daydream; it was right there on the little go-devil's odometer, in black and white.

" 'Well, it is,' she says. 'It is a piss-cutter. I only wish I could get Worth to give it a go sometime ... but he'll never get out of his rut unless someone blasts him out of it, and it would probably take a Titan II missile to do that, because I believe he has built himself a fallout shelter at the bottom of that rut. Come on in, Homer, and let's dump some dinner into you.'

"And she bought me one hell of a dinner, Dave, but I couldn't eat very much of it. I kep thinkin about what the ride back might be like, now that it was drawing down dark. Then, about halfway through the meal, she excused herself and made a telephone call. When she came back she ast me if I would mind drivin the go-devil back to Castle Rock for her. She said she had talked to some woman who

was on the same school committee as her, and the woman said they had some kind of problem about somethin or other. She said she'd grab herself a Hertz car if Worth couldn't see her back down. 'Do you mind awfully driving back in the dark?' she ast me.

"She looked at me, kinda smilin, and I knew she remembered some of it all right-Christ knows how much, but she remembered enough to know I wouldn't want to try her way after dark, if ever at all ... although I seen by the light in her eyes that it wouldn't have bothered her a bit.

"So I said it wouldn't bother me, and I finished my meal better than when I started it. It was drawin down dark by the time we was done, and she run us over to the house of the woman she'd called. And when she gets out she looks at me with that same light in her eyes and says, 'Now, you're sure you don't want to wait, Homer? I saw a couple of side roads just today, and although I can't find them on my maps, I think they might chop a few miles.'

"I says, 'Well, missus, I would, but at my age the best bed to sleep in is my own, I've found. I'll take your car back and never put a ding in her ... although I guess I'll probably put on some more miles than you did.'

"Then she laughed, kind of soft, and she give me a kiss. That was the best kiss I ever had in my whole life, Dave. It was just on the cheek, and it was the chaste kiss of a married woman, but it was as ripe as a peach, or like those flowers that open in the dark, and when her lips touched my skin I felt like ... I don't know exactly what I felt like, because a man can't easily hold on to those things that happened to him with a girl who was ripe when the world was young or how those things felt-I'm talking around what I mean, but I think you understand. Those things all get a red cast to them in your memory and you cannot see through it at all.

" 'You're a sweet man, Homer, and I love you for listening to me and riding with me,' she says. 'Drive safe.'

“Then in she went, to that woman’s house. Me, I drove home.”

“How did you go?” I asked.

He laughed softly. “By the turnpike, you damned fool,” he said, and I never seen so many wrinkles in his face before as I did then.

He sat there, looking into the sky.

“Came the summer she disappeared. I didn’t see much of her ... that was the summer we had the fire, you’ll remember, and then the big storm that knocked down all the trees. A busy time for caretakers. Oh, I thought about her from time to time, and about that day, and about that kiss, and it started to seem like a dream to me. Like one time, when I was about sixteen and couldn’t think about nothing but girls. I was out plowing George Bascomb’s west field, the one that looks acrost the lake at the mountains, dreamin about what teenage boys dream of. And I pulled up this rock with the harrow blades, and it split open, and it bled. At least, it looked to me like it bled. Red stuff come runnin out of the cleft in the rock and soaked into the soil. And I never told no one but my mother, and I never told her what it meant to me, or what happened to me, although she washed my drawers and maybe she knew. Anyway, she suggested I ought to pray on it. Which I did, but I never got no enlightenment, and after a while something started to suggest to my mind that it had been a dream. It’s that way, sometimes. There is holes in the middle, Dave. Do you know that?”

“Yes,” I says, thinking of one night when I’d seen something. That was in ‘59, a bad year for us, but my kids didn’t know it was a bad year; all they knew was that they wanted to eat just like always. I’d seen a bunch of whitetail in Henry Brugger’s back field, and I was out there after dark with a jacklight in August. You can shoot two when they’re summer-fat; the second’ll come back and sniff at the first as if to say What the hell? Is it fall already? and you can pop him like a bowlin pin. You can hack off enough meat to feed yowwens for six weeks and bury what’s left. Those are two whitetails the hunters who come in November don’t get a shot at, but kids have to eat. Like

the man from Massachusetts said, he'd like to be able to afford to live here the year around, and all I can say is sometimes you pay for the privilege after dark. So there I was, and I seen this big orange light in the sky; it come down and down, and I stood and watched it with my mouth hung on down to my breastbone and when it hit the lake the whole of it was lit up for a minute a purple-orange that seemed to go right up to the sky in rays. Wasn't nobody ever said nothing to me about that light, and I never said nothing to nobody myself, partly because I was afraid they'd laugh, but also because they'd wonder what the hell I'd been doing out there after dark to start with. And after a while it was like' Homer said-it seemed like a dream I had once had, and it didn't signify to me because I couldn't make nothing of it which would turn under my hand. It was like a moonbeam. It didn't have no handle and it didn't have no blade. I couldn't make it work so I left it alone, like a man does when he knows the day is going to come up nevertheless.

"There are holes in the middle of things," Homer said, and he sat up straighter, like he was mad. "Right in the damn middle of things, not even to the left or right where your p'riph'ral vision is and you could say 'Well, but hell-' They are there and you go around them like you'd go around a pothole in the road that would break an axle. You know? And you forget it. Or like if you are plowin, you can plow a dip. But if there's somethin like a break in the earth, where you see darkness, like a cave might be there, you say 'Go around, old hoss. Leave that alone! I got a good shot over here to the left'ards.' Because it wasn't a cave you was lookin for, or some kind of college excitement, but good plowin.

"Holes in the middle of things."

He fell still a long time then and I let him be still. Didn't have no urge to move him. And at last he says:

"She disappeared in August. I seen her for the first time in early July, and she looked..." Homer turned to me and spoke each word with careful, spaced emphasis. "Dave Owens, she looked gorgeous! Gorgeous and wild and almost untamed. The little wrinkles I'd

started to notice around her eyes all seemed to be gone. Worth Todd, he was at some conference or something in Boston. And she stands there at the edge of the deck-I was out in the middle with my shirt off-and she says, 'Homer, you'll never believe it.' " 'No, missus, but I'll try,' I says. " 'I found two new roads,' she says, 'and I got up to Bangor this last time in just sixty-seven miles.'

"I remembered what she said before and I says, 'That's not possible, missus. Beggin your pardon, but I did the mileage on the map myself, and seventy-nine is tops ... as the crow flies.'

"She laughed, and she looked prettier than ever. Like a goddess in the sun, on one of those hills in a story where there's nothing but green grass and fountains and no puckies to tear at a man's forearms at all. 'That's right,' she says, 'and you can't run a mile in under four minutes. It's been mathematically proved.'

" 'It ain't the same,' I says.

" 'It's the same,' she says. 'Fold the map and see how many miles it is then, Homer. It can be a little less than a straight line if you fold it a little, or it can be a lot less if you fold it a lot.'

"I remembered our ride then, the way you remember a dream, and I says, 'Missus, you can fold a map on paper but you can't fold land. Or at least you shouldn't ought to try. You want to leave it alone.'

" 'No sir,' she says. 'It's the one thing right now in my life that I won't leave alone, because it's there, and it's mine.'

"Three weeks later-this would be about two weeks before she disappeared-she give me a call from Bangor. She says, 'Worth has gone to New York, and I am coming down. I've misplaced my damn key, Homer. I'd like you to open the house so I can get in.'

"Well, that call come at eight o'clock, just when it was starting to come down dark. I had a sanwidge and a beer before leaving-about twenty minutes. Then I took a ride down there. All in all, I'd say I was

forty-five minutes. When I got down there to the Todds', I seen there was a light on in the pantry I didn't leave on while I was comin down the driveway. I was lookin at that, and I almost run right into her little go-devil. It was parked kind of on a slant, the way a drunk would park it, and it was splashed with muck all the way up to the windows, and there was this stuff stuck in that mud along the body that looked like seaweed... only when my lights hit it, it seemed to be movin. I parked behind it and got out of my truck. That stuff wasn't seaweed, but it was weeds, and it was movin... kinda slow and sluggish, like it was dyin. I touched a piece of it, and it tried to wrap itself around my hand. It felt nasty and awful. I drug my hand away and wiped it on my pants. I went around to the front of the car. It looked like it had come through about ninety miles of splash and low country. Looked tired, it did. Bugs was splashed all over the windshield-only they didn't look like no kind of bugs I ever seen before. There was a moth that was about the size of a sparrow, its wings still flappin a little, feeble and dyin. There was things like mosquitoes, only they had real eyes that you could see-and they seemed to be seein me. I could hear those weeds scrapin against the body of the go-devil, dyin, tryin to get a hold on somethin. And all I could think was Where in the hell has she been? And how did she get here in only three-quarters of an hour? Then I seen somethin else. There was some kind of a animal half-smashed onto the radiator grille, just under where that Mercedes ornament is-the one that looks kinda like a star looped up into a circle? Now most small animals you kill on the road is bore right under the car, because they are crouching when it hits them, hoping it'll just go over and leave them with their hide still attached to their meat. But every now and then one will jump, not away, but right at the damn car, as if to get in one good bite of whatever the buggardly thing is that's going to kill it-I have known that to happen. This thing had maybe done that. And it looked mean enough to jump a Sherman tank. It looked like something which come of a mating between a woodchuck and a weasel, but there was other stuff thrown in that a body didn't even want to look at. It hurt your eyes, Dave; worse'n that, it hurt your mind. Its pelt was matted with blood, and there was claws sprung out of the pads on its feet like a cat's claws, only longer. It had big yellowy eyes, only they

was glazed. When I was a kid I had a porcelain marble-a croaker-that looked like that. And teeth. Long thin needle teeth that looked almost like darning needles, stickin out of its mouth. Some of them was sunk right into that steel grillwork. That's why it was still hanging on; it had hung its own self on by the teeth. I looked at it and knowed it had a headful of poison just like a rattlesnake, and it jumped at that go-devil when it saw it was about to be run down, tryin to bite it to death. And I wouldn't be the one to try and yonk it offa there because I had cuts on my hands-hay-cuts-and I thought it would kill me as dead as a stone parker if some of that poison seeped into the cuts.

"I went around to the driver's door and opened it. The inside light come on, and I looked at that special odometer that she set for trips ... and what I seen there was 31.6.

"I looked at that for a bit, and then I went to the back door. She'd forced the screen and broke the glass by the lock so she could get her hand through and let herself in. There was a note that said: 'Dear Homer-got here a little sooner than I thought I would. Found a shortcut, and it is a dilly! You hadn't come yet so I let myself in like a burglar. Worth is coming day after tomorrow. Can you get the screen fixed and the door reglazed by then? Hope so. Things like that always bother him. If I don't come out to say hello, you'll know I'm asleep. The drive was very tiring, but I was here in no time! Ophelia.'

' 'Tirin! I took another look at that bogey-thing hangin offa the grille of her car, and I thought Yessir, it must have been tiring. By God, yes."

He paused again, and cracked a restless knuckle. "I seen her only once more. About a week later. Worth was there, but he was swimmin out in the lake, back and forth, back and forth, like he was sawin wood or signin papers. More like he was signin papers, I guess.

" 'Missus,' I says, 'this ain't my business, but you ought to leave well enough alone. That night you corne back and broke the glass of the door to come in, I seen somethin hangin off the front of your car-'

” ‘Oh, the chuck! I took care of that,’ she says. ” ‘Christ!’ I says. ‘I hope you took some care!’ ” ‘I wore Worth’s gardening gloves,’ she said. ‘It wasn’t anything anyway, Homer, but a jumped-up woodchuck with a little poison in it.’

” ‘But missus,’ I says, ‘where there’s woodchucks there’s bears. And if that’s what the woodchucks look like along your shortcut, what’s going to happen to you if a bear shows up?’

“She looked at me, and I seen that other woman in her-that Diana-woman. She says, ‘If things are different along those roads, Homer, maybe I am different, too. Look at this.’

“Her hair was done up in a clip at the back, looked sort of like a butterfly and had a stick through it. She let it down. It was the kind of hair that would make a man wonder what it would look like spread out over a pillow. She says, ‘It was coming in gray, Homer. Do you see any gray?’ And she spread it with her fingers so the sun could shine on it.

” ‘No’m,’ I says.

“She looks at me, her eyes all a-sparkle, and she says, ‘Your wife is a good woman, Homer Buckland, but she has seen me in the store and in the post office, and we’ve passed the odd word or two, and I have seen her looking at my hair in a kind of satisfied way that only women know. I know what she says, and what she tells her friends ... that Ophelia Todd has started dyeing her hair. But I have not. I have lost my way looking for a shortcut more than once ... lost my way ... and lost my gray.’ And she laughed, not like a college girl but like a girl in high school. I admired her and longed for her beauty, but I seen that other beauty in her face as well just then ... and I felt afraid again. Afraid for her, and afraid of her.

” ‘Missus,’ I says, ‘you stand to lose more than a little sta’ch in your hair.’

” ‘No,’ she says. ‘I tell you I am different over there ... I am all myself over there. When I am going along that road in my little car I am not Ophelia Todd, Worth Todd’s wife who could never carry a child to term, or that woman who tried to write poetry and failed at it, or the woman who sits and takes notes in committee meetings, or anything or anyone else. When I am on that road I am in the heart of myself, and I feel like-’

” ‘Diana,’ I said.

“She looked at me kind of funny and kind of surprised, and then she laughed. ‘O like some goddess, I suppose,’ she said. ‘She will do better than most because I am a night person-I love to stay up until my book is done or until the National Anthem comes on the TV, and because I am very pale, like the moon-Worth is always saying I need a tonic, or blood tests or some sort of similar bosh. But in her heart what every woman wants to be is some kind of goddess, I think-men pick up a ruined echo of that thought and try to put them on pedestals (a woman, who will pee down her own leg if she does not squat! it’s funny when you stop to think of it)-but what a man senses is not what a woman wants. A woman wants to be in the clear, is all. To stand if she will, or walk ...” Her eyes turned toward that little go-devil in the driveway, and narrowed. Then she smiled. ‘Or to drive, Homer. A man will not see that. He thinks a goddess wants to loll on a slope somewhere on the foothills of Olympus and eat fruit, but there is no god or goddess in that. All a woman wants is what a man wants-a woman wants to drive.’

” ‘Be careful where you drive, missus, is all,’ I says, and she laughs and give me a kiss spang in the middle of the forehead.

“She says, ‘I will, Homer,’ but it didn’t mean nothing, and I known it, because she said it like a man who says he’ll be careful to his wife or his girl when he knows he won’t ... can’t.

“I went back to my truck and waved to her once, and it was a week later that Worth reported her missing. Her and that go-devil both. Todd waited seven years and had her declared legally dead, and

then he waited another year for good measure-I'll give the sucker that much-and then he married the second Missus Todd. the one that just went by. And I don't expect you'll believe a single damn word of the whole yarn."

In the sky one of those big flat-bottomed clouds moved enough to disclose the ghost of the moon-half-full and pale as milk. And something in my heart leaped up at the sight, half in fright, half in love.

"I do though," I said. "Every frigging damned word. And even if it ain't true, Homer, it ought to be."

He give me a hug around the neck with his forearm, which is all men can do since the world don't let them kiss but only women, and laughed, and got up.

"Even if it shouldn't ought to be, it is," he said. He got his watch out of his pants and looked at it. "I got to go down the road and check on the Scott place. You want to come?" "I believe I'll sit here for a while," I said, "and think." He went to the steps, then turned back and looked at me, half-smiling. "I believe she was right," he said. "She was different along those roads she found ... wasn't nothing that would dare touch her. You or me, maybe, but not her.

"And I believe she's young."

Then he got in his truck and set off to check the Scott place.

That was two years ago, and Homer has since gone to Vermont, as I think I told you. One night he come over to see me. His hair was combed, he had a shave, and he smelled of some nice lotion. His face was clear and his eyes were alive. That night he looked sixty instead of seventy, and I was glad for him and I envied him and I hated him a little, too. Arthritis is one buggardly great old fisherman, and that night Homer didn't look like arthritis had any fishhooks sunk into his hands the way they were sunk into mine.

“I’m going,” he said.

“Ayuh?”

“Ayuh.”

“All right; did you see to forwarding your mail?”

“Don’t want none forwarded,” he said. “My bills are paid. I am going to make a clean break.”

“Well, give me your address. I’ll drop you a line from one time to the another, old hoss.” Already I could feel loneliness settling over me like a cloak ... and looking at him, I knew that things were not quite what they seemed.

“Don’t have none yet,” he said.

“All right,” I said. “Is it Vermont, Homer?”

“Well,” he said, “it’ll do for people who want to know.”

I almost didn’t say it and then I did. “What does she look like now?”

“Like Diana,” he said. “But she is kinder.”

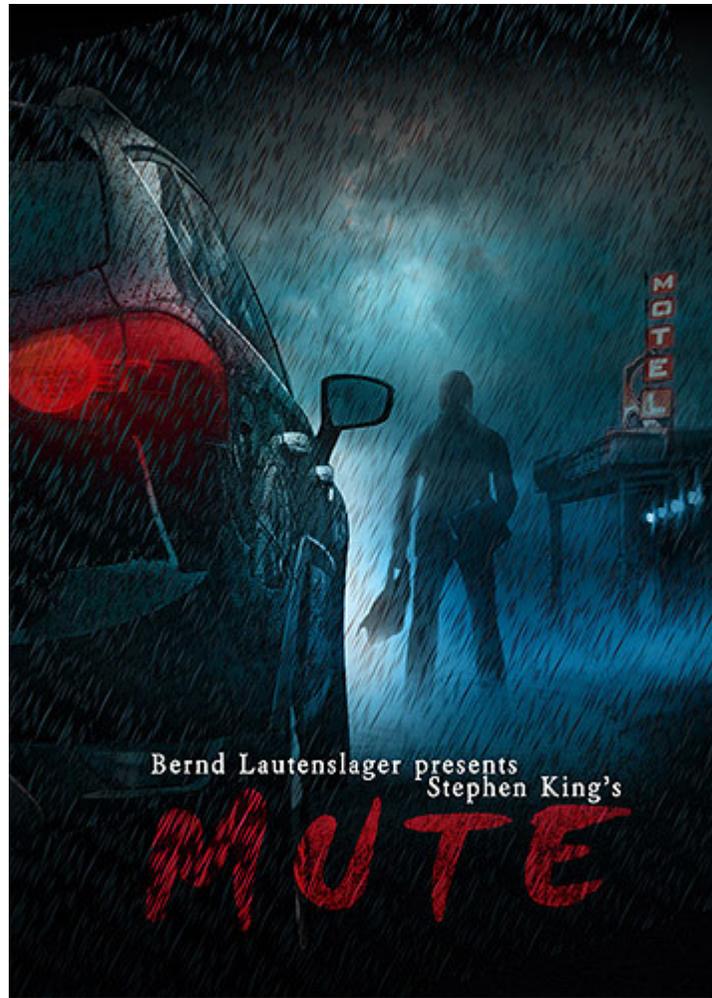
“I envy you, Homer,” I said, and I did.

I stood at the door. It was twilight in that deep part of summer when the fields fill with perfume and Queen Anne’s Lace. A full moon was beating a silver track across the lake. He went across my porch and down the steps. A car was standing on the soft shoulder of the road, its engine idling heavy, the way the old ones do that still run full bore straight ahead and damn the torpedoes. Now that I think of it, that car looked like a torpedo. It looked beat up some, but as if it could go the ton without breathin hard. He stopped at the foot of my steps and picked something up-it was his gas can, the big one that holds ten gallons. He went down my walk to the passenger side of the car. She leaned over and opened the door. The inside light came on and just

for a moment I saw her, long red hair around her face, her forehead shining like a lamp. Shining like the moon. He got in and she drove away. I stood out on my porch and watched the taillights of her little go-devil twinkling red in the dark ... getting smaller and smaller. They were like embers, then they were like flickerflies, and then they were gone.

Vermont, I tell the folks from town, and Vermont they believe, because it's as far as most of them can see inside their heads. Sometimes I almost believe it myself, mostly when I'm tired and done up. Other times I think about them, though-all this October I have done so, it seems, because October is the time when men think mostly about far places and the roads, which might get them there. I sit on the bench in front of Bell's Market and think about Homer Buckland and about the beautiful girl who leaned over to open his door when he come down that path with the full red gasoline can in his right hand-she looked like a girl of no more than sixteen, a girl on her learner's permit, and her beauty was terrible, but I believe it would no longer kill the man it turned itself on; for a moment her eyes lit on me, I was not killed, although part of me died at her feet.

Olympus must be a glory to the eyes and the heart, and there are those who crave it and those who find a clear way to it, mayhap, but I know Castle Rock like the back of my hand and I could never leave it for no shortcuts where the roads may go; in October the sky over the lake is no glory but it is passing fair, with those big white clouds that move so slow; I sit here on the bench, and think about 'Phelia Todd and Homer Buckland, and I don't necessarily wish I was where they are ... but I still wish I was a smoking man.



Bernd Lautenslager presents
Stephen King's

MUTE

MUTE

Stephen King

There were three confession booths. The light over the door of the middle one was on. No one was waiting. The church was empty. Colored light came in through the windows and made squares on the central aisle. Monette thought about leaving and didn't. Instead he walked to the booth that was open for business and went inside. When he closed the door and sat down, the little slider on his right opened. In front of him, tacked to the wall with a blue pushpin, was a file card. Typed on it was FOR ALL HAVE SINNED AND FALLEN SHORT OF GOD'S GLORY. It had been a long time, but Monette didn't think that was standard equipment. He didn't even think it was Baltimore Catechism.

From the other side of the mesh screen, the priest spoke. "How you doing, my son?"

Monette didn't think that was standard, either. But it was all right. Just the same, he couldn't reply at first. Not a word. And that was sort of funny, considering what he had to say.

"Son? Cat got your tongue?"

Still nothing. The words were there, but they were all blocked up. Absurd or not, Monette had a sudden image of a clogged toilet.

The blur beyond the screen shifted. "Been a while?"

"Yes," Monette said. It was something.

"Want me to give you a hint?"

"No, I remember. Bless me, Father, for I have sinned."

"Uh-huh, and how long has it been since your last confession?"

"I don't remember. A long time. Not since I was a kid."

“Well, take it easy—it’s like riding a bike.”

But for a moment he could still say nothing. He looked at the typed message on the pushpin and his throat worked. His hands were kneading themselves, tighter and tighter, until they made a big fist that was rocking back and forth between his thighs.

“Son? The day is rolling by, and I have company coming for lunch. Actually, my company is bringing lu—”

“Father, I may have committed a terrible sin.”

Now the priest was silent for a while. Mute, Monette thought. There was a white word if there ever was one. Type it on a file card and it ought to disappear.

When the priest on the other side of the screen spoke again, his voice was still friendly but more grave. “What’s your sin, my son?”

And Monette said, “I don’t know. You’ll have to tell me.”

- 2 -

It was starting to rain when Monette came up on the northbound entrance ramp to the turnpike. His suitcase was in the trunk, and his sample cases—big boxy things, the kind lawyers tote when they’re taking evidence into court—were in the backseat. One was brown, one black. Both were embossed with the Wolfe & Sons logo: a timber wolf with a book in its mouth. Monette was a salesman. He covered all of northern New England. It was Monday morning. It had been a bad weekend, very bad. His wife had moved out to a motel, where she was probably not alone. Soon she might go to jail. Certainly there would be a scandal, and infidelity was going to be the least of it.

On the lapel of his jacket, he wore a button reading, ASK ME ABOUT THE BEST FALL LIST EVER!!

There was a man standing at the foot of the ramp. He was wearing old clothes and holding up a sign as Monette approached and the rain grew stronger. There was a battered brown knapsack between feet dressed in dirty sneakers. The Velcro closure of one sneaker had come loose and stuck up like a cockeyed tongue. The hitchhiker had no cap, let alone an umbrella.

At first all Monette could make out of the sign were crudely drawn red lips with a black slash drawn diagonally through them. When he got a little closer, he saw the words above the slashed mouth read I AM MUTE! Below the slashed mouth was this: WILL YOU GIVE ME A RIDE???

Monette put on his blinker to make his turn onto the ramp. The hitchhiker flipped the sign over. On the other side was an ear, just as crudely drawn, with a slash through it. Above the ear: I AM DEAF! Below it: PLEASE MAY I HAVE A RIDE???

Monette had driven millions of miles since he was sixteen, most of them in the dozen years he had been repping for Wolfe & Sons, selling one best fall list ever after another, and during that time he had never picked up a single hitchhiker. Today he swerved over at the edge of the ramp with no hesitation and came to a stop. The St. Christopher's medal looped over the rearview mirror was still swinging back and forth when he used the button on his door to pop open the locks. Today he felt he had nothing to lose.

The hitchhiker slid in and put his battered little pack between his damp and dirty sneakers. Monette had thought, looking at him, that the fellow would smell bad, and he wasn't wrong. He said, "How far you going?"

The hitchhiker shrugged and pointed up the ramp. Then he bent and carefully put his sign on top of his pack. His hair was stringy and thin. There was some gray in it.

"I know which way, but ..." Monette realized the man wasn't hearing him. He waited for him to straighten up. A car blew past and up the

ramp, honking even though Monette had left him plenty of room to get by. Monette gave him the finger. This he had done before, but never for such minor annoyances.

The hitchhiker fastened his seat belt and looked at Monette, as if to ask what the holdup was. There were lines on his face, and stubble. Monette couldn't even begin to guess his age. Somewhere between old and not old, that was all he knew.

“How far are you going?” Monette asked, this time enunciating each word, and when the guy still only looked at him—average height, skinny, no more than a hundred and fifty pounds—he said, “Can you read lips?” He touched his own.

The hitchhiker shook his head and made some hand gestures.

Monette kept a pad in the console. While he wrote How far? on it, another car cruised past, now pulling up a fine rooster tail of moisture. Monette was going all the way to Derry, a hundred and sixty miles, and these were the kind of driving conditions he usually loathed, second only to heavy snow. But today he reckoned it would be all right. Today the weather—and the big rigs, pulling up their secondary storms of flying water as they droned past—would keep him occupied.

Not to mention this guy. His new passenger. Who looked at the note, then back at Monette. It occurred to Monette later that maybe the guy couldn't read, either—learning to read when you're a deaf-mute had to be damn hard—but understood the question mark. The man pointed through the windshield and up the ramp. Then he opened and closed his hands eight times. Or maybe it was ten. Eighty miles. Or a hundred. If he knew at all.

“Waterville?” Monette guessed.

The hitchhiker looked at him blankly.

“Okay,” Monette said. “Whatever. Just tap me on the shoulder when we get where you’re going.”

The hitchhiker looked at him blankly.

“Well, I guess you will,” Monette said. “Assuming you’ve even got a destination in mind, that is.” He checked his rearview, then got rolling. “You’re pretty much cut off, aren’t you?”

The guy was still looking at him. He shrugged and put his palms over his ears.

“I know,” Monette said, and merged. “Pretty much cut off. Phone lines down. But today I almost wish I was you and you were me.” He paused. “Almost. Mind some music?”

And when the hitchhiker just turned his head away and looked out the window, Monette had to laugh at himself. Debussy, AC/DC, or Rush Limbaugh, it was all the same to this guy.

He had bought the new Josh Ritter CD for his daughter—it was her birthday in a week—but hadn’t remembered to send it to her yet. Too many other things going on just lately. He set the cruise control once they’d cleared Portland, slit the wrapping with his thumb, and stuck the CD in the player. He supposed it was now technically a used CD, not the kind of thing you give your beloved only child. Well, he could always buy her another one. Assuming, that was, he still had money to buy one with.

Josh Ritter turned out to be pretty good. Kind of like early Dylan, only with a better attitude. As he listened, he mused on money. Affording a new CD for Kelsie’s birthday was the least of his problems. The fact that what she really wanted—and needed—was a new laptop wasn’t very high on the list either. If Barb had done what she said she had done—what the SAD office confirmed that she’d done—he didn’t know how he was going to afford the kid’s last year at Case Western. Even assuming he still had a job himself. That was a problem.

He turned the music up to drown the problem out and partially succeeded, but by the time they reached Gardiner, the last chord had died out. The hitchhiker's face and body were turned away to the passenger window. Monette could see only the back of his stained and faded duffle coat, with too-thin hair straggling down over the collar in bunches. It looked like there had been something printed on the back of the coat once, but now it was too faded to make out.

That's the story of this poor schmo's life, Monette thought.

At first Monette couldn't decide if the hitchhiker was dozing or looking at the scenery. Then he noted the slight downward tilt of the man's head and the way his breath was fogging the glass of the passenger window, and decided dozing was more likely. And why not? The only thing more boring than the Maine Turnpike south of Augusta was the Maine Turnpike south of Augusta in a cold spring rain.

Monette had other CDs in the center console, but instead of rummaging through them, he turned off the car's sound system. And after he'd passed through the Gardiner toll station—not stopping, only slowing, the wonders of E-ZPass—he began to talk.

- 3 -

Monette stopped talking and checked his watch. It was quarter to noon, and the priest had said he had company coming for lunch. That the company was bringing lunch, actually.

“Father, I'm sorry this is taking so long. I'd speed it up if I knew how, but I don't.”

“That's all right, son. I'm interested now.”

“Your company—”

“Will wait while I'm doing the Lord's work. Son, did this man rob you?”

“No,” Monette said. “Unless you count my peace of mind. Does that count?”

“Most assuredly. What did he do?”

“Nothing. Looked out the window. I thought he was dozing, but later I had reasons to think I was wrong about that.”

“What did you do?”

“Talked about my wife,” Monette said. Then he stopped and considered. “No, I didn’t. I vented about my wife. I ranted about my wife. I spewed about my wife. I ... you see ...” He struggled with it, lips pressed tightly together, looking down at that big twisting fist of hands between his thighs. Finally he burst out, “He was a deaf-mute, don’t you see? I could say anything and not have to listen to him make an analysis, give an opinion, or offer me sage advice. He was deaf, he was mute, hell, I thought he was probably asleep, and I could say any fucking thing I wanted to!”

In the booth with the file card pinned to the wall, Monette winced.

“Sorry, Father.”

“What exactly did you say about her?” the priest asked.

“I told him she was fifty-four,” Monette said. “That was how I started. Because that was the part ... you know, that was the part I just couldn’t swallow.”

- 4 -

After the Gardiner tolls, the Maine Turnpike becomes a free road again, running through three hundred miles of fuck-all: woods, fields, the occasional house trailer with a satellite dish on the roof and a truck on blocks in the side yard. Except in the summer, it is sparsely traveled. Each car becomes its own little world. It occurred to Monette even then (perhaps it was the St. Christopher’s medal

swinging from the rearview, a gift from Barb in better, saner days) that it was like being in a rolling confessional. Still, he started slowly, as so many confessors do.

“I’m married,” he said. “I’m fifty-five and my wife is fifty-four.”

He considered this while the windshield wipers ticked back and forth.

“Fifty-four, Barbara’s fifty-four. We’ve been married twenty-six years. One kid. A daughter. A lovely daughter. Kelsie Ann. She goes to school in Cleveland, and I don’t know how I’m going to keep her there, because two weeks ago, with no warning, my wife turned into Mount St. Helens. Turns out she’s got a boyfriend. Has had a boyfriend for almost two years. He’s a teacher—well, of course he is, what else would he be?—but she calls him Cowboy Bob. Turns out a lot of those nights I thought she was at Cooperative Extension or Book Circle, she was drinking tequila shooters and line dancing with Cowboy Fucking Bob.”

It was funny. Anyone could see that. It was sitcom shit if there had ever been sitcom shit. But his eyes—although tearless—were stinging as if they were full of poison ivy. He glanced to his right, but the hitchhiker was still mostly turned away, and now his forehead was leaning against the glass of the passenger window. Sleeping for sure.

Almost for sure.

Monette hadn’t spoken of her betrayal aloud. Kelsie still didn’t know, although the bubble of her ignorance would pop soon. The straws were flying in the wind—he’d hung up on three different reporters before leaving on this trip—but there was nothing they could print or broadcast yet. That would change soon, but Monette would go on getting by with No comment for as long as possible, mostly to spare himself embarrassment. In the meantime, though, he was commenting plenty, and doing so brought a great, angry relief. In a way it was like singing in the shower. Or vomiting there.

“She’s fifty-four,” he said. “That’s what I can’t get over. It means she started up with this guy, whose real name is Robert Yandowsky—how’s that for a cowboy name—when she was fifty-two. Fifty-two! Would you say that’s old enough to know better, my friend? Old enough to have sowed your wild oats, then ripped them up again and planted a more useful crop? My God, she wears bifocals! She’s had her gallbladder out! And she’s boffing this guy! In the Grove Motel, where the two of them have set up housekeeping! I gave her a nice house in Buxton, a two-car garage, she’s got an Audi on long lease, and she threw it all away to get drunk on Thursday nights in Range Riders, then shag this guy until the dawn’s early light—or however long they can manage—and she’s fifty-four! Not to mention Cowboy Bob, who is fucking sixty!”

He heard himself ranting, told himself to stop, saw the hitchhiker hadn’t moved (unless he’d sunk a little deeper into the collar of his duffle coat—that might have happened), and realized he didn’t have to stop. He was in a car. He was on I-95, somewhere east of the sun and west of Augusta. His passenger was a deaf-mute. He could rant if he wanted to rant.

He ranted.

“Barb spilled everything. She wasn’t defiant about it, and she wasn’t ashamed. She seemed ... serene. Shell-shocked, maybe. Or still living in a fantasy world.”

And she’d said it was partly his fault.

“I’m on the road a lot, that much is true. Over three hundred days last year. She was on her own—we only had the one chick, you know, and that one finished with high school and flown the coop. So it was my fault. Cowboy Bob and all the rest of it.”

His temples were throbbing, and his nose was almost shut. He sniffed back hard enough to make black dots fly before his eyes and got no relief. Not in his nose, anyway. In his head he finally felt

better. He was very glad he'd picked the hitchhiker up. He could have spoken these things aloud in the empty car, but—

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“But it wouldn't have been the same,” he told the shape on the other side of the confessional wall. He looked straight ahead as he said it, right at FOR ALL HAVE SINNED AND FALLEN SHORT OF GOD'S GLORY. “Do you understand that, Father?”

“Of course I do,” the priest replied—and rather cheerfully. “Even though you've clearly fallen away from Mother Church—except for a few superstitious remnants like your St. Christopher's medal—you shouldn't even have to ask. Confession is good for the soul. We've known that for two thousand years.”

Monette had taken to wearing the St. Christopher's medal that had once upon a time swung from his rearview mirror. Perhaps it was just superstition, but he had driven millions of miles in all kinds of shit weather with that medal for company and had never so much as dented a fender.

“Son, what else did she do, your wife? Besides sinning with Cowboy Bob?”

Monette surprised himself by laughing. And on the other side of the screen, the priest laughed, too. The difference was the quality of the laughter. The priest saw the funny side. Monette supposed he was still trying to ward off insanity.

“Well, there was the underwear,” he said.

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“She bought underwear,” he told the hitchhiker, who still sat slumped and mostly turned away, with his forehead against the window and his breath fogging the glass. Pack between his feet, sign resting on

top with the side reading I AM MUTE! facing up. “She showed me. It was in the guest room closet. It damn near filled the guest room closet. Bustiers and camisoles and bras and silk stockings still in their packages, dozens of pairs. What looked like about a thousand garter belts. But mostly there were panties, panties, panties. She said Cowboy Bob was ‘a real panty man.’ I think she would have gone on, told me just how that worked, but I got the picture. I got it a lot better than I wanted to. I said, ‘Of course he’s a panty man, he grew up jerking off to PLAYBOY, he’s fucking sixty.’”

They were passing the Fairfield sign now. Green and smeary through the windshield, with a wet crow hunched on top.

“It was the good stuff, too,” Monette said. “A lot was Victoria’s Secret from the mall, but there was also stuff from a high-priced underwear boutique called Sweets. In Boston. I didn’t even know there were underwear boutiques, but I have since been educated. Had to’ve been thousands of dollars’ worth piled up in that closet. Also shoes. High heels, for the most part. You know, stilettos. She had that hot-babe thing down pat. Although I imagine she took off her bifocals when she put on her latest Wonderbra and tap pants. But—”

A semi droned by. Monette had his headlights on and automatically flicked his high beams for a moment when the rig was past. The driver flicked a thank-you with his taillights. Sign language of the road.

“But a lot of it hadn’t even been worn. That was the thing. It was just ... just pack-ratted away. I asked her why she’d bought so goddam much, and she either didn’t know or couldn’t explain. ‘We just got into the habit,’ she said. ‘It was like foreplay, I guess.’ Not ashamed. Not defiant. Like she was thinking, This is all a dream I’ll wake up from soon. The two of us standing there are looking at that rummage sale of slips and skivvies and shoes and God knows what else piled in the back. Then I asked her where she got the money—I mean, I see the credit-card slips at the end of each month, and there weren’t any from Sweets of Boston—and we got to the real problem. Which was embezzlement.”

“Embezzlement,” the priest said. Monette wondered if the word had ever been spoken in this confessional before and decided it probably had been. Theft for sure.

“She worked for MSAD 19,” Monette said. “MSAD stands for Maine School Administrative District. It’s one of the big ones, just south of Portland. Based in Dowrie, as a matter of fact, home of both Range Riders—the line-dancing joint—and the historic Grove Motel, just down the road from there. Convenient. Get your dancing and your fuh ... your lovemaking all in the same area. Why, you wouldn’t even have to drive your car if you happened to have a snootful. Which on most evenings they did have. Tequila shooters for her, whiskey for him. Jack, naturally. She told me. She told me everything.”

“Was she a teacher?”

“Oh no—teachers don’t have access to that kind of money; she never could have embezzled over a hundred and twenty thousand dollars if she’d been a teacher. We’ve had the district superintendent and his wife over to the house for dinner, and of course I saw him at all the end-of-school-year picnics, usually at the Dowrie Country Club. Victor McCrea. University of Maine graduate. Played football. Majored in phys ed. Crew cut. Probably floated through on gift Cs, but a nice man, the kind who knows fifty different guy-walks-into-a-bar jokes. In charge of a dozen schools, from the five elementaries to Muskie High. Very large annual budget, might be able to add four and four on his own in a pinch. Barb was his executive secretary for twelve years.”

Monette paused.

“Barb had the checkbook.”

The rain was getting heavier. Now it was just short of a downpour. Monette slowed to fifty without even thinking about it, while other cars buzzed blithely past him in the left lane, each dragging up its own cloud of water. Let them buzz. He himself had had a long and accident-free career selling the best fall list ever (not to mention the best spring list ever and a few Summer Surprise lists, which mostly consisted of cookbooks, diet books, and Harry Potter knockoffs), and he wanted to keep it that way.

On his right, the hitchhiker stirred a little.

“You awake, buddy?” Monette asked. A useless question, but natural.

The hitchhiker uttered a comment from the end of him that apparently wasn’t mute: Phweeet. Small, polite, and—best of all—odorless.

“I take that as a yes,” Monette said, returning his attention to his driving. “Where was I?”

The underwear, that’s where he was. He could still see it. Piled up in the closet like a teenager’s wet dream. Then the confession of the embezzlement: that staggering figure. After he’d taken time to consider the possibility that she might be lying for some crazy reason (but of course it was all crazy), he had asked her how much was left, and she said—in that same calm and dazed manner—that there was nothing left, really, although she supposed she could get more. For a while, at least.

““But they’re going to find out soon now,’ she said. ‘If it was just poor old clueless Vic, I suppose I could go on forever, but the state auditors were in last week. They asked too many questions, and they took copies of the records. It won’t be long now.’

“So I asked her how she could spend well over a hundred thousand dollars on knickers and garter belts,” Monette told his silent companion. “I didn’t feel angry—at least not then, I guess I was too

shocked—but I was honestly curious. And she said—in that same way, not ashamed, not defiant, like she was sleep-walking: ‘Well, we got interested in the lottery. I suppose we thought we could make it back that way.’”

Monette paused. He watched the windshield wipers go back and forth. He briefly considered the idea of twisting the wheel to the right and sending the car into one of the concrete overpass supports just ahead. He rejected the idea. He would later tell the priest part of the reason was that ancient childhood prohibition against suicide, but mostly he was thinking he’d like to hear the Josh Ritter album at least one more time before he died.

Plus, he was no longer alone.

Instead of committing suicide (and taking his passenger with him), he drove beneath the overpass at that steady, moderate fifty (for maybe two seconds the windshield was clear, then the wipers once more found work to do) and resumed his story.

“They must have bought more lottery tickets than anyone in history.” He thought it over, then shook his head. “Well ... probably not. But they bought ten thousand for sure. She said that last November—I was in New Hampshire and Massachusetts almost that whole month, plus the sales conference in Delaware—they bought over two thousand. Powerball, Megabucks, Paycheck, Pick 3, Pick 4, Triple Play, they hit them all. At first they chose the numbers, but Barb said after a while that took too long and they went to the EZ Pick option.”

Monette pointed to the white plastic box glued to his windshield, just below the stem of the rearview mirror.

“All these gadgets speed up the world. Maybe that’s a good thing, but I sort of doubt it. She said, ‘We went the EZ Pick route because the people standing in line behind you get impatient if you take too long to pick your own numbers, especially when the jackpot’s over a hundred million.’ She said sometimes she and Yandowsky split up and hit different stores, as many as two dozen in an evening. And of

course they sold them right there at the place where they went to line dance.

“She said, ‘The first time Bob played, we won five hundred dollars on a Pick 3. It was so romantic.’” Monette shook his head. “After that, the romance stayed, but the winning pretty much stopped. That was what she said. She said once they won a thousand, but by then they were already thirty thousand in the bucket. In the bucket is what she called it.

“One time—this was in January, while I was out on the road trying to earn back the price of the cashmere coat I got her for Christmas—she said they went up to Derry and spent a couple of days. I don’t know if they’ve got line dancing up there or not, I never checked, but they’ve got a place called Hollywood Slots. They stayed in a suite, ate high off the hog—she said high off the hog—and dropped seventy-five hundred playing video poker. But, she said, they didn’t like that so much. Mostly they just stuck to the lottery, plugging in more and more of the SAD’s dough, trying to get even before the state auditors came and the roof fell in. And every now and then, of course, she’d buy some new underwear. A girl wants to be fresh when she’s buying Powerball tix at the local 7-Eleven.

“You all right, buddy?”

There was no response from his passenger—of course not—so Monette reached out and shook the man’s shoulder. The hitcher lifted his head from the window (his forehead had left a greasy mark on the glass) and looked around, blinking his redrimmed eyes as if he had been asleep. Monette didn’t think he’d been asleep. No reason why, just a feeling.

He made a thumb-and-forefinger circle at the hitchhiker, then raised his eyebrows.

For a moment the hitcher only looked blank, giving Monette time to think the guy was bull-stupid as well as deaf-mute. Then he smiled and nodded and returned the circle.

“Okay,” Monette said. “Just checking.”

The man leaned his head back against the window again. In the meantime, the guy’s presumed destination, Waterville, had slid behind them and into the rain. Monette didn’t notice. He was still living in the past.

“If it had been just lingerie and the kind of lottery games where you pick a bunch of numbers, the damage might have been limited,” he said. “Because playing the lottery that way takes time. It gives you a chance to come to your senses, always presuming you have any to come to. You have to stand in line and collect the slips and save them in your wallet. Then you have to watch TV or check the paper for the results. It might still have been okay. If, that is, you can call anything okay about your wife catting around with a stoneboat-dumb history teacher and flushing thirty or forty thousand dollars’ worth of the school district’s money down the shitter. But thirty grand I might have been able to cover. I could have taken out a second mortgage on the house. Not for Barb, no way, but for Kelsie Ann. A kid just starting out in life doesn’t need a stinking fish like that around her neck. Restitution is what they call it. I would have made restitution even if it meant living in a two-bedroom apartment. You know?”

The hitchhiker obviously didn’t know—not about beautiful young daughters just starting out in life, or second mortgages, or restitution. He was warm and dry in his dead-silent world, and that was probably better.

Monette plowed forward nonetheless.

“Thing is, there are quicker ways to chuck your money, and it’s as legal as ... as buying underwear.”

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“They moved on to scratch tickets, didn’t they?” the priest asked. “What the Lottery Commission calls instant winners.”

“You speak like a man who’s had a flutter himself,” Monette said.

“From time to time,” the priest agreed, and with an admirable lack of hesitation. “I always tell myself that if I should ever get a real golden ticket, I’d put all the money into the church. But I never risk more than five dollars a week.” This time there was hesitation. “Sometimes ten.” Another pause. “And once I bought a twenty-dollar scratch, back when they were new. But that was a momentary madness. I never did it again.”

“At least not so far,” Monette said.

The priest chuckled. “The words of a man who has truly had his fingers burned, son.” He sighed. “I’m fascinated by your story, but I wonder if we could move it along a bit faster? My company will wait while I do the Lord’s work, but not forever. And I believe we’re having chicken salad, heavy on the mayo. A favorite of mine.”

“There’s not much more,” Monette said. “If you’ve played, you’ve got the gist of it. You can buy the scratch tickets at all the same places you can buy the Powerball and Megabucks tickets, but you can also buy them at a lot of other places, including turnpike rest stops. You don’t even need to do business with a clerk; you can get them from a machine. The machines are always green, the color of money. By the time Barb came clean—”

“By the time she confessed,” the priest said, with what might have been a touch of actual slyness.

“Yes, by the time she confessed, they’d pretty much settled on the twenty-dollar scratch-offs. Barb said she never bought any when she was on her own, but when she was with Cowboy Bob, they’d buy a lot. Hoping for that big score, you know. Once she said they bought a hundred of those puppies in a single night. That’s two thousand dollars’ worth. They got back eighty. They each had their own little plastic ticket scratcher. They look like snow scrapers for elves and have MAINE STATE LOTTERY written on the handle. They’re green, like the vending machines that sell the tickets. She showed me hers

—it was under the guest room bed. You couldn't make out anything except TERY on it. Could have been MYSTERY instead of LOTTERY. The sweat from her palm had wiped out all the rest.”

“Son, did you strike her? Is that why you're here?”

“No,” Monette said. “I wanted to kill her for it—the money, not the cheating, the cheating part just seemed unreal, even with all that fuh ... all that underwear right in front of my eyes. But I didn't lay so much as a finger on her. I think it was because I was too tired. All that information had just tired me out. What I wanted to do was take a nap. A long one. Maybe a couple of days long. Is that strange?”

“No,” the priest said.

“I asked her how she could do something like that to me. Did she care so little? And she asked—”

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“She asked me how come I didn't know,” Monette told the hitchhiker. “And before I could say anything, she answered herself, so I guess it was a whatchacallit, a rhetorical question. She said, ‘You didn't know because you didn't care. You were almost always on the road, and when you weren't on the road, you wanted to be on the road. It's been ten years since you cared what underwear I have on—why would you, when you don't care about the woman inside it? But you care now, don't you? You do now.’

“Man, I just looked at her. I was too tired to kill her—or even slap her—but I was mad, all right. Even through the shock, I was mad. She was trying to make it my fault. You see that, don't you? Trying to lay it all off on my fucking job, as if I could get another one that paid even half as much. I mean, at my age what else am I qualified for? I guess I could get a job as school crossing guard—I don't have any morals busts in my past—but that would be about it.”

He paused. Far down the road, still mostly hidden by a shifting camisole of rain, was a blue sign.

He considered, then said, "But even that wasn't the real point. You want to know the point? Her point? I was supposed to feel guilty for liking my job. For not drudging through my days until I found the right person to go absolutely fucking bombers with!"

The hitcher stirred a little, probably only because they'd hit a bump (or run over some roadkill), but it made Monette realize he was shouting. And hey, the guy might not be completely deaf. Even if he was, he might feel vibrations in the bones of his face once sounds passed a certain decibel level. Who the fuck knew?

"I didn't get into it with her," Monette said in a lower voice. "I refused to get into it with her. I think I knew that if I did, if we really started to argue, anything might happen. I wanted to get out of there while I was still in shock ... because that was protecting her, see?"

The hitchhiker said nothing, but Monette saw for both of them.

"I said, 'What happens now?' and she said, 'I suppose I'll go to jail.' And you know what? If she'd started to cry then, I might have held her. Because after twenty-six years of marriage, things like that get to be a reflex. Even when most of the feeling's gone. But she didn't cry, so I walked out. Just turned around and walked out. And when I came back, there was a note saying she'd moved out. That was almost two weeks ago, and I haven't seen her since. Talked to her on the phone a few times, that's all. Talked to a lawyer, too. Froze all our accounts, not that it'll do any good once the legal wheels start turning. Which will be soon. The caca is going to clog the air-cooling system, if you take my meaning. Then I suppose I'll see her again. In court. Her and Cowboy Fucking Bob."

Now he could read the blue sign: PITTSFIELD REST AREA 2 MI.

"Ah, shit!" he cried. "Waterville's fifteen miles back thataway, partner." And when the deaf-mute didn't stir (of course not), Monette

realized he didn't know the guy had been going to the Ville anyway. Not for sure. In any case, it was time to get this straightened out. The rest area would do for that, but for a minute or two longer they would remain enclosed in this rolling confessional, and he felt he had one more thing to say.

"It's true that I haven't felt much for her in a very long time," he said. "Sometimes love just runs out. And it's also true that I haven't been entirely faithful—I've taken a little road comfort from time to time. But does that warrant this? Does it justify a woman blowing up a life the way a kid would blow up a rotten apple with a firecracker?"

He pulled into the rest area. There were maybe four cars in the lot, huddled up against the brown building with the vending machines in the front. To Monette the cars looked like cold children left out in the rain. He parked. The hitchhiker looked at him questioningly.

"Where are you going?" Monette asked, knowing it was hopeless.

The deaf-mute considered. He looked around and saw where they were. He looked back at Monette as if to say, Not here.

Monette pointed back south and raised his eyebrows. The deaf-mute shook his head, then pointed north. Opened and closed his fists, showing his fingers six times ... eight ... ten. Same as before, basically. But this time Monette got it. He thought life might have been simpler for this guy if someone had taught him the sideways figure-eight symbol that means infinity.

"You're basically just rambling, aren't you?" Monette asked.

The deaf-mute only looked at him.

"Yeah you are," Monette said. "Well, I tell you what. You listened to my story—even though you didn't know you were listening to it—and I'll get you as far as Derry." An idea struck him. "In fact, I'll drop you at the Derry Shelter. You can get a hot and a cot, at least for one night. I have to take a leak. You need to take a leak?"

The deaf-mute looked at him with patient blankness.

“A leak,” Monette said. “A piss.” He started to point at his crotch, realized where they were, and decided a road bum would think he was signing for a blowjob right here beside the Hav-A-Bite machines. He pointed toward the silhouettes on the side of the building instead—black cutout man, black cutout woman. The man had his legs apart, the woman had hers together. Pretty much the story of the human race in sign language.

This his passenger got. He shook his head decisively, then made another thumb-and-forefinger circle for good measure. Which left Monette with a delicate problem: leave Mr. Silent Vagabond in the car while he did his business or turn him out into the rain to wait ... in which case the guy would almost certainly know why he was being put out.

Only it wasn't a problem at all, he decided. There was no money in the car, and his personal luggage was locked in the trunk. There were his sample cases in the backseat, but he somehow didn't think the guy was going to steal two seventy-pound cases and go trotting down the rest area's exit ramp with them. For one thing, how would he hold up his I AM MUTE! sign?

“I'll be right back,” Monette said, and when the hitchhiker only looked at him with those redrimmed eyes, Monette pointed to himself, to the restroom icons, then back to himself. This time the hitchhiker nodded and made another thumb-and-forefinger circle.

Monette went to the toilet and pissed for what felt like twenty minutes. The relief was exquisite. He felt better than he had since Barb had dropped her bombshell. It occurred to him for the first time that he was going to get through this. And he would help Kelsie get through it. He remembered a quote from some old German (or maybe a Russian, it certainly sounded like the Russian view of life): Whatever does not kill me makes me stronger.

He went back to his car, whistling. He even gave the coin-op lottery-ticket machine a comradely slap as he went by. At first he thought maybe he couldn't see his passenger because the guy was lying down ... in which case, Monette would have to shoo him upright again so he could get behind the wheel. But the hitchhiker wasn't lying down. The hitchhiker was gone. Had taken his pack and his sign and decamped.

Monette checked the backseat and saw his Wolfe & Sons cases undisturbed. Looked into the glove compartment and saw the paltry identification kept within—registration, insurance card, AAA card—was still there. All that was left of the bum was a lingering smell, not entirely unpleasant: sweat and faint pine, as if the guy had been sleeping rough.

He thought he'd see the guy at the foot of the ramp, holding up his sign and patiently switching it from side to side so that potential Good Samaritans got the complete lowdown on his defects. If so, Monette would stop and pick him up again. The job didn't feel done, somehow. Delivering the guy to the Derry Shelter—that would make the job feel done. That would close the deal, and close the book. Whatever other failings he might have, he liked to finish things.

But the guy wasn't at the foot of the ramp; the guy was completely AWOL. And it wasn't until Monette was passing a sign reading DERRY 10 MI. that he looked up at the rearview mirror and saw that his St. Christopher's medal, companion of all those millions of miles, was gone. The deaf-mute had stolen it. But not even that could break Monette's new optimism. Maybe the deaf-mute needed it more than he did. Monette hoped it would bring him good luck.

Two days later—by then he was selling the best fall list ever in Presque Isle—he got a call from the Maine State Police. His wife and Bob Yandowsky had been beaten to death in the Grove Motel. The killer had used a piece of pipe wrapped in a motel towel.

“My ... dear ... God!” the priest breathed.

“Yes,” Monette agreed, “that’s pretty much what I thought.”

“Your daughter ... ?”

“Heartbroken, of course. She’s with me, at home. We’ll get through this, Father. She’s tougher than I thought. And of course, she doesn’t know about the other. The embezzlement. With luck, she never will. There’s going to be a very large insurance payment, what they call double indemnity. Given everything that went on before, I think I would be in moderate to serious trouble with the police now if I didn’t have a cast-iron alibi. And if there hadn’t been ... developments. As it is, I’ve been questioned several times.”

“Son, you didn’t pay someone to—”

“I’ve been asked that, too. The answer is no. I’ve thrown my bank accounts open to anyone who wants a look. Every penny is accounted for, both in my half of the wedded partnership and in Barb’s. She was financially very responsible. At least in the sane part of her life.

“Father, can you open up on your side? I want to show you something.”

Instead of replying, the priest opened his door. Monette slipped the St. Christopher’s medal from around his neck, then reached around from his side. Their fingers touched briefly as the medal and its little pile of steel chain passed from hand to hand.

There was silence for five seconds as the priest considered it. Then he said, “This was returned to you when? Was it at the motel where —”

“No,” Monette said. “Not the motel. The house in Buxton. On the dresser in what used to be our bedroom. Next to our wedding picture, actually.”

“Dear God,” the priest said.

“He could have gotten the address from my car registration when I was in the john.”

“And of course you mentioned the name of the motel ... and the town”

“Dowrie,” Monette agreed.

For the third time the priest invoked the name of his Boss. Then he said, “The fellow wasn’t deaf-mute at all, was he?”

“I’m almost positive he was mute,” Monette said, “but he sure wasn’t deaf. There was a note beside the medal, on a piece of paper he tore off the phone pad. All this must have happened while my daughter and I were at the funeral home, picking out a casket. The back door was open but not jimmied. He might have been smart enough to trig the lock, but I think I just forgot and left it open when we went out.”

“The note said what?”

“Thank you for the ride,” Monette said.

“I’ll be damned.” Thoughtful silence, then a soft knocking just outside the door of the confessional in which Monette sat, contemplating FOR ALL HAVE SINNED AND FALLEN SHORT OF GOD’S GLORY. Monette took back his medal.

“Have you told the police?”

“Yes, of course, the whole story. They think they know who the guy is. They’re familiar with the sign. His name is Stanley Doucette. He’s spent years rambling around New England with that sign of his. Sort of like me, now that I think of it.”

“Prior crimes of violence on his record?”

“A few,” Monette said. “Fights, mostly. Once he beat a man pretty badly in a bar, and he’s been in and out of mental institutions, including Serenity Hill, in Augusta. I don’t think the police told me everything.”

“Do you want to know everything?”

Monette considered, then said, “No.”

“They haven’t caught this fellow.”

“They say it’s only a matter of time. They say he’s not bright. But he was bright enough to fool me.”

“Did he fool you, son? Or did you know you were speaking to a listening ear? It seems to me that is the key question.”

Monette was quiet for a long time. He didn’t know if he had honestly searched his heart before, but he felt he was searching it now, and with a bright light. Not liking everything he found there but searching, yes. Not overlooking what he saw there. At least not on purpose.

“I did not,” he said.

“And are you glad your wife and her lover are dead?”

In his heart, Monette instantly said yes. Aloud he said, “I’m relieved. I’m sorry to say that, Father, but considering the mess she made—and how it’s apt to work out, with no trial and quiet restitution made out of the insurance money—I am relieved. Is that a sin?”

“Yes, my son. Sorry to break the news, but it is.”

“Can you give me absolution?”

“Ten Our Fathers and ten Hail Marys,” the priest said briskly. “The Our Fathers are for lack of charity—a serious sin but not mortal.”

“And the Hail Marys?”

“Foul language in the confessional. At some point the adultery issue—yours, not hers—needs to be addressed, but now—”

“You have a lunch date. I understand.”

“In truth, I’ve lost my appetite for lunch, although I should certainly greet my company. The main thing is, I think I’m a little too ... too overwhelmed to go into your so-called road comfort just now.”

“I understand.”

“Good. Now son?”

“Yes?”

“Not to belabor the point, but are you sure you didn’t give this man permission? Or encourage him in any way? Because then I think we’d be talking mortal sin instead of venial. I’d have to check with my own spiritual advisor to make sure, but—”

“No, Father. But do you think ... is it possible that God put that guy in my car?”

In his heart, the priest instantly said yes. Aloud he said, “That’s blasphemy, good for ten more Our Fathers. I don’t know how long you’ve been outside the doors, but even you should know better. Now do you want to say something else and try for more Hail Marys, or are we done here?”

“We’re done, Father.”

“Then you’re shriven, as we say in the trade. Go your way and sin no more. And take care of your daughter, son. Children only have one mother, no matter how she may have behaved.”

“Yes, Father.”

Behind the screen, the form shifted. “Can I ask you one more question?”

Monette settled back, reluctantly. He wanted to be gone. "Yes."

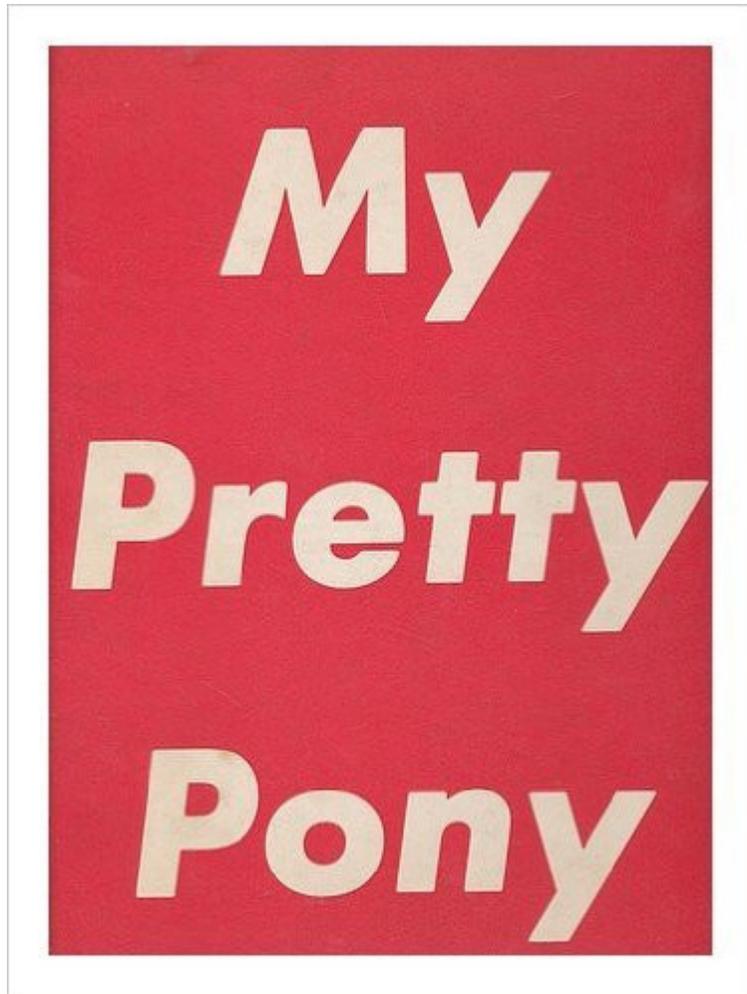
"You say the police think they will catch this man."

"They tell me it's only a matter of time."

"My question is, do you want the police to catch this man?"

And because what he really wanted was to be gone and say his atonement in the even more private confessional of his car, Monette said, "Of course I do."

On his way back home, he added two extra Hail Marys and two extra Our Fathers.



MY PRETTY PONY

Stephen King

The old man sat in the barn doorway in the smell of apples, rocking, wanting not to want to smoke not because of the doctor but because now his heart fluttered all the time. He watched that stupid son of a bitch Osgood do a fast count with his head against the tree and watched him turn and catch Clivey out and laugh, his mouth open wide enough so the old man could observe how his teeth were already rotting in his head and imagine how the kid's breath would smell: like the back part of a wet cellar. Although the whelp couldn't be more than eleven.

The old man watched Osgood laugh his gaspy hee-hawing laugh. The boy laughed so hard he finally had to lean over and put his hands on his knees, so hard the others came out of their hiding places to see what it was, and when they saw, they laughed, too. They all stood around in the morning sun and laughed at his grandson and the old man forgot how much he wanted a smoke. What he wanted now was to see if Clivey would cry. He found he was more curious on this subject than on any other which had engaged his attention over the last several months, including the subject of his own fast-approaching death.

"Caught im out!" the others chanted, laughing. "Caught im, caught im, caught im out!"

Clivey only stood there, stolid as a chunk of rock in a farmer's field, waiting for the razzing to be over so the game could go on with him as it and the embarrassment beginning to be behind him. After awhile the game did. Then it was noontime and the other boys went home. The old man watched to see how much lunch Clivey would eat. It turned out to be not much. Clivey just poked at his potatoes, made his corn and his peas change places, and fed little scraps of meat to the dog under the table. The old man watched it all, interested, answering when the others talked to him, but not much listening to their mouths or his own. His mind was on the boy.

When the pie was done he wanted what he couldn't have and so excused himself to take a nap and paused halfway up the stairs

because now his heart felt like a fan with a playing card caught in it, and he stood there with his head down, waiting to see if this was the final one (there had been two before), and when it wasn't he went on up and took off all but his underdrawers and lay down on the crisp white coverlet. A rectangular label of sun lay across his scrawny chest; it was cut into three sections by dark strokes of shadow that were the window laths. He put his hands behind his head, drowsing and listening. After awhile he thought he heard the boy crying in his own room down the hall and he thought, I ought to take care of that.

He slept an hour, and when he got up the woman was asleep beside him in her slip, and so he took his clothes out into the hallway to dress before going down.

Clivey was outside, sitting on the steps and throwing a stick for the dog, who fetched with more will than the boy tossed. The dog (he had no name, he was just the dog) seemed puzzled.

The old man hailed the boy and told him to take a walk up to the orchard with him and so the boy did.

*

The old man's name was George Banning. He was the boy's grandfather, and it was from him that Clive Banning learned the importance of having a pretty pony in your life. You had to have one of those even if you were allergic to horses, because without a pretty pony you could have six clocks in every room and so many watches on each wrist you couldn't raise your arms and still you'd never know what time it was.

The instruction (George Banning didn't give advice, only instruction) had taken place on the day Clive got caught out by that idiot Alden Osgood while playing hide and seek. By that time Clive's Grandpa seemed older than God, which probably meant about seventy-two. The Banning homestead was in the town of Troy, New York, which in 1961 was just starting to learn how not to be the country.

The instruction took place in the West Orchard.

*

His grandfather was standing coatless in a blizzard that was not late snow but early apple blossoms in a high warm wind; Grandpa was wearing his biballs with a collared shirt beneath, a shirt that looked as if it had once been green but was now faded to a no-account olive by dozens or hundreds of washings, and beneath the collared shirt was the round top of a cotton undershirt (the kind with the straps, of course; in those days they made the other kind, but a man like Grandpa would be a strap-undershirt man to the end), and this shirt was clean but the color of old ivory instead of its original white because Gramma's motto, often spoken and stitched into a living-room sampler as well (presumably for those rare times when the woman herself was not there to dispense what wisdom needed dispensing), was this: Use it, use it, never lose it! Break it in! Wear it out! Keep it safe or do without! There were apple blossoms caught in Grandpa's long hair, still only half white, and the boy thought the old man was beautiful in the trees.

He had seen Grandpa watching them as they went about their game earlier that day. Watching him. Grandpa had been sitting in his rocker at the entrance to the barn. One of the boards squeaked every time Grandpa rocked, and there he sat, a book facedown in his lap, his hands folded atop it, there he sat rocking amid the dim sweet smells of hay and apples and cider. It was this game that caused his Grandpa to offer Clive Banning instruction on the subject of time, and how it was slippery, and how a man had to fight to hold it in his hands almost all the while; the pony was pretty but it had a wicked heart. If you didn't keep a close eye on that pretty pony, it would jump the fence and be out of sight and you'd have to take your rope bridle and go after it, a trip that was apt to tire you all the way to your bones even if it was short.

Grandpa began his instruction by saying that Alden Osgood had cheated. He was supposed to hide his eyes against the dead elm by the chopping block for a full minute, which he would time by counting

to sixty. This would give Clivey (so Grandpa had always called him, and he hadn't minded, although he was thinking he would have to fight any boy or man who called him that once he was past the age of twelve) and the others a fair chance to hide. Clivey had still been looking for a place when Alden Osgood got to sixty, turned around, and "caught him out" as he was trying to squirm—as a last resort—behind a pile of apple crates stacked haphazardly beside the press-shed, where the machine that squeezed the blems into cider bulked in the dimness like an engine of torture.

"It wasn't fair," Grandpa said. "You didn't do no bitching about it and that was right, because a natural man never does no bitching—they call it bitching because it ain't for men or even boys smart enough to know better and brave enough to do better. Just the same, it wasn't fair. I can say that now because you didn't say it then."

Apple blossoms blowing in the old man's hair. One caught in the dent below his Adam's apple, caught there like a jewel that was pretty simply because some things were and couldn't help it, but was gorgeous because it lacked duration: in a few seconds it would be brushed impatiently away and left on the ground where it would become perfectly anonymous among its fellows.

He told Grandpa that Alden had counted to sixty, just as the rules said he must, not knowing why he wanted to argue the side of the boy who had, after all, shamed him by not even having to find him but had simply "caught him out." Alden—who sometimes slapped like a girl when he was mad—had needed only to turn, see him, then casually put his hand on the dead tree and chant the mystic and unquestioned formula of elimination: "I-see-Clive, my gool-one-two-three!"

Maybe he only argued Alden's case so he and Grandpa wouldn't have to go back yet, so he could watch Grandpa's steel hair blow back in the blizzard of blossoms, so he could admire that transient jewel caught in the hollow at the base of the old man's throat.

“Sure he did,” Grandpa said. “Sure he counted to sixty. Now looka this, Clivey! And let it mark your mind!”

There were real pockets in Grandpa’s overalls—five of them, counting the kangaroo-like pouch in the bib—but beside the hip pockets there were things that only looked like pockets. They were really slits, made so you could reach through to the pants you were wearing underneath (in those days the idea of not wearing pants underneath would not have seemed scandalous, only laughable—the behavior of someone who was A Little Soft in the Attic). Grandpa was wearing the inevitable pair of blue-jeans beneath his overalls. “Jew-pants,” he called them matter-of-factly, a term that all the farmers Clive knew used. Levi’s were either “Jew-pants” or simply “Joozers.”

He reached through the right-hand slit in his overalls, fumbled at some length in the right-hand pocket of the denim trousers beneath, and at last brought out a tarnished silver pocket watch which he put in the boy’s unprepared hand. The weight of the watch was so sudden, the ticking beneath its metal skin so lively, that he came within an ace of dropping it.

He looked at Grandpa, his brown eyes wide.

“You ain’t gonna drop it,” said Grandpa, “and if you did you probably wouldn’t stop it—it’s been dropped before, even stepped on once in some damned beerjoint in Utica, and it never stopped yet. And if it did stop, it’d be your loss, not mine, because it’s yours now.”

“What?” He wanted to say he didn’t understand but couldn’t finish because he thought he did.

“I’m giving it to you,” Grandpa said. “Always meant to, but I’ll be damned if I’m gonna put it in my will. It’d cost more for the damn law-rights than that thing’s worth.”

“Grandpa ... I ... Jesus!”

Grandpa laughed until he started to cough. He doubled over, coughing and laughing, his face going a plum-purple color. Some of Clive's joy and wonder were lost in concern. He remembered his mother telling him again and again on their way up here that he was not to tire Grandpa out because Grandpa was ill. When Clive had asked him two days before—cautiously—what had made him sick, George Banning had replied with a single mysterious word. It was only on the night after their talk in the orchard, as he was drifting off to sleep with the pocket watch curled warmly in his hand, that Clive realized the word Grandpa had spoken, "ticka," referred not to some dangerous poison-bug but to Grandpa's heart. The doctor had made him stop smoking and said if he tried anything too strenuous, like shovelling snow or trying to hoe the garden, he would end up playing a harp. The boy knew well enough what that meant.

"You ain't gonna drop it, and if you did you probably wouldn't stop it," Grandpa had said, but the boy was old enough to know that it would stop someday, that people and watches both stopped someday.

He stood, waiting to see if Grandpa was going to stop, but at last his coughing and laughter eased off and he stood up straight again, wiping a runner of snot from his nose with his left hand and then flicking it casually away.

"You're a goddam funny kid, Clivey," he said. "I got sixteen grandchildren, and there's only two of em that I think is gonna amount to duckshit, and you ain't one of em—although you're on the runner-up list—but you're the only one that can make me laugh until my balls ache."

"I didn't mean to make your balls ache," Clive said, and that sent Grandpa off again, although this time he was able to get his laughter under control before the coughing started.

"Loop the chain over your knuckles a time or two, if it'll make you feel easier," Grandpa said. "If you feel easier in your mind, maybe you'll pay attention a little better."

He did as Grandpa suggested and did feel better. He looked at the watch in his palm, mesmerized by the lively feel of its mechanism, by the sunstar on its crystal, by the second hand which turned in its own small circle. But it was still Grandpa's pocket watch: of this he was quite sure. Then, as he had this thought, an apple blossom went skating across the crystal and was gone. This happened in less than a second, but it changed everything. After the blossom, it was true. It was his watch, forever... or at least until one of them stopped running and couldn't be fixed and had to be thrown away.

"All right," Grandpa said. "You see the second hand going around all by its ownself?"

"Yes."

"Good. Keep your eye on it. When it gets up to the top, you holler 'Go!' at me. Understand?"

He nodded.

"Okay. When it gets there, you just let her go, Gallagher."

Clive frowned down at the watch with the deep seriousness of a mathematician approaching the conclusion of a crucial equation. He already understood what Grandpa wanted to show him, and he was bright enough to understand that proof was only a formality... but one that must be shown just the same. It was a rite, like not being able to leave church until the minister said the benediction, even though all the songs on the board had been sung and the sermon was finally, mercifully, over.

When the second hand stood straight up at twelve on its own separate little dial (Mine, he marvelled. That's my second hand on my watch), he hollered "Go!" at the top of his lungs, and Grandpa began to count with the greasy speed of an auctioneer selling dubious goods, trying to get rid of them at top prices before his hypnotized audience can wake up and realize it has not just been bilked but outraged.

“One-two-thre’, fo’-fi’-six, sev’-ay-nine, ten-‘leven,” Grandpa chanted, the gnarly blotches on his cheeks and the big purple veins on his nose beginning to stand out again in his excitement. He finished in a triumphant hoarse shout: “Fiffynine-sixxy!” As he said this last, the second hand of the pocket watch was just crossing the seventh dark line, marking thirty-five seconds.

“How long?” Grandpa asked, panting and rubbing at his chest with his hand.

Clive told him, looking at Grandpa with undisguised admiration. “That was fast counting, Grandpa!”

Grandpa flapped the hand with which he had been rubbing his chest in a get out! gesture, but he smiled. “Didn’t count half as fast as that Osgood brat,” he said. “I heard that little sucker count twenty-seven, and the next thing I knew he was up somewhere around forty-one.” Grandpa fixed him with his eyes, a dark autumnal blue utterly unlike Clive’s Mediterranean brown ones. He put one of his gnarled hands on Clive’s shoulder. It was knotted with arthritis, but the boy felt the live strength that still slumbered in there like wires in a machine that’s turned off. “You remember one thing, Clivey. Time ain’t got nothing to do with how fast you can count.”

Clive nodded slowly. He didn’t understand completely, but he thought he felt the shadow of understanding, like the shadow of a cloud passing slowly across a meadow.

Grandpa reached into the pouch pocket in the bib of his overalls and brought out a pack of unfiltered Kools. Apparently Grandpa hadn’t stopped smoking after all, dicky heart or not. Still, it seemed to the boy as if maybe Grandpa had cut down drastically, because that pack of Kools looked as if it had done hard travelling; it had escaped the fate of most packs, torn open after breakfast and tossed empty into the gutter at three, a crushed ball. Grandpa rummaged, brought out a cigarette almost as bent as the pack from which it had come. He stuck it in the corner of his mouth, replaced the pack in the bib, and brought out a wooden match which he snapped alight with one

practiced flick of his old man's thick yellow thumbnail. Clive watched with the fascination of a child who watches a magician produce a fan of cards from an empty hand. The flick of the thumb was always interesting, but the amazing thing was that the match did not go out. In spite of the high wind which steadily combed this hilltop, Grandpa cupped the small flame with an assurance that could afford to be leisurely. He lit his smoke and then was actually shaking the match, as if he had negated the wind by simple will. Clive looked closely at the cigarette and saw no black scorch-marks trailing up the white paper from the glowing tip. His eyes had not deceived him, then; Grandpa had taken his light from a straight flame, like a man who takes a light from a candle in a closed room. It was sorcery, pure and simple.

Grandpa removed the cigarette from his mouth and put his thumb and forefinger in, looking for a moment like a man who means to whistle for his dog, or a taxi. Instead he brought them out again wet and pressed them against the match-head. The boy needed no explanation; the only thing Grandpa and his friends out here in the country feared more than sudden freezes was fire. Grandpa dropped the match and ground it under his boot. When he looked up and saw the boy staring at him, he misinterpreted the subject of his fascination.

"I know I ain't supposed to," he said, "and I ain't gonna tell you to lie or even ask you to. If Gramma asks you right out—'Was that old man smokin up there?'—you go on and tell her I was. I don't need a kid to lie for me." He didn't smile, but his shrewd, side-slanted eyes made Clive feel part of a conspiracy that seemed amiable and sinless. "But then, if Gramma asks me right out if you took the Savior's name in vain when I gave you that watch, I'd look her right in the eye and say, 'No'm. He said thanks as pretty as could be and that was all he done.' "

Now Clive was the one to burst out laughing, and the old man grinned, revealing his few remaining teeth.

“Course, if she don’t ask neither of us nothing, I guess we don’t have to volunteer nothing... do we, Clivey? Does that seem fair?”

“Yes,” Clive said. He wasn’t a good-looking boy and never became the sort of man women exactly consider handsome, but as he smiled in complete understanding of the old man’s rhetorical sleight-of-hand, he was beautiful, at least for a moment, and Grandpa ruffled his hair.

“You’re a good boy, Clivey.”

“Thank you, sir,”

His grandfather stood ruminating, his Kool burning with unnatural rapidity (the tobacco was dry, and although he puffed seldom, the greedy hilltop wind smoked the cigarette ceaselessly), and Clive thought the old man had said everything he had to say. He was sorry. He loved to hear Grandpa talk. The things Grandpa said continually amazed him because they almost always made sense. His mother, his father, Gramma, Uncle Don—they all said things he was supposed to take to heart, but they rarely made sense. Handsome is as handsome does, for instance—what did that mean?

He had a sister, Patty, who was six years older. He understood her but didn’t care because most of what she said out loud was stupid. The rest was communicated in vicious little pinches. The worst of these she called “Peter-Pinches.” She told him that, if he ever told about the Peter-Pinches, she’d murdalize him. Patty was always talking about people she was going to murdalize; she had a hit-list to rival Murder, Incorporated. It made you want to laugh ... until you took a good look at her thin, grim face, that was. When you saw what was really there, you lost your desire to laugh. Clive did, anyway. And you had to be careful of her—she sounded stupid but was far from it.

“I don’t want dates,” she had announced at supper one night not long ago—around the time that boys traditionally invited girls to either the Spring Dance at the country club or to the prom at the high school, in

fact. “I don’t care if I never have a date.” And she had looked at them with wide-eyed defiance from above her plate of steaming meat and vegetables.

Clive had looked at the still and somehow spooky face of his sister peering through the steam and remembered something that had happened two months before, when there had still been snow on the ground. He’d come along the upstairs hallway in his bare feet so she hadn’t heard him, and he had looked into the bathroom because the door was open—he hadn’t had the slightest idea old Pukey Patty was in there. What he saw had frozen him dead in his tracks. If she had turned her head even a little to the left, she would have seen him.

She didn’t, though. She had been too preoccupied with her inspection of herself. She had been standing there as naked as one of the slinky babes in Foxy Brannigan’s well-thumbed Model Delights, her bath towel lying puddled around her feet. She was no slinky babe, though—Clive knew it, and she knew it too, from the look of her. Tears were rolling down her pimply cheeks. They were big tears and there were a lot of them, but she never made a sound. At last Clive had regained enough of his sense of self-preservation to tiptoe away, and he had never said a word to anyone about the incident, least of all to Patty herself. He didn’t know if she would have been mad about her kid brother seeing her bareass, but he had a good idea about how she’d react to the idea that he had seen her bawling (even that weird boohoo-less bawling she’d been doing); for that she would have murderized him for sure.

“I think boys are dumb and most of them smell like gone-over cottage cheese,” she had said on that spring night. She stuck a forkful of roast beef into her mouth. “If a boy ever asked me for a date, I’d laugh.”

“You’ll change your mind about that, Punkin,” Dad said, chewing his roast beef and not looking up from the book beside his plate. Mom had given up trying to get him to stop reading at the table.

“No I won’t,” Patty said, and Clive knew she wouldn’t. When Patty said things she most always meant them. That was something Clive understood about her that his parents didn’t. He wasn’t sure she meant it—you know, really—about murdering him if he tattled on her about the Peter-Pinches, but he wasn’t going to take chances. Even if she didn’t actually kill him, she would find some spectacular yet untraceable way to hurt him, that was for sure. Besides, sometimes the Peter-Pinches weren’t really pinches at all; they were more like the way Patty sometimes stroked her little half-breed poodle, Brandy, and he knew she was doing it because he was bad, but he had a secret he certainly did not intend to tell her: these other Peter-Pinches, the stroking ones, actually felt sort of good.

*

When Grandpa opened his mouth, Clive thought he would say Time to go back t’the house, Clivey, but instead he told the boy: “I’m going to tell you something, if you want to hear it. Won’t take long. You want to hear it, Clivey?”

“Yes, sir!”

“You really do, don’t you?” Grandpa said in a bemused voice.

“Yes, sir.”

“Sometimes I think I ought to steal you from your folks and keep you around forever. Sometimes I think if I had you on hand most the time, I’d live forever, goddam bad heart or not.”

He removed the Kool from his mouth, dropped it to the ground, and stamped it to death under one workboot, revolving the heel back and forth and then covering the butt with the dirt his heel had loosened just to be sure. When he looked up at Clive again, it was with eyes that gleamed.

“I stopped giving advice a long time ago,” he said. “Thirty years or more, I guess. I stopped when I noticed only fools gave it and only

fools took it. Instruction, now... instruction's a different thing. A smart man will give a little from time to time, and a smart man—or boy—will take a little from time to time.”

Clive said nothing, only looked at his grandfather with close concentration.

“There are three kinds of time,” Grandpa said, “and while all of them are real, only one is really real. You want to make sure you know them all and can always tell them apart. Do you understand that?”

“No, sir.”

Grandpa nodded. “If you'd said ‘Yes, sir,’ I would have swatted the seat of your pants and taken you back to the farm.”

Clive looked down at the smeared results of Grandpa's cigarette, face hot with blush, proud.

“When a fellow is only a sprat, like you, time is long. Take a for-instance. When May comes, you think school's never gonna let out, that mid-month June will just never come. Ain't that pretty much how it is?”

Clive thought of that last weight of drowsy, chalk-smelling schooldays and nodded.

“And when mid-month June finally does come and Teacher gives you your report card and lets you go free, it seems like school's never gonna let back in. Ain't that pretty much right, too?”

Clive thought of that highway of days and nodded so hard his neck actually popped. “Boy, it sure is! I mean, sir.” Those days. All those days, stretching away across the plains of June and July and over the unimaginable horizon of August. So many days, so many dawns, so many noon lunches of bologna sandwiches with mustard and raw chopped onion and giant glasses of milk while his mom sat silently in the living room with her bottomless glass of wine, watching the soap

operas on the TV; so many depthless afternoons when sweat grew in the short hedge of your crewcut and then ran down your cheeks, afternoons when the moment you noticed that your blob of a shadow had grown a boy always came as a surprise, so many endless twilights with the sweat cooling away to nothing but a smell like aftershave on your cheeks and forearms while you played tag or red rover or capture the flag; sounds of bike chains, slots clicking neatly into oiled cogs, smells of honeysuckle and cooling asphalt and green leaves and cut grass, sounds of the slap of baseball cards being laid out on some kid's front walk, solemn and portentous trades which changed the faces of both leagues, councils that went on in the slow shady axial tilt of a July evening until the call of "Clllllve! Sup-per!" put an end to that business; and that call was always as expected and yet as shocking as the noon blob that had, by three or so, become a black boy-shape running in the street beside him—and that boy stapled to his heels had actually become a man by five or so, albeit an extraordinarily skinny one; velvet evenings of television, the occasional rattle of pages as his father read one book after another (he never tired of them; words, words, words, his dad never tired of them, and Clive had meant once to ask him how that could be but lost his nerve), his mother getting up once in a while and going into the kitchen, followed only by his sister's worried, angry eyes and his own simply curious ones; the soft clink as Mom replenished the glass which was never empty after eleven in the morning or so (and their father never looking up from his book, although Clive had an idea he heard it all and knew it all, although Patty had called him a stupid liar and had given him a Peter-Pinch that hurt all day long the one time he had dared to tell her that); the sound of mosquitoes whining against the screens, always so much louder, it seemed, after the sun had gone down; the decree of bedtime, so unfair and unavoidable, all arguments lost before they were begun; his father's brusque kiss, smelling of tobacco, his mother's softer, both sugary and sour with the smell of wine; the sound of his sister telling Mom she ought to go to bed after Dad had gone down to the corner tavern to drink a couple of beers and watch the wrestling matches on the television over the bar; his mom telling Patty to mind her own p's and q's, a conversational pattern that was

upsetting in its content but somehow soothing in its predictability; fireflies gleaming in the gloom; a car horn, distant, as he drifted into sleep's long, dark channel; then the next day, which seemed the same but wasn't, not quite. Summer. That was summer. And it did not just seem long; it was long.

Grandpa, watching him closely, seemed to read all this in the boy's brown eyes, to know all the words for all the things the boy never could have found a way to tell, things that could not escape him because his mouth could never articulate the language of his heart. And then Grandpa nodded, as if he wanted to confirm this very idea, and suddenly Clive was terrified that Grandpa would spoil everything by saying something soft and soothing and meaningless. Sure, he would say. I know all about it, Clivey—I was a boy once myself, you know.

But he didn't, and Clive understood he had been stupid to fear the possibility even for a moment. Worse, faithless. Because this was Grandpa, and Grandpa never talked meaningless shit like other grownups so often did. Instead of speaking softly and soothingly, he spoke with the dry finality of a judge pronouncing a harsh sentence for a capital crime.

"All that changes," he said.

Clive looked up at him, a little apprehensive at the idea but very much liking the wild way the old man's hair blew around his head. He thought Grandpa looked the way the church-preacher would if he really knew the truth about God instead of just guessing. "Time does? Are you sure?"

"Yes. When you get to a certain age—right around fourteen, I think, mostly when the two halves of the human race go on and make the mistake of discovering each other—time starts to be real time. The real real time. It ain't long like it was or short like it gets to be. It does, you know. But for most of your life it's mostly the real real time. You know what that is, Clivey?"

“No, sir.”

“Then take instruction: real real time is your pretty pony. Say it: ‘My pretty pony.’ “

Feeling dumb, wondering if Grandpa was having him on for some reason (“trying to get your goat,” as Uncle Don would have said), Clive said what he wanted him to say. He waited for the old man to laugh, to say, “Boy, I really got your goat that time, Clivey!” But Grandpa only nodded matter-of-factly, in a way that took all the dumb out of it.

“My pretty pony. Those are three words you’ll never forget if you’re as smart’s I think y’might be. My pretty pony. That’s the truth of time.”

Grandpa took the battered package of cigarettes from his pocket, considered it briefly, then put it back.

“From the time you’re fourteen until, oh, I’m gonna say until you’re sixty or so, most time is my-pretty-pony time. There’s times when it goes back to being long like it was when you were a kid, but those ain’t good times anymore. You’d give your soul for some my-pretty-pony time then, let alone short time. If you was to tell Gramma what I’m gonna tell you now, Clivey, she’d call me a blasphemer and wouldn’t bring me no hot-water bottle for a week. Maybe two.”

Nevertheless, Grandpa’s lips twisted into a bitter and unregenerate jag.

“If I was to tell it to that Reverend Chadband the wife sets such a store by, he’d trot out the one about how we see through a glass darkly or that old chestnut about how God works in mysterious ways His wonders to perform, but I’ll tell you what I think, Clivey. I think God must be one mean old son of a bitch to make the only long times a grownup has the times when he is hurt bad, like with crushed ribs or stove-in guts or something like that. A God like that, why, He makes a kid who sticks pins in flies look like that saint who was so good the birds’d come and roost all over him. I think about how long

them weeks were after the hayrick turned turtle on me, and I wonder why God wanted to make living, thinking creatures in the first place. If He needed something to piss on, why couldn't He have just made Him some sumac bushes and left it at that? Or what about poor old Johnny Brinkmayer, who went so slow with the bone cancer last year."

Clive hardly heard that last, although he remembered later, on their ride back to the city, that Johnny Brinkmayer, who had owned what his mother and father called the grocery store and what Grandpa and Gramma still both called "the Mercantile," was the only man Grandpa went to see of an evening... and the only man who came to see Grandpa of an evening. On the long ride back to town it came to Clive that Johnny Brinkmayer, whom he remembered only vaguely as a man with a very large wart on his forehead and a way of hitching at his crotch as he walked, must have been Grandpa's only real friend. The fact that Gramma tended to turn up her nose when Brinkmayer's name was mentioned—and often complained about the way the man had smelled—only reinforced the idea.

Such reflections could not have come now, anyway, because Clive was waiting breathlessly for God to strike Grandpa dead. Surely He would for such a blasphemy. No one could get away with calling God the Father Almighty a mean old son of a bitch, or suggest that the Being who made the universe was no better than a mean third-grader who got his kicks sticking pins into flies.

Clive took a nervous step away from the figure in the bib overalls, who had ceased being his Grandpa and had become instead a lightning rod. Any moment now a bolt would come out of the blue sky, sizzling his Grandpa dead as doggy-doo and turning the apple trees into torches that would signal the old man's damnation to all and sundry. The apple blossoms blowing through the air would be turned into something like the bits of char that went floating up from the incinerator in their backyard when his father burned the week's worth of newspapers on late Sunday afternoons.

Nothing happened.

Clive waited, his dreadful surety eroding, and when a robin twittered cheerily somewhere nearby (as if Grandpa had said nothing more awful than kiss-my-foot), he knew no lightning was going to come. And at the moment of that realization, a small but fundamental change took place in Clive Banning's life. His Grandpa's unpunished blasphemy would not make him a criminal or a bad boy, or even such a small thing as a "problem child" (a phrase that had only recently come into vogue). Yet the true north of belief shifted just a little in Clive's mind, and the way he listened to his Grandpa changed at once. Before, he had listened to the old man. Now he attended him.

"Times when you're hurt go on forever, seems like," Grandpa was saying. "Believe me, Clivey—a week of being hurt makes the best summer vacation you ever had when you was a kid seem like a weekend. Hell, makes it seem like a Sat'dy mornin! When I think of the seven months Johnny lay there with that... that thing that was inside him, inside him and eating on his guts ... Jesus, I ain't got no business talkin this way to a kid. Your Gramma's right. I got the sense of a chicken."

Grandpa brooded down at his shoes for a moment. At last he looked up and shook his head, not darkly, but with brisk, almost humorous dismissiveness.

"Ain't a bit of that matters. I said I was gonna give you instruction, and instead I stand here howlin like a woe-dog. You know what a woe-dog is, Clivey?"

The boy shook his head.

"Never mind; that's for another day." Of course there had never been another, because the next time he saw Grandpa, Grandpa was in a box, and Clive supposed that was an important part of the instruction Grandpa had to give that day. The fact that the old man didn't know he was giving it made it no less important. "Old men are like old trains in a switchin yard, Clivey—too many damned tracks. So they loop the damned roundhouse five times before they ever get in."

“That’s all right, Grandpa.”

“What I mean is that every time I drive for the point, I go someplace else.”

“I know, but those someplace elses are pretty interesting.”

Grandpa smiled. “If you’re a bullshit artist, Clivey, you are a damned good one.”

Clive smiled back, and the darkness of Johnny Brinkmayer’s memory seemed to lift from his Grandpa. When he spoke again, his voice was more businesslike.

“Anyway! Never mind that swill. Having long time in pain is just a little extra the Lord throws in. You know how a man will save up Raleigh coupons and trade em in for something like a brass barometer to hang in his den or a new set of steak knives, Clivey?”

Clive nodded.

“Well, that’s what pain-time is like ... only it’s more of a booby prize than a real one, I guess you’d have to say. Main thing is, when you get old, regular time—my-pretty-pony time—changes to short time. It’s like when you were a kid, only turned around.”

“Backwards.”

“Yep.”

The idea that time went fast when you got old was beyond the ability of the boy’s emotions to grasp, but he was bright enough to admit the concept. He knew that if one end of a seesaw went up, the other had to go down. What Grandpa was talking about, he reasoned, must be the same idea: balance and counterbalance. All right; it’s a point of view, Clive’s own father might have said.

Grandpa took the packet of Kools from the kangaroo pouch again, and this time he carefully extracted a cigarette—not just the last one

in the packet but the last one the boy would ever see him smoke. The old man crumpled the package and stowed it back in the place from which it had come. He lit this last cigarette as he had the other, with the same effortless ease. He did not ignore the hilltop wind; he seemed somehow to negate it.

“When does it happen, Grandpa?”

“I can’t exactly tell you that, n it don’t happen all at once,” Grandpa said, wetting the match as he had its predecessor. “It kinda creeps up, like a cat stalking a squirrel. Finally you notice. And when you do notice, it ain’t no more fair than the way the Osgood boy counted his numbers was fair.”

“Well then, what happens? How do you notice?”

Grandpa tapped a roll of ash from his cigarette without taking it from his mouth. He did it with his thumb, knocking on the cigarette the way a man may rap a low knock on a table. The boy never forgot that small sound.

“I think what you notice first must be different for everyone,” the old man said, “but for me it started when I was forty-something. I don’t remember exactly how old I was, but you want to bet I remember where I was ... in Davis Drug. You know it?”

Clive nodded. His father almost always took him and his sister in there for ice-cream sodas when they were visiting Grandpa and Gramma. His father called them the VanChockstraw Triplets because their orders never varied: their father always had vanilla, Patty chocolate, Clive strawberry. And his father would sit between them and read while they slowly ingested the cold sweet treats. Patty was right when she said you could get away with anything when their father was reading, which was most of the time, but when he put his book away and looked around, you wanted to sit up and put on your prettiest manners, or you were apt to get clouted.

“Well, I was in there,” Grandpa resumed, his eyes far off, studying a cloud that looked like a soldier blowing on a bugle moving swiftly across the spring sky, “to get some medicine for your Gramma’s arthritis. We’d had rain for a week and it was hurting her like all get-out. And all at once I seen a new store display. Would have been hard to miss. Took up most of one whole aisle, it did. There were masks and cutout decorations of black cats and witches on brooms and things like that, and there were those cardboard punkins they used to sell. They came in a bag with an elastic inside. The idea was, a kid would punch the punkin out of the cardboard and then give his mom an afternoon of peace coloring it in and maybe playing the games on the back. When it was done you hung it on your door for a decoration, or, if the kid’s family was too poor to buy him a store mask or too dumb to help him make a costume out of what was around the house, why, you could staple that elastic onto the thing and the kid would wear it. Used to be a lot of kids walking around town with paper bags in their hands and those punkin masks from Davis Drug on their faces come Halloween night, Clivey! And, of course, he had his candy out. Was always that penny-candy counter up there by the soda fountain, you know the one I mean—”

Clive smiled. He knew, all right.

“—but this was different. This was penny candy by the job lot. All that truck like wax bottles and candy corn and root-beer barrels and licorice whips.

“And I thought that old man Davis—there really was a fella named Davis who ran the place back then, it was his father that opened her up right around 1910—had slipped a cog or two. Holy hell, I’m thinkin to myself, Frank Davis has got his trick-or-treat out before the goddam summer’s even over. It crossed my mind to go up to the prescription counter where he was n tell him just that, and then a part of me says, Whoa up a second, George—you’re the one who’s slipped a cog or two. And that wasn’t so far wrong, Clivey, because it wasn’t still summer, and I knew it just as well as I know we’re standin here. See, that’s what I want you to understand—that I knew better.

“Wasn’t I already on the lookout for apple pickers from around town, and hadn’t I already put in an order for five hundred handbills to get put up over the border in Canada? And didn’t I already have my eye on this fella named Tim Warburton who’d come down from Schenectady lookin for work? He had a way about him, looked honest, and I thought he’d make a good foreman during picking time. Hadn’t I been meaning to ask him the very next day, and didn’t he know I was gonna ask because he’d let on he’d be getting his hair cut at such-and-such a place at such-and-such a time? I thought to myself, Suds n body, George, ain’t you a little young to be going senile? Yeah, old Frank’s got his Halloween candy out a little early, but summer? That’s gone by, me fine bucko.

“I knew that just fine, but for a second, Clivey—or maybe it was a whole row of seconds—it seemed like summer, or like it had to be summer, because it was just being summer. Get what I mean? It didn’t take me long to get September set down straight again in my head, but until I did I felt ... you know, I felt...” He frowned, then reluctantly brought out a word he knew but would not have used in conversation with another farmer, lest he be accused (if only in the other fellow’s mind) of being high-flown. “I felt dismayed. That’s the only goddam way I know how to put it. Dismayed. And that’s how it was the first time.”

He looked at the boy, who only looked back at him, not even nodding, so deep in concentration was he. Grandpa nodded for both of them and knocked another roll of ash off his cigarette with the side of his thumb. The boy believed Grandpa was so lost in thought that the wind was smoking practically all of this one for him.

“It was like steppin up to the bathroom mirror meanin to do no more’n shave and seein that first gray hair in your head. You get that, Clivey?”

“Yes.”

“Okay. And after that first time, it started to happen with all the holidays. You’d think they was puttin the stuff out too early, and

sometimes you'd even say so to someone, although you always stayed careful to make it sound like you thought the shopkeepers were greedy. That something was wrong with them, not you. You get that?"

"Yes."

"Because," Grandpa said, "a greedy shopkeeper was something a man could understand—and something some men even admired, although I was never one of them. 'So-and-so keeps himself a sharp practice,' they'd say, as if sharp practice, like that butcher fella Radwick that used to always stick his thumb on the scales when he could get away with it, like that was just a honey of a way to be. I never felt that way, but I could understand it. Saying something that made you sound like you had gone over funny in the head, though ... that was a different kettle of beans. So you'd just say something like 'By God, they'll have the tinsel and the angel's hair out before the hay's in the barn next year,' and whoever you said it to would say that was nothing but the Gospel truth, but it wasn't the Gospel truth, and when I hunker right down and study her, Clivey, I know they are putting all those things out pretty near the same time every year.

"Then somethin else happened to me. This might have been five years later, might have been seven. I think I must've been right round fifty, one side or the other. Anyhow, I got called on jury duty. Damn pain in the ass, but I went. The bailiff swore me up, asked me if I'd do my duty so help me God, and I said I will, just as if I hadn't spent all my life doin my duty about one thing n another so help me God. Then he got out his pen and asked for my address, and I gave it to him neat as you'd like. Then he asked how old I was, and I opened my mouth all primed to say thirty-seven."

Grandpa threw back his head and laughed at the cloud that looked like a soldier. That cloud, the bugle part now grown as long as a trombone, had gotten itself halfway from one horizon to the other.

"Why did you want to say that, Grandpa?" Clive thought he had followed everything up to this pretty well, but here was a thicket.

“I wanted to say it because it was the first thing to come into my mind! Hell! Anyhow, I knew it was wrong and so I stopped for a second. I don’t think that bailiff or anyone else in the courtroom noticed—seemed like most of em was either asleep or on the doze—and, even if they’d been as wide awake as the fella who just got Widow Brown’s broomstick rammed up his buttsky, I don’t know as anyone would have made anything of it. Wasn’t no more than how, sometimes, a man trying to hit a tricky pitch will kinda take a double pump before he swings. But, shit! Askin a man how damn old he is ain’t like throwin no spitball. I felt like an ijit. Seemed like for that one second I didn’t know how old I was if I wasn’t thirty-seven. Seemed for a second there like it could have been seven or seventeen or seventy-seven. Then I got it and I said forty-eight or fifty-one or whatever-the-frig. But to lose track of your age, even for a second ... shoo!”

Grandpa dropped his cigarette, brought his heel down upon it, and began the ritual of first murdalizing and then burying it.

“But that’s just the beginning, Clivey me son,” he went on, and, although he spoke only in the Irish vernacular he sometimes affected, the boy thought, I wish I was your son. Yours instead of his. “After a bit, it lets go of first, hits second, and before you know it, time has got itself into high gear and you’re cruising, the way folks do on the turnpike these days, goin so fast their cars blow the leaves right off’n the trees in the fall.”

“What do you mean?”

“Way the seasons change is the worst,” the old man said moodily, as if he hadn’t heard the boy. “Different seasons stop bein different seasons. Seems like Mother has no more’n got the boots n mittens n scarves down from the attic before it’s mud season, and you’d think a man’d be glad to see mud season gone—shit, I always was—but you ain’t s’glad t’see it go when it seems like the mud’s gone before you done pushed the tractor out of the first jellypot it got stuck in. Then it seems like you no more’n clapped your summer straw on for

the first band concert of the year when the poplars start showing their chemises.”

Grandpa looked at him then, an eyebrow raised ironically, as if expecting the boy to ask for an explanation, but Clive smiled, delighted by this—he knew what a chemise was, all right, because it was sometimes all that his mother wore until five in the afternoon or so, at least when his father was out on the road, selling appliances and kitchenware and a little insurance when he could. When his father went out on the road his mother got down to the serious drinking, and that was drinking sometimes too serious to allow her to get dressed until the sun was getting ready to go down. Then sometimes she went out, leaving him in Patty’s care while she went to visit a sick friend. Once he said to Patty, “Ma’s friends get sick more when Dad’s on the road, d’ja notice?” And Patty laughed until tears ran down her face and she said Oh yes, she had noticed, she most certainly had.

What Grandpa said reminded him of how, once the days finally began to slope down toward school again, the poplars changed somehow. When the wind blew, their undersides turned up exactly the color of his mother’s prettiest chemise, a silver color which was as surprisingly sad as it was lovely: a color that signified the end of what you had believed must be forever.

“Then,” Grandpa continued, “you start to lose track of things in your own mind. Not too much—it ain’t being senile, like old man Hayden down the road, thank God—but it’s still a suckardly thing, the way you lose track. It ain’t like forgetting things; that’d be one thing. No, you remember em but you get em in all the wrong places. Like how I was so sure I broke my arm just after our boy Billy got killed in that road accident in ‘58. That was a suckardly thing, too. That’s one I could task that Reverend Chadband with. Billy, he was followin a gravel truck, doin no more than twenty mile an hour, when a chunk of stone no bigger’n the dial of that pocket watch I gave you fell off the back of the truck, hit the road, bounced up, and smashed the windshield of our Ford. Glass went in Billy’s eyes and the doc said

he would have been blinded in one of em or maybe even in both if he'd lived, but he didn't live—he went off the road and hit a 'lectric pole. It fell down atop the car and he got fried just the same as any mad dog killer that ever rode Old Sparky at Sing Sing. And him the worst thing he ever did in his life maybe playing sick to keep from hoeing beans when we still kep the garden.

“But I was saying how sure I was I broke my goddam arm after—I swore up n down I could remember goin to his funeral with that arm still in the sling! Sarah had to show me the family Bible first and the insurance papers on my arm second before I could believe she had it the right way around; it had been two whole months before, and by the time we buried Billy away, the sling was off. She called me an old fool and I felt like putting one up on the side of her head I was s'mad, but I was mad because I was embarrassed, and at least I had the sense to know that n leave her alone. She was only mad because she don't like to think about Bill. He was the apple of her eye, he was.”

“Boy!” Clive said.

“It ain't goin soft; it's more like when you go down to New York City and there are these fellas on the street corners with nutshells and a beebie under one of em, and they bet you can't tell which nutshell the beebie's under, and you're sure you can, but they shuffle em so goddam fast they fool you every time. You just lose track. You can't seem to help it.”

He sighed, looking around, as if to remember where exactly it was that they were. His face had a momentary look of utter helplessness that disgusted the boy as much as it frightened him. He didn't want to feel that way, but couldn't help it. It was as if Grandpa had pulled open a bandage to show the boy a sore which was a symptom of something awful. Something like leprosy.

“Seems like spring started last week,” Grandpa said, “but the blossoms'll be gone tomorrow if the wind keeps up its head, and damn if it don't look like it's gonna. A man can't keep his train of

thought when things go as fast as that. A man can't say, Whoa up a minute or two, old hoss, while I get my bearings! There's no one to say it to. It's like being in a cart that's got no driver, if you take my drift. So what do you make of it, Clivey?"

"Well," the boy said, "you're right about one thing, Grandpa—it sounds like an ijit of some kind must've made up the whole thing."

He didn't mean it to be funny, but Grandpa laughed until his face went that alarming shade of purple again, and this time he not only had to lean over and put his hands on the knees of his overalls but then had to sling an arm around the boy's neck to keep from falling down. They both would have gone tumbling if Grandpa's coughing and wheezing hadn't eased just at the moment when the boy felt sure the blood must come bursting out of that face, which was swollen purple with hilarity.

"Ain't you a jeezer!" Grandpa said, pulling back at last. "Ain't you a one!"

"Grandpa? Are you all right? Maybe we ought to—"

"Shit, no, I ain't all right. I've had me two heart attacks in the last two years, and if I live another two years no one'll be any more surprised than me. But it ain't no news to the human race, boy. All I ever set out to say was that old or young, fast time or slow time, you can walk a straight line if you remember that pony. Because when you count and say 'my pretty pony' between each number, time can't be nothing but time. You do that, I'm telling you you got the sucker stabled. You can't count all the time—that ain't God's plan. I'll go down the primrose lane with that little oily-faced pissant Chadband that far, anyway. But you got to remember that you don't own time; it's time that owns you. It goes along outside you at the same speed every second of every day. It don't care a piss-hole in the snow for you, but that don't matter if you got a pretty pony. If you got a pretty pony, Clivey, you got the bastard right where its dingle dangles and never mind all the Alden Osgoods in the world."

He bent toward Clive Banning.

“Do you understand that?”

“No, sir.”

“I know you don’t. Will you remember it?”

“Yes, sir.”

Grandpa Banning’s eyes studied him so long the boy became uncomfortable and fidgety. At last he nodded. “Yeah, I think you will. Goddam if I don’t.”

The boy said nothing. In truth, he could think of nothing to say.

“You have taken instruction,” Grandpa said.

“I didn’t take any instruction if I didn’t understand!” Clive cried in a frustrated anger so real and so complete it startled him. “I didn’t!”

“Fuck understanding,” the old man said calmly. He slung his arm around the boy’s neck again and drew him close—drew him close for the last time before Gramma would find him dead as a stone in bed a month later. She just woke up and there was Grandpa and Grandpa’s pony had kicked down Grandpa’s fences and gone over all the hills of the world.

Wicked heart, wicked heart. Pretty, but with a wicked heart.

“Understanding and instruction are cousins that don’t kiss,” Grandpa said that day among the apple trees.

“Then what is instruction?”

“Remembrance,” the old man said serenely. “Can you remember that pony?”

“Yes, sir.”

“What name does it keep?”

The boy paused.

“Time... I guess.”

“Good. And what color is it?”

The boy thought longer this time. He opened his mind like an iris in the dark. “I don’t know,” he said at last

“Me, neither,” the old man said, releasing him. “I don’t think it has one, and I don’t think it matters. What matters is, will you know it?”

“Yes, sir,” the boy said at once.

A glittering, feverish eye fastened the boy’s mind and heart like a staple.

“How?”

“It’ll be pretty,” Clive Banning said with absolute certainty.

Grandpa smiled. “So!” he said. “Clivey has taken a bit of instruction, and that makes him wiser and me more blessed ... or the other way around. D’you want a slice of peach pie, boy?”

“Yes, sir!”

“Then what are we doin up here? Let’s go get her!”

They did.

And Clive Banning never forgot the name, which was time, and the color, which was none, and the look, which was not ugly or beautiful... but only pretty. Nor did he ever forget her nature, which was wicked, or what his Grandpa said on the way down, words almost thrown away, lost in the wind: having a pony to ride was

better than having no pony at all, no matter how the weather of its heart might lie.

NEVER LOOK BEHIND YOU

Stephen King

George Jacobs closing his office, when an old woman felt free to walk right in.

Hardly anyone walked through his door these days. The people hated him. For fifteen years he'd picked the people's pockets clean of money. No one had ever been able to hook him on a charge. But back to our little story.

The old woman that came in had an ugly scar on her left cheek. Her clothes were mostly filthy rags and other crude material. Jacobs was counting his money.

"There! Fifty-thousand, nine hundred and seventy-three dollars and sixty-two cents."

Jacobs always liked to be precise.

"Indeed a lot of money," she spoke up. "Too bad you won't be able to spend it."

Jacobs turned around.

Why - who are you?" he asked in half surprise. "What right have you to spy on me?"-

The woman didn't answer. She held up her bony hand. There was a flash of fire on his throat - and a scream. Then, with a final gurgle, George Jacobs died.

"I wonder what - or who - could have killed him?" said a young man.

"I'm glad he's gone." said another.

That one was lucky.

He didn't look behind him.

THE NEW LIEUTENANT'S RAP

Stephen King

“The New Lieutenant’s Rap” is from *Hearts in Atlantis*, to be published by Scribner’s in the fall of 1999. This version, which differs considerably from the one which will appear in the book (it’s longer, for one thing), is offered as a little keepsake—my way of marking twenty-five fruitful (a little too fruitful, some critics would say) years as a novelist and freelance writer. It is limited to no more than 500 copies, each of which has been signed by me and numbered or lettered by Michael Alpert, who has so brilliantly executed all the Philtrum Press books, from *The Plant* to *The Ideal Genuine Man*. The printing is my own. So are the mistakes and scratch-outs.

I hope what follows makes you as uncomfortable as it does me.

Can I have one of those?" Sully asked the new lieutenant once they were safely out of the funeral parlor and down the alley which ran along the side. Here was a bench and a couple of sand-filled ashtrays. The new lieutenant had taken his cigarettes out as soon as they were around the corner. Dunhills. How Spiff. Sully had never had a Dunhill.

"Whatever floats your boat." Dieffenbaker sounded amused... but he hadn't been amused on the day old mamasan died. That day he had been shit scared. They had all been shit scared.

And today the new lieutenant smoked Dunhills, sold computers, and looked as if he had never been shit scared in his life. Say goddam. But Dieffenbaker had stood tall on that day in Dong Ha Province. He had done what needed doing, had given the order that needed giving. Sully thought if it had come down to him, Clemson and Malenfant and those other fuckheads would have killed until their ammo ran out—wasn't that pretty much what the men under Calley and Medina had done? But Dieffenbaker was no William Calley, give him that. Dieffenbaker had given the little nod. Slocum nodded back, then raised his rifle—goddam, I say goddam—

and blew off the back of Ralph Clemson's head.

Now Deef—the new lieutenant—was

Dieffenbaker, a bald computer salesman who had quit going to the reunions. He gave Sully a light with his Zippo, then watched as Sully drew back the smoke deep and coughed it back out.

"Been a while, hasn't it?" Dieffenbaker asked.

"Two years, give or take."

"You want to know the scary thing? How fast you get back into practice."

Sully took another drag and reflected that that was true of a lot of things, none of them good. Pagano, dead inside the funeral parlor, lying there in a wash of canned hymns—that wasn't a good thing, either. Pags's dead, fucking Pags, he thought. Can you say goddam, my brothers?

“Why is it that a fairly decent guy like Pagano—no angel but a fairly decent guy—

goes down with cancer of the pancreas and a guy like Ronnie Malenfant gets a second chance? What do you thing, loot?”

Dieffenbaker voiced a sour laugh. “A good question, and original as hell. Why don't you jot it down on a postcard and send it to Paul Harvey? He can answer it on the radio, after Page Three and before Today's Bumper Snicker.

Me, I just build computers.”

“And smoke Dunhills.”

“Smoke Dunhills, that's affirmative.”

They sat without talking much for awhile.

Sully asked Dieffenbaker for another cigarette and Dieffenbaker gave him one, also another flick of that old Zippo. From around the corner came tangles of conversation and some low laughter. Pags's funeral was over. Another one bites the dust.

“Why were we in Vietnam to begin with?”

Sully asked. “Not to get all philosophical or anything, but have you ever figured that out?”

“Who said, ‘He who does not learn from the past is condemned to repeat it?’”

“Richard Dawson, the host of Family

Feud.”

“Fuck you, Sullivan.”

“Well... maybe it was Kasey Kasem.”

“And fuck your mother.”

“I don’t know who said it. Does it matter?”

“Fuckin yeah, it matters,” Dieffenbaker said. “Because we never got out. We never got out of the green. Our generation died there.”

“That sounds a little—”

“A little what? Pretentious? You bet. A little silly? Yes sir. A little self-regarding? That’s affirmative. But that’s us. That’s us back to front and right up the gut. What have we done since Nam, Sully? Those of us who went, those of us who ran north to Toronto, those of us who marched and protested, those of us who just sat at home watching the Dallas Cowboys and drinking beer and farting into the sofa cushions?”

Color was seeping into the new lieutenant’s cheeks. He had the look of a man who has found his hobby-horse and is now climbing on, helpless to do anything but ride. He held up his hands and began popping his fingers to emphasize his points. To Sully he looked like a maniacal carpet salesman on high-number cable TV.

“Well, let’s see. We’re the generation that pioneered the videogaming revolution, voyaging bravely from Pong to Myst in a mere twenty-five years. We invented the ATV, the Feva-Strip, laser missile-guidance systems, Super-8 video cameras, and crack cocaine. We discovered Richard Simmons, Scott Peck, and Martha Stewart Living. Our idea of history was to reinvent Kiss and go to Bob Dylan shows and put Greatful Dead stickers on our Japanese cars and our Beemers. Our idea of a major lifestyle change is buying a dog. We gave up Eldridge Cleaver for Eddie Murphy and Lenny

Bruce for Andrew Dice Clay. The girls who burned their bras in 1969 now buy their lingerie from Victoria's Secret and the boys who fucked fearlessly for peace are now fat men who sit in front of their computer screens late at night, spanking the monkey while looking at pictures of naked eighteen-year-olds on the Internet.

That's us, Sully—we like to watch. Movies, video games, live car-chase footage from the WJKL Sky-Cam Chopper, fistfights on The Jerry Springer Show, Mark McGwire, John Elway, World Federation Wrestling. We're the Weather Channel generation, Sully. We can accept the idea that God is dead just as long as we know what travel conditions are going to be like on I-80 this weekend. We finally got a guy from our generation in the White House and the best he could do was stick a panatella up some needy little girl's twat. Talk about dirty deeds done dirt cheap—say goddam!"

"Deef—"

"Don't call me that, nobody calls me that now, I told you. We're a joke, Sully our generation is a joke. Every name they put on us ends in -ie, like a kid's nickname—yuppie, yippie, buppie, Butchie, Petie, Patty come in, it's time for supper. But there was a time... don't laugh, but there was a time when it was all in our hands. Do you know that?"

Sully nodded, thinking of Carol. Not the version of her sitting on the sofa with him and her wine-smelling mother, not the one flipping the peace-sign at the camera while the blood ran down the side of her face—at the peace-march in Bridgeport, that had been, just before he went into the service—that one was already too late and too crazy, you could see it in her smile, read it in the sigh, where screaming words forbade all discussion. Rather he thought of Carol on the day her mother had taken a whole bunch of them to Savin Rock Amusement Park. 1960, that would have been. Carol had worn her blue bathing suit and sometimes she'd give Sully's friend Bobby that look, the one that said Bobby was killing her and death was sweet. It had been in their hands then, he was quite sure of it. But

kids lose everything, kids have slippery fingers and holes in their pockets and they lose everything.

Meanwhile, the new lieutenant went on.

The new lieutenant was rapping—he was full out and pumped, can you say oh yeah.

“We filled up our wallets on the stock market and we went to the gym and booked therapy sessions to get in touch with ourselves.

We bought sneakers made by uneducated, malnourished twelve-year-olds and put them on our feet and never thought twice about it because Michael Jordan said we should, and we want to be like Mike. South America is burning, Malaysia’s burning, fucking Vietnam is burning, but we finally got past that self-hating thing, we got the appointment for the liposuction and the reservations at Palms of the Sea, so fuck the rest of the world, I’m okay, you’re okay, John Glenn got back okay, and none of the credit-cards are currently maxed out, so what the fuck? As for the future we all used to talk about... that’s in the past.”

Dieffenbaker’s fingers were held up in front of his face and poked out, to Sully he looked like Al Jolson getting ready to sing

“Mammy.” Dieffenbaker seemed to become aware of this at the same moment Sully did, and lowered his hands. He looked tired and distracted and unhappy.

“I like lots of people our age where they’re one by one,” he said. “Some I actually admire.

But I loathe and despise my generation, Sully.

We had an opportunity to change everything.

We actually did.”

“If you’re talking about selling out—”

“Shit, every generation sells out, it’s part of growing up. But we had it in our hands, man, we had it in our fucking hands, and we never sold it at all. We gave it away, like that Bible guy that gave up his birthright for a mess of pottage. Our mess of potage was designer jeans, tickets to see Mariah Carey, and Celine Dion at Radio City Music Hall, premium cable, frequent flier miles, James Cameron’s Titanic, and those all-important Retirement Portfolios.

The only generation even close to us in pure, selfish self-indulgence is the so-called Lost Generation of the twenties, and at least most of them had the decency to stay drunk. We, on the other hand, have made a self-congratulatory fetish of staying sober, helped along by some vague, non-punishing deity who seems to have no other purpose. A Tupperware God for a Tupperware generation. Basically, Sully, we suck.”

“Hey, man—”

“You know the price of selling out the future, Sully-John? You never really leave the past. You can never get over. My Thesis is that you’re not really in New York City at all. You’re in the Delta, leaning back against a tree, stoned and rubbing bug-dope on the back of your neck.

Packer’s still C.O. because it’s still 1969. The big tune on ASR is still ‘Willie and the Poorboys’ by Creedence. Everything you think of as ‘your later life’ is nothing but a pot-bubble.

And it’s better that way. Vietnam is better. The later life of a sellout isn’t pleasant.”

“Vietnam is better.”

“That’s affirmative, soldier.” Dieffenbaker lit a fresh cigarette with his Zippo. “That’s why we stay there. We don’t love out Tupperware God, but we love Vietnam.”

“You think?”

“Absolutely.” Dieffenbaker looked at his watch. “Like the old Wolfman used to say—too hip, gotta split.”

“Me too.”

Dieffenbaker started toward the front of the building, then turned back to Sully. “I’m sorry.” He said. “I guess it was the shock of seeing Pags in a box. He was too young, you know?”

“I know.” Sully said, but what he knew was that none of them were too young. Not anymore.

“Hang in a little bit. We’ll go for a drink. I promise not to preach.” But his eyes shifted from Sully’s when he said this, as if they knew this was a promise he couldn’t keep.

“Thanks, loot, but I really ought to get back. Another time, huh?”

They looked at each other across the

years—it felt like years, not space, and Sully thought: ‘Willy and the Poorboys’ is still on the ASR. It’s still clicks instead of miles and Dieffenbaker is still the new lieutenant. We stay because it’s better. He’s right. We stay.

“You bet, Sully, that’s affirmative.

Another time.”

**THE NEW YORK TIMES AT SPECIAL BARGAIN
RATES**

Stephen King

She's fresh out of the shower when the phone begins to ring, but although the house is still full of relatives—she can hear them downstairs, it seems they will never go away, it seems she never had so many—no one picks up. Nor does the answering machine, as James programmed it to do after the fifth ring.

Anne goes to the extension on the bed-table, wrapping a towel around her, her wet hair thwacking unpleasantly on the back of her neck and bare shoulders. She picks it up, she says hello, and then he says her name. It's James. They had thirty years together, and one word is all she needs. He says Annie like no one else, always did.

For a moment she can't speak or even breathe. He has caught her on the exhale and her lungs feel as flat as sheets of paper. Then, as he says her name again (sounding uncharacteristically hesitant and unsure of himself), the strength slips from her legs. They turn to sand and she sits on the bed, the towel falling off her, her wet bottom dampening the sheet beneath her. If the bed hadn't been there, she would have gone to the floor.

Her teeth click together and that starts her breathing again.

"James? Where are you? What happened?" In her normal voice, this might have come out sounding shrewish—a mother scolding her wayward eleven-year-old who's come late to the supper-table yet again—but now it emerges in a kind of horrified growl. The murmuring relatives below her are, after all, planning his funeral.

James chuckles. It is a bewildered sound. "Well, I tell you what," he says. "I don't exactly know where I am."

Her first confused thought is that he must have missed the plane in London, even though he called her from Heathrow not long before it took off. Then a clearer idea comes: although both the Times and the TV news say there were no survivors, there was at least one. Her husband crawled from the wreckage of the burning plane (and the

burning apartment building the plane hit, don't forget that, twenty-four more dead on the ground and the number apt to rise before the world moved on to the next tragedy) and has been wandering around Brooklyn ever since, in a state of shock.

"Jimmy, are you all right? Are you ... are you burned?" The truth of what that would mean occurs after the question, thumping down with the heavy weight of a dropped book on a bare foot, and she begins to cry. "Are you in the hospital?"

"Hush," he says, and at his old kindness—and at that old word, just one small piece of their marriage's furniture—she begins to cry harder. "Honey, hush."

"But I don't understand!"

"I'm all right," he says. "Most of us are."

"Most—? There are others?"

"Not the pilot," he says. "He's not so good. Or maybe it's the co-pilot. He keeps screaming. 'We're going down, there's no power, oh my God.' Also 'This isn't my fault, don't let them blame it on me.' He says that, too."

She's cold all over. "Who is this really? Why are you being so horrible? I just lost my husband, you asshole!"

"Honey—"

"Don't call me that!" There's a clear strand of mucus hanging from one of her nostrils. She wipes it away with the back of her hand and then flings it into the wherever, a thing she hasn't done since she was a child. "Listen, mister—I'm going to star-sixty-nine this call and the police will come and slam your ass ... your ignorant, unfeeling ass ..."

But she can go no farther. It's his voice. There's no denying it. The way the call rang right through—no pickup downstairs, no answering machine—suggests this call was just for her. And ... honey, hush. Like in the old Carl Perkins song.

He has remained quiet, as if letting her work these things through for herself. But before she can speak again, there's a beep on the line.

"James? Jimmy? Are you still there?"

"Yeah, but I can't talk long. I was trying to call you when we went down, and I guess that's the only reason I was able to get through at all. Lots of others have been trying, we're lousy with cell phones, but no luck." That beep again. "Only now my phone's almost out of juice."

"Jimmy, did you know?" This idea has been the hardest and most terrible part for her—that he might have known, if only for an endless minute or two. Others might picture burned bodies or dismembered heads with grinning teeth; even light-fingered first responders filching wedding rings and diamond ear-clips, but what has robbed Annie Driscoll's sleep is the image of Jimmy looking out his window as the streets and cars and the brown apartment buildings of Brooklyn swell closer. The useless masks flopping down like the corpses of small yellow animals. The overhead bins popping open, carry-ons starting to fly, someone's Norelco razor rolling up the tilted aisle.

"Did you know you were going down?"

"Not really," he says. "Everything seemed all right until the very end—maybe the last thirty seconds. Although it's hard to keep track of time in situations like that, I always think."

Situations like that. And even more telling: I always think. As if he has been aboard half a dozen crashing 767s instead of just the one.

"In any case," he goes on, "I was just calling to say we'd be early, so be sure to get the FedEx man out of bed before I got there."

Her absurd attraction for the FedEx man has been a joke between them for years. She begins to cry again. His cell utters another of those beeps, as if scolding her for it.

“I think I died just a second or two before it rang the first time. I think that’s why I was able to get through to you. But this thing’s gonna give up the ghost pretty soon.”

He chuckles as if this is funny. She supposes that in a way it is. She may see the humor in it herself, eventually. Give me ten years or so, she thinks.

Then, in that just-talking-to-myself voice she knows so well: “Why didn’t I put the tiresome motherfucker on charge last night? Just forgot, that’s all. Just forgot.”

“James ... honey ... the plane crashed two days ago.”

A pause. Mercifully with no beep to fill it. Then: “Really? Mrs. Corey said time was funny here. Some of us agreed, some of us disagreed. I was a disagreeer, but looks like she was right.”

“Hearts?” Annie asks. She feels now as if she is floating outside and slightly above her plump damp middle-aged body, but she hasn’t forgotten Jimmy’s old habits. On a long flight he was always looking for a game. Cribbage or canasta would do, but hearts was his true love.

“Hearts,” he agrees. The phone beeps again, as if seconding that.

“Jimmy ...” She hesitates long enough to ask herself if this is information she really wants, then plunges with that question still unanswered. “Where are you, exactly?”

“Looks like Grand Central Station,” he says. “Only bigger. And emptier. As if it wasn’t really Grand Central at all but only ... mmm ... a movie-set of Grand Central. Do you know what I’m trying to say?”

“I ... I think so ...”

“There certainly aren’t any trains ... and we can’t hear any in the distance ... but there are doors going everywhere. Oh, and there’s an escalator, but it’s broken. All dusty, and some of the treads are broken.” He pauses, and when he speaks again he does so in a lower voice, as if afraid of being overheard. “People are leaving. Some climbed the escalator—I saw them—but most are using the doors. I guess I’ll have to leave, too. For one thing, there’s nothing to eat. There’s a candy machine, but that’s broken, too.”

“Are you ... honey, are you hungry?”

“A little. Mostly what I’d like is some water. I’d kill for a cold bottle of Dasani.”

Annie looks guiltily down at her own legs, still beaded with water. She imagines him licking off those beads and is horrified to feel a sexual stirring.

“I’m all right, though,” he adds hastily. “For now, anyway. But there’s no sense staying here. Only ...”

“What? What, Jimmy?”

“I don’t know which door to use.”

Another beep.

“I wish I knew which one Mrs. Corey took. She’s got my damn cards.”

“Are you ...” She wipes her face with the towel she wore out of the shower; then she was fresh, now she’s all tears and snot. “Are you scared?”

“Scared?” he asks thoughtfully. “No. A little worried, that’s all. Mostly about which door to use.”

Find your way home, she almost says. Find the right door and find your way home. But if he did, would she want to see him? A ghost might be all right, but what if she opened the door on a smoking cinder with red eyes and the remains of jeans (he always traveled in jeans) melted into his legs? And what if Mrs. Corey was with him, his baked deck of cards in one twisted hand?

Beep.

“I don’t need to tell you to be careful about the FedEx man anymore,” he says. “If you really want him, he’s all yours.”

She shocks herself by laughing.

“But I did want to say I love you—”

“Oh honey I love you t—”

“—and not to let the McCormack kid do the gutters this fall, he works hard but he’s a risk-taker, last year he almost broke his fucking neck. And don’t go to the bakery anymore on Sundays. Something’s going to happen there, and I know it’s going to be on a Sunday, but I don’t know which Sunday. Time really is funny here.”

The McCormack kid he’s talking about must be the son of the guy who used to be their caretaker in Vermont ... only they sold that place ten years ago, and the kid must be in his mid-twenties by now. And the bakery? She supposes he’s talking about Zoltan’s, but what on earth—

Beep.

“Some of the people here were on the ground, I guess. That’s very tough, because they don’t have a clue how they got here. And the pilot keeps screaming. Or maybe it’s the co-pilot. I think he’s going to be here for quite awhile. He just wanders around. He’s very confused.”

The beeps are coming closer together now.

“I have to go, Annie. I can’t stay here, and the phone’s going to shit the bed any second now, anyway.” Once more in that I’m-scolding-myself voice (impossible to believe she will never hear it again after today; impossible not to believe) he mutters, “It would have been so simple just to ... well, never mind. I love you, sweetheart.”

“Wait! Don’t go!”

“I c—”

“I love you, too! Don’t go!”

But he already has. In her ear there is only black silence.

She sits there with the dead phone to her ear for a minute or more, then breaks the connection. The non-connection. When she opens the line again and gets a perfectly normal dial tone, she touches star-sixty-nine after all. According to the robot who answers her page, the last incoming call was at nine o’clock that morning. She knows who that one was: her sister Nell, calling from New Mexico. Nell called to tell Annie that her plane had been delayed and she wouldn’t be in until tonight. Nell told her to be strong.

All the relatives who live at a distance—James’s, Annie’s—flew in. Apparently they feel that James used up all the family’s Destruction Points, at least for the time being.

There is no record of an incoming call at—she glances at the bedside clock and sees it’s now 3:17 P.M.—at about ten past three, on the third afternoon of her widowhood.

Someone raps briefly on the door and her brother calls, “Anne? Annie?”

“Dressing!” she calls back. Her voice sounds like she’s been crying, but unfortunately, no one in this house would find that strange.

“Privacy, please!”

“You okay?” he calls through the door. “We thought we heard you talking. And Ellie thought she heard you call out.”

“Fine!” she calls, then wipes her face again with the towel. “Down in a few!”

“Okay. Take your time.” Pause. “We’re here for you.” Then he clumps away.

“Beep,” she whispers, then covers her mouth to hold in laughter that is some emotion even more complicated than grief finding the only way out it has. “Beep, beep. Beep, beep, beep.” She lies back on the bed, laughing, and above her cupped hands her eyes are large and awash with tears that overspill down her cheeks and run all the way to her ears. “Beep-fucking-beepity-beep.”

She laughs for quite awhile, then dresses and goes downstairs to be with her relatives, who have come to share their grief with hers. Only they feel apart from her, because he didn’t call any of them. He called her. For better or worse, he called her.

*

During the autumn of that year, with the blackened remains of the apartment building the jet crashed into still closed off from the rest of the world by yellow police tape (although the taggers have been inside, one leaving a spray-painted message reading CRISPY CRITTERS STOP HERE), Annie receives the sort of e-blast computer-addicts like to send to a wide circle of acquaintances. This one comes from Gert Fisher, the town librarian in Tilton, Vermont. When Annie and James summered there, Annie used to volunteer at the library, and although the two women never got on especially well, Gert has included Annie in her quarterly updates ever since. They are usually not very interesting, but halfway through the weddings, funerals, and 4-H winners in this one, Annie comes across a bit of news that makes her catch her breath. Jason McCormack, the son of

old Hughie McCormack, was killed in an accident on Labor Day. He fell from the roof of a summer cottage while cleaning the gutters and broke his neck.

“He was only doing a favor for his dad, who as you may remember had a stroke the year before last,” Gert wrote before going on to how it rained on the library’s end-of-summer lawn sale, and how disappointed they all were.

Gert doesn’t say in her three-page compendium of breaking news, but Annie is quite sure Jason fell from the roof of what used to be their cottage. In fact, she is positive.

*

Five years after the death of her husband (and the death of Jason McCormack not long after), Annie remarries. And although they relocate to Boca Raton, she gets back to the old neighborhood often. Craig, the new husband, is only semi-retired, and his business takes him to New York every three or four months. Annie almost always goes with him, because she still has family in Brooklyn and on Long Island. More than she knows what to do with, it sometimes seems. But she loves them with that exasperated affection that seems to belong, she thinks, only to people in their fifties and sixties. She never forgets how they drew together for her after James’s plane went down, and made the best cushion for her that they could. So she wouldn’t crash, too.

When she and Craig go back to New York, they fly. About this she never has a qualm, but she stops going to Zoltan’s Family Bakery on Sundays when she’s home, even though their raisin bagels are, she is sure, served in heaven’s waiting room. She goes to Froger’s instead. She is actually there, buying doughnuts (the doughnuts are at least passable), when she hears the blast. She hears it clearly even though Zoltan’s is eleven blocks away. LP gas explosion. Four killed, including the woman who always passed Annie her bagels with the top of the bag rolled down, saying, “Keep it that way until you get home or you lose the freshness.”

People stand on the sidewalks, looking east toward the sound of the explosion and the rising smoke, shading their eyes with their hands. Annie hurries past them, not looking. She doesn't want to see a plume of rising smoke after a big bang; she thinks of James enough as it is, especially on the nights when she can't sleep. When she gets home she can hear the phone ringing inside. Either everyone has gone down the block to where the local school is having a sidewalk art sale, or no one can hear that ringing phone. Except for her, that is. And by the time she gets her key turned in the lock, the ringing has stopped.

Sarah, the only one of her sisters who never married, is there, it turns out, but there is no need to ask her why she didn't answer the phone; Sarah Bernicke, the one-time disco queen, is in the kitchen with the Village People turned up, dancing around with the O-Cedar in one hand, looking like a chick in a TV ad. She missed the bakery explosion, too, although their building is even closer to Zoltan's than Froger's.

Annie checks the answering machine, but there's a big red zero in the MESSAGES WAITING window. That means nothing in itself, lots of people call without leaving a message, but—

Star-sixty-nine reports the last call at eight-forty last night. Annie dials it anyway, hoping against hope that somewhere outside the big room that looks like a Grand Central Station movie-set he found a place to re-charge his phone. To him it might seem he last spoke to her yesterday. Or only minutes ago. Time is funny here, he said. She has dreamed of that call so many times it now almost seems like a dream itself, but she has never told anyone about it. Not Craig, not even her own mother, now almost ninety but alert and with a firmly held belief in the afterlife.

In the kitchen, the Village People advise that there is no need to feel down. There isn't, and she doesn't. She nevertheless holds the phone very tightly as the number she has star-sixty-nined rings once, then twice. Annie stands in the living room with the phone to her ear and her free hand touching the brooch above her left breast, as if

touching the brooch could still the pounding heart beneath it. Then the ringing stops and a recorded voice offers to sell her the New York Times at special bargain rates that will not be repeated.

"Startling, nonstop horror..." - Ft. Worth Star Telegram

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THE NIGHT FLIER

Stephen King

1

In spite of his pilot's license, Dees didn't really get interested until the murders at the airport in Maryland—the third and fourth murders in the series. Then he smelled that special combination of blood and guts which readers of *Inside View* had come to expect. Coupled with a good dime-store mystery like this one, you were looking at the likelihood of an explosive circulation boost, and in the tabloid business, increased circulation was more than the name of the game; it was the Holy Grail.

For Dees, however, there was bad news as well as good. The good news was that he had gotten to the story ahead of the rest of the pack; he was still undefeated, still champion, still top hog in the sty. The bad news was that the roses really belonged to Morrison ... so far, at least. Morrison, the freshman editor, had gone on picking away at the damned thing even after Dees, the veteran reporter, had assured him there was nothing there but smoke and echoes. Dees didn't like the idea that Morrison had smelled blood first—hated it, in fact—and this left him with a completely understandable urge to piss the man off. And he knew just how to do it.

“Duffrey, Maryland, huh?”

Morrison nodded.

“Anyone in the straight press pick up on it yet?” Dees asked, and was gratified to see Morrison bristle at once.

“If you mean has anyone suggested there's a serial killer out there, the answer is no,” he said stiffly.

But it won't be long, Dees thought.

“But it won't be long,” Morrison said. “If there's another one—”

“Gimme the file,” Dees said, pointing to the buff-colored folder lying on Morrison’s eerily neat desk.

The balding editor put a hand on it instead, and Dees understood two things: Morrison was going to give it to him, but not until he had been made to pay a little for his initial unbelief... and his lofty I’m-the-veteran-around-here attitude. Well, maybe that was all right. Maybe even the top hog in the sty needed to have his curly little tail twisted every now and then, just to refresh his memory on his place in the scheme of things.

“I thought you were supposed to be over at the Museum of Natural History, talking to the penguin guy,” Morrison said. The corners of his mouth curved up in a small but undeniably evil smile. “The one who thinks they’re smarter than people and dolphins.”

Dees pointed to the only other thing on Morrison’s desk besides the folder and the pictures of his nerdy-looking wife and three nerdy-looking kids: a large wire basket labelled DAILY BREAD. It currently contained a single thin sheaf of manuscript, six or eight pages held together with one of Dees’s distinctive magenta paper-clips, and an envelope marked CONTACT SHEETS DO NOT BEND.

Morrison took his hand off the folder (looking ready to slap it back on if Dees so much as twitched), opened the envelope, and shook out two sheets covered with black-and-white photos not much bigger than postage stamps. Each photo showed long files of penguins staring silently out at the viewer. There was something undeniably creepy about them—to Merton Morrison they looked like George Romero zombies in tuxedos. He nodded and slipped them back into the envelope. Dees disliked all editors on principle, but he had to admit that this one at least gave credit where credit was due. It was a rare attribute, one Dees suspected would cause the man all sorts of medical problems in later life. Or maybe the problems had already started. There he sat, surely not thirty-five yet, with at least seventy per cent of his skull exposed.

“Not bad,” Morrison said. “Who took them?”

“I did,” Dees said. “I always take the pix that go with my stories. Don’t you ever look at the photo credits?”

“Not usually, no,” Morrison said, and glanced at the temp headline Dees had slugged at the top of his penguin story. Libby Grannit in Comp would come up with a punchier, more colorful one, of course—that was, after all, her job—but Dees’s instincts were good all the way up to headlines, and he usually found the right street, if not often the actual address and apartment number. ALIEN INTELLIGENCE AT NORTH POLE, this one read. Penguins weren’t aliens, of course, and Morrison had an idea that they actually lived at the South Pole, but those things hardly mattered. Inside View readers were crazy about both Aliens and Intelligence (perhaps because a majority of them felt like the former and sensed in themselves a deep deficiency of the latter), and that was what mattered.

“The headline’s a little lacking,” Morrison began, “but—”

“—that’s what Libby’s for,” Dees finished for him. “So...”

“So?” Morrison asked. His eyes were wide and blue and guileless behind his gold-rimmed glasses. He put his hand back down on top of the folder, smiled at Dees, and waited.

“So what do you want me to say? That I was wrong?”

Morrison’s smile widened a millimeter or two. “Just that you might have been wrong. That’d do, I guess—you know what a pussycat I am.”

“Yeah, tell me about it,” Dees said, but he was relieved. He could take a little abasement; it was the actual crawling around on his belly that he didn’t like.

Morrison sat looking at him, right hand splayed over the file.

“Okay; I might have been wrong.”

“How large-hearted of you to admit it,” Morrison said, and handed the file over.

Dees snatched it greedily, took it over to the chair by the window, and opened it. What he read this time—it was no more than a loose assemblage of wire-service stories and clippings from a few small-town weeklies—blew his mind.

I didn’t see this before, he thought, and on the heels of that: Why didn’t I see this before?

He didn’t know ... but he did know he might have to rethink that idea of being top hog in the tabloid sty if he missed many more stories like this. He knew something else, as well: if his and Morrison’s positions had been reversed (and Dees had turned down the editor’s chair at Inside View not once but twice over the last seven years), he would have made Morrison crawl on his belly like a reptile before giving him the file.

Fuck that, he told himself. You would have fired his ass right out the door.

The idea that he might be burning out fluttered through his mind. The burnout rate was pretty high in this business, he knew. Apparently you could spend only so many years writing about flying saucers carrying off whole Brazilian villages (usually illustrated by out-of-focus photographs of lightbulbs hanging from strands of thread), dogs that could do calculus, and out-of-work daddies chopping their kids up like kindling wood. Then one day you suddenly snapped. Like Dottie Walsh, who had gone home one night and taken a bath with a dry-cleaning bag wrapped around her head.

Don’t be a fool, he told himself, but he was uneasy just the same. The story was sitting there, right there, big as life and twice as ugly. How in the hell could he have missed it?

He looked up at Morrison, who was rocked back in his desk chair with his hands laced together over his stomach, watching him.

“Well?” Morrison asked.

“Yeah,” he said. “This could be big. And that’s not all. I think it’s the real goods.”

“I don’t care if it’s the real goods or not,” Morrison said, “as long as it sells papers. And it’s going to sell lots of papers, isn’t it, Richard?”

“Yes.” He got to his feet and tucked the folder under his arm. “I want to run this guy’s backtrail, starting with the first one we know about, up in Maine.”

“Richard?”

He turned back at the door and saw Morrison was looking at the contact sheets again. He was smiling.

“What do you think if we run the best of these next to a photo of Danny DeVito in that Batman movie?”

“It works for me,” Dees said, and went out. Questions and self-doubts were suddenly, blessedly set aside; the old smell of blood was back in his nose, strong and bitterly compelling, and for the time being he only wanted to follow it all the way to the end. The end came a week later, not in Maine, not in Maryland, but much farther south, in North Carolina.

2

It was summertime, which meant the living should have been easy and the cotton high, but nothing was coming easy for Richard Dees as that long day wound its way down toward dark.

The major problem was his inability—at least so far—to get into the small Wilmington airport, which served only one major carrier, a few commuter airlines, and a lot of private planes. There were heavy thunderstorm cells in the area and Dees was circling ninety miles from the airfield, pogoing up and down in the unsteady air and cursing as the last hour of daylight began to slip away. It was 7:45 P.M. by the time he was given landing clearance. That was less than forty minutes before official sundown. He didn't know if the Night Flier stuck to the traditional rules or not, but if he did, it was going to be a close thing.

And the Flier was here; of that Dees was sure. He had found the right place, the right Cessna Skymaster. His quarry could have picked Virginia Beach, or Charlotte, or Birmingham, or some point even farther south, but he hadn't. Dees didn't know where he had hidden between leaving Duffrey, Maryland, and arriving here, and didn't care. It was enough to know that his intuition had been correct—his boy had continued to work the windsock circuit. Dees had spent a good part of the last week calling all the airports south of Duffrey that seemed right for the Flier's M.O., making the rounds again and again, using his finger on the Touch-Tone in his Days Inn motel room until it was sore and his contacts on the other end had begun to express their irritation with his persistence. Yet in the end persistence had paid off, as it so often did.

Private planes had landed the night before at all of the most likely airfields, and Cessna Skymaster 337s at all of them. Not surprising, since they were the Toyotas of private aviation. But the Cessna 337 that had landed last night in Wilmington was the one he was looking for; no question about it. He was on the guy.

Dead on the guy.

“N471B, vector ILS runway 34,” the radio voice drawled laconically into his earphones. “Fly heading 160. Descend and maintain 3,000.”

“Heading 160. Leaving 6 for 3,000, roger.”

“And be aware we still got some nasty weather down here.”

“Roger,” Dees said, thinking that ole Farmer John, down there in whatever beer-barrel passed for Air Traffic Control in Wilmington, was sure one hell of a sport to tell him that. He knew there was still nasty weather in the area; he could see the thunderheads, some with lightning still going off inside them like giant fireworks, and he had spent the last forty minutes or so circling and feeling more like a man in a blender than one in a twin-engine Beechcraft.

He flicked off the autopilot, which had been taking him around and around the same stupid patch of now-you-see-it, now-you-don't North Carolina farmland for far too long, and grabbed a handful of wheel. No cotton down there, high or otherwise, that he could see. Just a bunch of used-up tobacco patches now overgrown with kudzu. Dees was happy to point his plane's nose toward Wilmington and start down the ramp, monitored by pilot, ATC, and tower, for the ILS approach.

He picked up the microphone, thought about giving ole Farmer John there a yell, asking him if there happened to be anything weird going on downstairs—the dark-and-stormy-night kind of stuff Inside View readers loved, perhaps—then racked the mike again. It was still awhile until sunset; he had verified the official Wilmington time on his way down from Washington National. No, he thought, maybe he'd just keep his questions to himself for a little while longer.

Dees believed the Night Flier was a real vampire about as much as he believed it was the Tooth Fairy who had put all those quarters under his pillow when he was a kid, but if the guy thought he was a

vampire—and this guy, Dees was convinced, really did—that would probably be enough to make him conform to the rules.

Life, after all, imitates art.

Count Dracula with a private pilot's license.

You had to admit, Dees thought, it was a lot better than killer penguins plotting the overthrow of the human race.

The Beech jounced as he passed through a thick membrane of cumulus on his steady downward course. Dees cursed and trimmed the plane, which seemed increasingly unhappy with the weather.

You and me both, babes, Dees thought.

When he came into the clear again, he could see the lights of Wilmington and Wrightsville Beach clearly.

Yes, sir, the fatties who shop at 7-Eleven are gonna love this one, he thought as lightning flashed on the port side. They're gonna pick up about seventy zillion copies of this baby when they go out for their nightly ration of Twinkies and beer.

But there was more, and he knew it.

This one could be ... well ... just so goddam good.

This one could be legitimate.

There was a time when a word like that never would have crossed your mind, ole buddy, he thought. Maybe you are burning out.

Still, big stacked headlines danced in his head like sugarplums:
INSIDE VIEW REPORTER APPREHENDS CRAZED NIGHT FLIER
EXCLUSIVE STORY ON HOW BLOOD-DRINKING NIGHT FLIER
WAS FINALLY CAUGHT. "NEEDED TO HAVE IT," DEADLY
DRACULA DECLARES.

It wasn't exactly grand opera—Dees had to admit that—but he thought it sang just the same. He thought it sang like a boid.

He picked up the mike after all and depressed the button. He knew his blood-buddy was still down there, but he also knew he wasn't going to be comfortable until he had made absolutely sure.

“Wilmington, this is N471B. You still got a Skymaster 337 from Maryland down there on the ramp?”

Through static: “Looks like it, old hoss. Can't talk just now. I got air traffic.”

“Has it got red piping?” Dees persisted.

For a moment he thought he would get no answer, then: “Red piping, roger. Kick it off, N471B, if you don't want me to see it I can slap an FCC fine on y'all. I got too many fish to fry tonight and not enough skilletts.”

“Thanks, Wilmington,” Dees said in his most courteous voice. He hung up the mike and then gave it the finger, but he was grinning, barely noticing the jolts as he passed through another membrane of cloud. Skymaster, red piping, and he was willing to bet next year's salary that if the doofus in the tower hadn't been so busy, he would have been able to confirm the tail-number as well: N101BL.

One week, by Christ, one little week. That was all it had taken. He had found the Night Flier, it wasn't dark yet, and as impossible as it seemed, there were no police on the scene. If there had been cops, and if they had been there concerning the Cessna, Farmer John almost certainly would have said so, sky-jam and bad weather or not. Some things were just too good not to gossip about.

I want your picture, you bastard, Dees thought. Now he could see the approach lights, flashing white in the dusk. I'll get your story in time, but first, the picture. Just one, but I gotta have it.

Yes, because it was the picture that made it real. No fuzzy out-of-focus lightbulbs; no “artist’s conception”; a real by-God photo in living black-and-white. He headed down more steeply, ignoring the descent beep. His face was pale and set. His lips were pulled back slightly, revealing small, gleaming white teeth.

In the combined light of dusk and the instrument panel, Richard Dees looked quite a little bit like a vampire himself.

3

There were many things Inside View was not—literate, for one, overconcerned with such minor matters as accuracy and ethics, for another—but one thing was undeniable: it was exquisitely attuned to horrors. Merton Morrison was a bit of an asshole (although not as much of one as Dees had thought when he'd first seen the man smoking that dumb fucking pipe of his), but Dees had to give him one thing—he had remembered the things that had made Inside View a success in the first place: buckets of blood and guts by the handful.

Oh, there were still pictures of cute babies, plenty of psychic predictions, and Wonder Diets featuring such unlikely ingestibles as beer, chocolate, and potato chips, but Morrison had sensed a sea-change in the temper of the times, and had never once questioned his own judgement about the direction the paper should take. Dees supposed that confidence was the main reason Morrison had lasted as long as he had, in spite of his pipe and his tweed jackets from Asshole Brothers of London. What Morrison knew was that the flower children of the sixties had grown into the cannibals of the nineties. Huggy therapy, political correctness, and “the language of feelings” might be big deals among the intellectual upper class, but the ever-popular common man was still a lot more interested in mass murders, buried scandals in the lives of the stars, and just how Magic Johnson had gotten AIDS.

Dees had no doubt there was still an audience for All Things Bright and Beautiful, but the one for All Shit Grim and Gory had become a growth stock again as the Woodstock Generation began to discover gray in its hair and lines curving down from the corners of its petulant self-indulgent mouth. Merton Morrison, whom Dees now recognized as a kind of intuitive genius, had made his own inside view clear in a famous memo issued to all staff and stringers less than a week after he and his pipe had taken up residence in the corner office. By all means, stop and smell the roses on your way to work, this memo

suggested, but once you get to there, spread those nostrils—spread them wide—and start sniffing for blood and guts.

Dees, who had been made for sniffing blood and guts, had been delighted. His nose was the reason he was here, flying into Wilmington. There was a human monster down there, a man who thought he was a vampire. Dees had a name all picked out for him; it burned in his mind as a valuable coin might burn in a man's pocket. Soon he would take the coin out and spend it. When he did, the name would be plastered across the tabloid display racks of every supermarket checkout counter in America, screaming at the patrons in unignorable sixty-point type.

Look out, ladies and sensation seekers, Dees thought. You don't know it, but a very bad man is coming your way. You'll read his real name and forget it, but that's okay. What you'll remember is my name for him, the name that's going to put him right up there with Jack the Ripper and the Cleveland Torso Murderer and the Black Dahlia. You'll remember the Night Flier, coming soon to a checkout counter near you. The exclusive story, the exclusive interview ... but what I want most of all is the exclusive picture.

He checked his watch again and allowed himself to relax the tiniest bit (which was all he could relax). He still had almost half an hour till dark, and he would be parking next to the white Skymaster with red piping (and N101BL on the tail in a similar red) in less than fifteen minutes.

Was the Flier sleeping in town or in some motel on the way into town? Dees didn't think so. One of the reasons for the Skymaster 337's popularity, besides its relatively low price, was that it was the only plane its size with a belly-hold. It wasn't much bigger than the trunk of an old VW Beetle, true, but it was roomy enough for three big suitcases or five small ones ... and it could certainly hold a man, provided he wasn't the size of a pro basketball player. The Night Flier could be in the Cessna's belly-hold, provided he was (a) sleeping in the fetal position with his knees drawn up to his chin; or

(b) crazy enough to think he was a real vampire; or (c) both of the above.

Dees had his money on (c).

Now, with his altimeter winding down from four to three thousand feet, Dees thought: Nope, no hotel or motel for you, my friend, am I right? When you play vampire, you're like Frank Sinatra—you do it your way. Know what I think? I think when the belly-hold of that plane opens, the first thing I'm gonna see is a shower of graveyard earth (even if it isn't, you can bet your upper incisors it will be when the story comes out), and then I'm gonna see first one leg in a pair of tuxedo pants, and then the other, because you are gonna be dressed, aren't you? Oh, dear man, I think you are gonna be dressed to the nines, dressed to kill, and the auto-winder is already on my camera, and when I see that cloak flap in the breeze—

But that was where his thoughts stopped, because that was when the flashing white lights on both runways below him went out.

4

I want to run this guy's backtrail, he had told Merton Morrison, starting with the first one we know about, up in Maine.

Less than four hours later he had been at Cumberland County Airport, talking to a mechanic named Ezra Hannon. Mr. Hannon looked as if he had recently crawled out of a gin-bottle, and Dees wouldn't have let him within shouting distance of his own plane, but he gave the fellow his full and courteous attention just the same. Of course he did; Ezra Hannon was the first link in what Dees was beginning to think might prove to be a very important chain.

Cumberland County Airport was a dignified-sounding name for a country landing-field which consisted of two Quonset huts and two crisscrossing runways. One of these runways was actually tarred. Because Dees had never landed on a dirt runway, he requested the tarred one. The bouncing his Beech 55 (for which he was in hock up to his eyebrows and beyond) took when he landed convinced him to try the dirt when he took off again, and when he did he had been delighted to find it as smooth and firm as a coed's breast. The field also had a windsock, of course, and of course it was patched like a pair of old Dad's underdrawers. Places like CCA always had a windsock. It was part of their dubious charm, like the old biplane that always seemed to be parked in front of the single hangar.

Cumberland County was the most populous in Maine, but you never would have known it from its cow-patty airport, Dees thought... or from Ezra the Amazing Gin-Head Mechanic, for that matter. When he grinned, displaying all six of his remaining teeth, he looked like an extra from the film version of James Dickey's *Deliverance*.

The airport sat on the outskirts of the much plusher town of Falmouth, existing mostly on landing fees paid by rich summer residents. Claire Bowie, the Night Flier's first victim, had been CCA's night traffic controller and owned a quarter interest in the airfield. The

other employees had consisted of two mechanics and a second ground controller (the ground controllers also sold chips, cigarettes, and sodas; further, Dees had learned, the murdered man had made a pretty mean cheeseburger).

Mechanics and controllers also served as pump jockeys and custodians. It wasn't unusual for the controller to have to rush back from the bathroom, where he had been swabbing out the john with Janitor-in-a-Drum, to give landing clearance and assign a runway from the challenging maze of two at his disposal. The operation was so high-pressure that during the airport's peak summer season the night controller sometimes got only six hours' worth of good sleep between midnight and 7:00 A.M.

Claire Bowie had been killed almost a month prior to Dees's visit, and the picture the reporter put together was a composite created from the news stories in Morrison's thin file and Ezra the Amazing Gin-Head Mechanic's much more colorful embellishments. And even when he had made the necessary allowances for his primary source, Dees remained sure that something very strange had happened at this dipshit little airport in early July.

The Cessna 337, tail-number N101BL, had radioed the field for landing clearance shortly before dawn on the morning of July 9th. Claire Bowie, who had been working the night shift at the airfield since 1954, when pilots sometimes had to abort their approaches (a maneuver in those days known simply as "pulling up") because of the cows that sometimes wandered onto what was then the single runway, logged the request at 4:32 A.M. The time of landing he noted as 4:49 A.M.; he recorded the pilot's name as Dwight Renfield, and the point of N101BL's origination as Bangor, Maine. The times were undoubtedly correct. The rest was bullshit (Dees had checked Bangor, and wasn't surprised to find they had never heard of N101BL), but even if Bowie had known it was bullshit, it probably wouldn't have made much difference; at CCA, the atmosphere was loose, and a landing fee was a landing fee.

The name the pilot had given was a bizarre joke. Dwight just happened to be the first name of an actor named Dwight Frye, and Dwight Frye had just happened to play, among a plethora of other parts, the role of Renfield, a slavering lunatic whose idol had been the most famous vampire of all time. But radioing UNICOM and asking for landing clearance in the name of Count Dracula might have raised suspicion even in a sleepy little place like this, Dees supposed.

Might have; Dees wasn't really sure. After all, a landing fee was a landing fee, and "Dwight Renfield" had paid his promptly, in cash, as he had also paid to top off his tanks—the money had been in the register the next day, along with a carbon of the receipt Bowie had written out.

Dees knew about the casual, hipshot way private air-traffic had been controlled at the smaller fields in the fifties and sixties, but he was still astonished by the informal treatment the Night Flier's plane had received at CCA. It wasn't the fifties or sixties anymore, after all; this was the era of drug paranoia, and most of the shit to which you were supposed to just say no came into small harbors in small boats, or into small airports in small planes ... planes like "Dwight Renfield's" Cessna Skymaster. A landing fee was a landing fee, sure, but Dees would have expected Bowie to give Bangor a shout about the missing flight-plan just the same, if only to cover his own ass. But he hadn't. The idea of a bribe had occurred to Dees at this point, but his gin-soaked informant claimed that Claire Bowie was as honest as the day was long, and the two Falmouth cops Dees talked to later on had confirmed Hannon's judgement.

Negligence seemed a likelier answer, but in the end it didn't really matter; Inside View readers weren't interested in such esoteric questions as how or why things happened. Inside View readers were content to know what had happened, and how long it took, and if the person it happened to had had time to scream. And pictures, of course. They wanted pictures. Great big hi-intensity black-and-

whites, if possible—the kind that seemed to leap right off the page in a swarm of dots and nail you in the forebrain.

Ezra the Amazing Gin-Head Mechanic had looked surprised and considering when Dees asked where he thought “Renfield” might have gone after landing.

“Dunno,” he said. “Motel, I s’pose. Musta taken a cab.”

“You came in at ... what time did you say? Seven o’clock that morning? July ninth?”

“Uh-huh. Just before Claire left to go home.”

“And the Cessna Skymaster was parked and tied down and empty?”

“Yep. Parked right where yours is now.” Ezra pointed, and Dees pulled back a little. The mechanic smelled quite a little bit like a very old Roquefort cheese which had been pickled in Gilbey’s Gin.

“Did Claire happen to say if he called a cab for the pilot? To take him to a motel? Because there don’t seem to be any in easy walking distance.”

“There ain’t,” Ezra agreed. “Closest one’s the Sea Breeze, and that’s two mile away. Maybe more.” He scratched his stubbly chin. “But I don’t remember Claire saying ary word about callin the fella a cab.”

Dees made a mental note to call the cab companies in the area just the same. At that time he was going on what seemed like a reasonable assumption: that the guy he was looking for slept in a bed, like almost everyone else.

“What about a limo?” he asked.

“Nope,” Ezra said more positively, “Claire didn’t say nothing about no limbo, and he woulda mentioned that.”

Dees nodded and decided to call the nearby limo companies, too. He would also question the rest of the staff, but he expected no light to dawn there; this old boozehound was about all there was. He'd had a cup of coffee with Claire before Claire left for the day, and another with him when Claire came back on duty that night, and it looked like that was all she wrote. Except for the Night Flier himself, Ezra seemed to have been the last person to see Claire Bowie alive.

The subject of these ruminations looked slyly off into the distance, scratched the wattles below his chin, then shifted his bloodshot gaze back to Dees. "Claire didn't say nothing about no cab or limbo, but he did say something else."

"That so?"

"Yep," Ezra said. He unzipped a pocket of his grease-stained coverall, removed a pack of Chesterfields, lit one up, and coughed a dismal old man's cough. He looked at Dees through the drifting smoke with an expression of half-baked craftiness. "Might not mean nothing, but then again, it might. It sure struck Claire perculyer, though. Must have, because most of the time old Claire wouldn't say shit if he had a mouthful."

"What was it he said?"

"Don't quite remember," Ezra said. "Sometimes, you know, when I forget things, a picture of Alexander Hamilton sorta refreshes my memory."

"How about one of Abe Lincoln?" Dees asked dryly.

After a moment's consideration—a short one—Hannon agreed that sometimes Lincoln also did the trick, and a portrait of this gentleman consequently passed from Dees's wallet to Ezra's slightly palsied hand. Dees thought that a portrait of George Washington might have turned the trick, but he wanted to make sure the man was entirely on his side ... and besides, it all came out of the expense account.

“So give.”

“Claire said the guy looked like he must be goin to one hell of a fancy party,” Ezra said.

“Oh? Why was that?” Dees was thinking he should have stuck with Washington after all.

“Said the guy looked like he just stepped out of a bandbox. Tuxedo, silk tie, all that stuff.” Ezra paused. “Claire said the guy was even wearin a big cloak. Red as a fire engine inside, black as a woodchuck’s asshole outside. Said when it spread out behind him, it looked like a goddam bat’s wing.”

A large word lit in red neon suddenly flashed on in Dees’s mind, and the word was BINGO.

You don’t know it, my gin-soaked friend, Dees thought, but you may have just said the words that are going to make you famous.

“All these questions about Claire,” Ezra said, “and you ain’t never once ast if I saw anything funny.”

“Did you?”

“As a matter of fact, I did.”

“What was that, my friend?”

Ezra scratched his stubbly chin with long, yellow nails, looked wisely at Dees from the corners of his bloodshot eyes, and then took another puff on his cigarette.

“Here we go again,” Dees said, but he produced another picture of Abe Lincoln and was careful to keep his voice and face amiable. His instincts were wide awake now, and they were telling him that Mr. Ginhead wasn’t quite squeezed dry. Not yet, anyway.

“That don’t seem like enough for all I’m tellin you,” Ezra said reproachfully. “Rich city fella like you ought to be able to do better’n ten bucks.”

Dees looked at his watch—a heavy Rolex with diamonds gleaming on the face. “Gosh!” he said. “Look how late it’s getting! And I haven’t even been over to talk with the Falmouth police yet!”

Before he could do more than start to get up, the five had disappeared from between his fingers and had joined its mate in the pocket of Harmon’s coverall.

“All right, if you’ve got something else to tell, tell it,” Dees said. The amiability was gone now. “I’ve got places to go and people to see.”

The mechanic thought it over, scratching his wattles and sending out little puffs of ancient, cheesy smell. Then he said, almost reluctantly: “Seen a big pile of dirt under that Skymaster. Right under the luggage bay, it was.”

“That so?”

“Ayuh. Kicked it with my boot.”

Dees waited. He could do that.

“Nasty stuff. Full of worms.”

Dees waited. This was good, useful stuff, but he didn’t think the old man was wrung completely dry even yet.

“And maggots,” Ezra said. “There was maggots, too. Like where something died.”

Dees stayed that night at the Sea Breeze Motel, and was winging his way to the town of Alderton in upstate New York by eight o’clock the next morning.

5

Of all the things Dees didn't understand about his quarry's movements, the thing which puzzled him the most was how leisurely the Flier had been. In Maine and in Maryland, he had actually lingered before killing. His only one-night stand had been in Alderton, which he had visited two weeks after doing Claire Bowie.

Lakeview Airport in Alderton was even smaller than CCA—a single unpaved runway and a combined Ops/UNICOM that was no more than a shed with a fresh coat of paint. There was no instrument approach; there was, however, a large satellite dish so none of the flying farmers who used the place would have to miss *Murphy Brown* or *Wheel of Fortune* or anything really important like that.

One thing Dees liked a lot: the unpaved Lakeview runway was just as silky-smooth as the one in Maine had been. I could get used to this, Dees thought as he dropped the Beech neatly onto the surface and began to slow it down. No big thuds over asphalt patches, no potholes that want to ground-loop you after you come in ... yeah, I could get used to this real easy.

In Alderton, nobody had asked for pictures of Presidents or friends of Presidents. In Alderton, the whole town—a community of just under a thousand souls—was in shock, not merely the few part-timers who, along with the late Buck Kendall, had run Lakeview Airport almost as a charity (and certainly in the red). There was really no one to talk to, anyway, not even a witness of the Ezra Hannon caliber. Hannon had been bleary, Dees reflected, but at least he had been quotable.

“Must have been a mighty man,” one of the part-timers told Dees. “Ole Buck, he dressed out right around two-twenty, and he was easy most of the time, but if you did get him riled, he made you sorry. Seen him box down a fella in a carny show that came through P’keepsie two years ago. That kind of fightin ain’t legal, accourse, but Buck was short a payment on that little Piper of his, so he boxed

that carny fighter down. Collected two hundred dollars and got it to the loan comp'ny about two days before they was gonna send out someone to repo his ride, I guess."

The part-timer shook his head, looking genuinely distressed, and Dees wished he'd thought to uncase his camera. Inside View readers would have lapped up that long, lined, mournful face. Dees made a mental note to find out if the late Buck Kendall had had a dog. Inside View readers also lapped up pictures of the dead man's dog. You posed it on the porch of the deceased's house and captioned it BUFFY'S LONG WAIT BEGINS, or something similar.

"It's a damn shame," Dees said sympathetically.

The part-timer sighed and nodded. "Guy musta got him from behind. That's the only way I can figger it."

Dees didn't know from which direction Gerard "Buck" Kendall had been gotten, but he knew that this time the victim's throat had not been ripped out. This time there were holes, holes from which "Dwight Renfield" had presumably sucked his victim's blood. Except, according to the coroner's report, the holes were on opposite sides of the neck, one in the jugular vein and the other in the carotid artery. They weren't the discreet little bite marks of the Bela Lugosi era or the slightly gorier ones of the Christopher Lee flicks, either. The coroner's report spoke in centimeters, but Dees could translate well enough, and Morrison had the indefatigable Libby Grannit to explain what the coroner's dry language only partially revealed: the killer either had teeth the size of one of View's beloved Bigfeet, or he had made the holes in Kendall's neck in a much more prosaic fashion with a hammer and a nail.

DEADLY NIGHT FLIER SPIKED VICTIMS, DRANK THEIR BLOOD, both men thought at different places on the same day. Not bad.

The Night Flier had requested permission to land at Lakeview Airport shortly after 10:30 P.M. on the night of July 23rd. Kendall had granted permission and had noted a tail-number with which Dees

had become very familiar: N101BL. Kendall had noted “name of pilot” as “Dwite Renfield” and the “make and model of aircraft” as “Cessna Skymaster 337.” No mention of the red piping, and of course no mention of the sweeping bat-wing cloak that was as red as a fire engine on the inside and as black as a woodchuck’s asshole on the outside, but Dees was positive of both, just the same.

The Night Flier had flown into Alderton’s Lakeview Airport shortly after ten-thirty, killed that strapping fellow Buck Kendall, drunk his blood, and flown out again in his Cessna sometime before Jenna Kendall came by at five o’clock on the morning of the twenty-fourth to give her husband a fresh-made waffle and discovered his exsanguinated corpse instead.

As Dees stood outside the ramshackle Lakeview hangar/tower mulling these things over, it occurred to him that if you gave blood, the most you could expect was a cup of orange juice and a word of thanks. If you took it, however—sucked it, to be specific—you got headlines. As he turned the rest of a bad cup of coffee out on the ground and headed toward his plane, ready to fly south to Maryland, it occurred to Richard Dees that God’s hand might have shaken just a tiny bit when He was finishing off the supposed masterwork of His creative empire.

6

Now, two bad hours after leaving Washington National, things had suddenly gotten a lot worse, and with shocking suddenness. The runway lights had gone out, but Dees now saw that wasn't all that had gone out—half of Wilmington and all of Wrightsville Beach were also dark. ILS was still there, but when Dees snatched the mike and screamed, "What happened? Talk to me, Wilmington!" he got nothing back but a screech of static in which a few voices babbled like distant ghosts.

He jammed the mike back, missing the prong. It thudded to the cockpit floor at the end of its curled wire, and Dees forgot it. The grab and the yell had been pure pilot's instinct and no more. He knew what had happened as surely as he knew the sun set in the west ... which it would do very soon now. A stroke of lightning must have scored a direct hit on a power substation near the airport. The question was whether or not to go in anyway.

"You had clearance," one voice said. Another immediately (and correctly) replied that that was so much bullshit rationalization. You learned what you were supposed to do in a situation like this when you were still the equivalent of a student driver. Logic and the book tell you to head for your alternate and try to contact ATC. Landing under snafu conditions such as these could cost him a violation and a hefty fine.

On the other hand, not landing now—right now—could lose him the Night Flier. It might also cost a life (or lives), but Dees barely factored this into the equation ... until an idea went off like a flashbulb in his mind, an inspiration that occurred, as most of his inspirations did, in huge tabloid type:

HEROIC REPORTER SAVES (fill in a number, as large as possible, which was pretty large, given the amazingly generous borders that mark the range of human credulity) FROM CRAZED NIGHT FLIER.

Eat that, Farmer John, Dees thought, and continued his descent toward Runway 34.

The runway lights down there suddenly flashed on, as if approving his decision, then went out again, leaving blue afterimages on his retinas that turned the sick green of spoiled avocados a moment later. Then the weird static coming from the radio cleared and Farmer John's voice screamed: "Haul port, N471B: Piedmont, haul starboard: Jesus, oh Jesus, midair, I think we got a midair—"

Dees's self-preservation instincts were every bit as well honed as those which smelled blood in the bush. He never even saw the Piedmont Airlines 727's strobe lights. He was too busy banking as tightly to port as the Beech could bank—which was as tight as a virgin's cooze, and Dees would be happy to testify to that fact if he got out of this shitstorm alive—as soon as the second word was out of Farmer John's mouth. He had a momentary sight/sense of something huge only inches above him, and then the Beech 55 was taking a beating that made the previous rough air seem like glass. His cigarettes flew out of his breast pocket and streamed everywhere. The half-dark Wilmington skyline tilted crazily. His stomach seemed to be trying to squeeze his heart all the way up his throat and into his mouth. Spit ran up one cheek like a kid whizzing along a greased slide. Maps flew like birds. The air outside now raved with jet thunder as well as the kind nature made. One of the windows in the four-seat passenger compartment imploded, and an asthmatic wind whooped in, skirling everything not tied down back there into a tornado.

"Resume your previous altitude assignment, N471B!" Farmer John was screaming. Dees was aware that he'd just ruined a two-hundred-dollar pair of pants by spraying about a pint of hot piss into them, but he was partially soothed by a strong feeling that old Farmer John had just loaded his Jockey shorts with a truckload or so of fresh Mars Bars. Sounded that way, anyhow.

Dees carried a Swiss Army knife. He took it from his right pants pocket and, holding the wheel with his left hand, cut through his shirt

just above the left elbow, bringing blood. Then with no pause, he made another cut, shallow, just below his left eye. He folded the knife shut and stuffed it into the elasticized map pocket in the pilot's door. Gotta clean it later, he thought. And if I forget it, I could be in deep shit. But he knew he wouldn't forget, and considering the things the Night Flier had gotten away with, he thought he'd be okay.

The runway lights came on again, this time for good, he hoped, although their pulsing quality told him they were being powered by a generator. He homed the Beech in again on Runway 34. Blood ran down his left cheek to the corner of his mouth. He sucked some in and then spat a pink mixture of blood and spit onto his IVSI. Never miss a trick; just keep following those instincts and they'd always take you home.

He looked at his watch. Sunset was only fourteen minutes away now. This was cutting it much too close to the bone.

"Pull up, Beech!" Farmer John yelled. "Are you deaf?"

Dees groped for the mike's kinked wire without ever taking his eyes from the runway lights. He pulled the wire through his fingers until he got the mike itself. He palmed it and depressed the send button.

"Listen to me, you chicken-fried son of a bitch," he said, and now his lips were pulled all the way back to the gum line. "I missed getting turned into strawberry jam by that 727 because your shit genny didn't kick in when it was supposed to; as a result I had no ATC comm. I don't know how many people on the airliner just missed getting turned into strawberry jam, but I bet you do, and I know the cockpit crew does. The only reason those guys are still alive is because the captain of that boat was bright enough to allemande right, and I was bright enough to do-si-do, but I have sustained both structural and physical damage. If you don't give me a landing clearance right now, I'm going to land anyway. The only difference is that if I have to land without clearance, I'm going to have you up in front of an FAA hearing. But first I will personally see to it that your head and your asshole change places. Have you got that, hoss?"

A long, static-filled silence. Then a very small voice, utterly unlike Farmer John's previous hearty "Hey bo'!" delivery, said, "You're cleared to land Runway 34, N471B."

Dees smiled and homed in on the runway.

He depressed the mike button and said, "I got mean and yelling. I'm sorry. It only happens when I almost die."

No response from the ground.

"Well, fuck you very much," Dees said, and then headed on down, resisting the impulse to take a quick glance at his watch as he did so.

7

Dees was case-hardened and proud of it, but there was no use kidding himself; what he found in Duffrey gave him the creeps. The Night Flier's Cessna had spent another entire day—July 31st—on the ramp, but that was really only where the creeps began. It was the blood his loyal Inside View readers would care about, of course, and that was just as it should be, world without end, amen, amen, but Dees was increasingly aware that blood (or, in the case of good old Ray and Ellen Sarch, the lack of blood) was only where this story started. Below the blood were caverns dark and strange.

Dees arrived in Duffrey on August 8th, by then barely a week behind the Night Flier. He wondered again where his batty buddy went between strikes. Disney World? Busch Gardens? Atlanta, maybe, to check out the Braves? Such things were relatively small potatoes right now, with the chase still on, but they would be valuable later on. They would become, in fact, the journalistic equivalent of Hamburger Helper, stretching the leftovers of the Night Flier story through a few more issues, allowing readers to resavor the flavor even after the biggest chunks of raw meat had been digested.

Still, there were caverns in this story—dark places into which a man might drop and be lost forever. That sounded both crazy and corny, but by the time Dees began to get a picture of what had gone on in Duffrey, he had actually begun to believe it ... which meant that part of the story would never see print, and not just because it was personal. It violated Dees's single ironclad rule: Never believe what you publish, and never publish what you believe. It had, over the years, allowed him to keep his sanity while those all about him had been losing theirs.

He had landed at Washington National—a real airport for a change—and rented a car to take him the sixty miles to Duffrey, because without Ray Sarch and his wife, Ellen, there was no Duffrey Airfield. Aside from Ellen's sister, Raylene, who was a pretty fair Socket

Wrench Susie, the two of them had been the whole shebang. There was a single oiled-dirt runway (oiled both to lay the dust and to discourage the growth of weeds) and a control booth not much bigger than a closet attached to the JetAire trailer where the Sarch couple lived. They were both retired, both fliers, both reputedly as tough as nails, and still crazy in love with each other even after almost five decades of marriage.

Further, Dees learned, the Sarches watched the private air-traffic in and out of their field with a close eye; they had a personal stake in the war on drugs. Their only son had died in the Florida Everglades, trying to land in what looked like a clear stretch of water with better than a ton of Acapulco Gold packed into a stolen Beech 18. The water had been clear ... except for a single stump, that was. The Beech 18 hit it, water-looped, and exploded. Doug Sarch had been thrown clear, his body smoking and singed but probably still alive, as little as his grieving parents would want to believe such a thing. He had been eaten by gators, and all that remained of him when the DEA guys finally found him a week later was a dismembered skeleton, a few maggoty scraps of flesh, a charred pair of Calvin Klein jeans, and a sport coat from Paul Stuart in New York. One of the sport-coat pockets had contained better than twenty thousand dollars in cash; another had yielded nearly an ounce of Peruvian flake cocaine.

“It was drugs and the motherfuckers who run em killed my boy,” Ray Sarch had said on several occasions, and Ellen Sarch was willing to double and redouble on that one. Her hatred of drugs and drug dealers, Dees was told again and again (he was amused by the nearly unanimous feeling in Duffrey that the murder of the elderly Sarches had been a “gangland hit”), was exceeded only by her grief and bewilderment over the seduction of her son by those very people.

Following the death of their son, the Sarches had kept their eyes peeled for anything or anyone who looked even remotely like a drug transporter. They had brought the Maryland State Police out to the

field four times on false alarms, but the State Bears hadn't minded because the Sarches had also blown the whistle on three small transporters and two very big ones. The last had been carrying thirty pounds of pure Bolivian cocaine. That was the kind of bust that made you forget a few false alarms, the sort of bust that made promotions.

So very late in the evening of July 30th comes this Cessna Skymaster with a number and description that had gone out to every airfield and airport in America, including the one in Duffrey; a Cessna whose pilot had identified himself as Dwight Renfield, point of origination, Bayshore Airport, Delaware, a field which had never heard of "Renfield" or a Skymaster with tail-number N101BL; the plane of a man who was almost surely a murderer.

"If he'd flown in here, he'd be in the stir now," one of the Bayshore controllers had told Dees over the phone, but Dees wondered. Yes. He wondered very much.

The Night Flier had landed in Duffrey at 11:27 P.M., and "Dwight Renfield" had not only signed the Sarches' logbook but also had accepted Ray Sarch's invitation to come into the trailer, have a beer, and watch a rerun of Gunsmoke on TNT. Ellen Sarch had told all of this to the proprietor of the Duffrey Beauty Bar the following day. This woman, Selida McCammon, had identified herself to Dees as one of the late Ellen Sarch's closest friends.

When Dees asked how Ellen had seemed, Selida had paused and then said, "Dreamy, somehow. Like a high-school girl with a crush, almost seventy years old or not. Her color was so high I thought it was make-up, until I started in on her perm. Then I saw that she was just ... you know ..." Selida McCammon shrugged. She knew what she meant but not how to say it.

"Het up," Dees suggested, and that made Selida McCammon laugh and clap her hands.

"Het up! That's it! You're a writer, all right!"

“Oh, I write like a boid,” Dees said, and offered a smile he hoped looked good-humored and warm. This was an expression he had once practiced almost constantly and continued to practice with fair regularity in the bedroom mirror of the New York apartment he called his home, and in the mirrors of the hotels and motels that were really his home. It seemed to work—Selida McCammon answered it readily enough—but the truth was that Dees had never felt good-humored and warm in his life. As a kid he had believed these emotions didn’t really exist at all; they were just a masquerade, a social convention. Later on he decided he had been wrong about that; most of what he thought of as “Reader’s Digest emotions” were real, at least for most people. Perhaps even love, the fabled Big Enchilada, was real. That he himself could not feel these emotions was undoubtedly a shame, but hardly the end of the world. There were, after all, people out there with cancer, and AIDS, and the memory-spans of brain-damaged parakeets. When you looked at it that way, you quickly realized that being deprived of a few huggy-kissy emotions was fairly small beans. The important thing was that if you could manage to stretch the muscles of your face in the right directions every now and then, you were fine. It didn’t hurt and it was easy; if you could remember to zip up your fly after you took a leak, you could remember to smile and look warm when it was expected of you. And an understanding smile, he had discovered over the years, was the world’s best interview tool. Once in awhile a voice inside asked him what his own inside view was, but Dees didn’t want an inside view. He only wanted to write and to take photographs. He was better at the writing, always had been and always would be, and he knew it, but he liked the photographs better just the same. He liked to touch them. To see how they froze people either with their real faces hung out for the whole world to see or with their masks so clearly apparent that they were beyond denial. He liked how, in the best of them, people always looked surprised and horrified. How they looked caught.

If pressed, he would have said the photographs provided all the inside view he needed, and the subject had no relevance here, anyway. What did was the Night Flier, his little batty buddy, and how

he had waltzed into the lives of Ray and Ellen Sarch a week or so earlier.

The Flier had stepped out of his plane and walked into an office with a red-bordered FAA notice on the wall, a notice which suggested there was a dangerous guy out there driving a Cessna Skymaster 337, tail-number N101BL, who might have murdered two men. This guy, the notice went on, might or might not be calling himself Dwight Renfield. The Skymaster had landed, Dwight Renfield had signed in and had almost surely spent the following day in the belly-hold of his plane. And what about the Sarches, those two sharp-eyed old folks?

The Sarches had said nothing; the Sarches had done nothing.

Except that latter wasn't quite right, Dees had discovered. Ray Sarch had certainly done something; he had invited the Night Flier in to watch an old Gunsmoke episode and drink a beer with his wife. They had treated him like an old friend. And then, the next day, Ellen Sarch had made an appointment at the Beauty Bar, which Selida McCammon had found surprising; Ellen's visits were usually as regular as clockwork, and this one was at least two weeks before Selida would next have expected her. Her instructions had been unusually explicit; she had wanted not just the usual cut but a perm ... and a little color, too.

"She wanted to look younger," Selida McCammon told Dees, and then wiped a tear from one cheek with the side of her hand.

But Ellen Sarch's behavior had been pedestrian compared to that of her husband. He had called the FAA at Washington National and told them to issue a NOTAM, removing Duffrey from the active-airfield grid, at least for the time being. He had, in other words, pulled down the shades and closed up the shop.

On his way home, he'd stopped for gas at the Duffrey Texaco and told Norm Wilson, the proprietor, that he thought he was coming down with the flu. Norm told Dees that he thought Ray was probably

right about that—he'd looked pale and wan, suddenly even older than his years.

That night, the two vigilant fire wardens had, in effect, burned to death. Ray Sarch was found in the little control room, his head torn off and cast into the far corner, where it sat on a ragged stump of neck, staring toward the open doorway with wide, glazed eyes, as if there were actually something there to see.

His wife had been found in the bedroom of the Sarch trailer. She was in bed. She was dressed in a peignoir so new it might never have been worn before that night. She was old, a deputy had told Dees (at twenty-five dollars he was a more expensive fuck than Ezra the Amazing Gin-Head Mechanic, but worth it), but you still only had to take one look to know that there was a woman who'd dressed for bed with loving on her mind. Dees had liked the c & w twang so much that he wrote it down in his notebook. Those huge, spike-sized holes were driven into her neck, one in the carotid, the other in the jugular. Her face was composed, her eyes closed, her hands on her bosom.

Although she had lost almost every drop of blood in her body, there were only spots on the pillows beneath her, and a few more spots on the book which lay open on her stomach: *The Vampire Lestat*, by Anne Rice.

And the Night Flier?

Sometime just before midnight on July 31st, or just after it on the morning of August 1st, he had simply flown away. Like a boid.

Or a bat.

8

Dees touched down in Wilmington seven minutes before official sunset. While he was throttling back, still spitting blood out of his mouth from the cut below his eye, he saw lightning strike down with blue-white fire so intense that it nearly blinded him. On the heels of the light came the most deafening thunderclap he had ever heard. His subjective opinion of the sound was confirmed when another window in the passenger compartment, stelled by the near miss with the Piedmont 727, now coughed inward in a spray of junk-shop diamonds.

In the brilliant glare he saw a squat, cubelike building on the port side of Runway 34 impaled by the bolt. It exploded, shooting fire into the sky in a column that, although brilliant, did not even come close to the power of the bolt that had ignited it.

Like lighting a stick of dynamite with a baby nuke, Dees thought confusedly, and then: The genny. That was the genny.

The lights—all of them, the white lights that marked the edges of the runway and the bright red bulbs that marked its end—were suddenly gone, as if they had been no more than candles puffed out by a strong gust of wind. All at once Dees was rushing at better than eighty miles an hour from dark into dark.

The concussive force of the explosion which had destroyed the airport's main generator struck the Beech like a fist—did more than strike it, hammered it like a looping haymaker. The Beech, still hardly knowing it had become a ground-bound creature again, skittered affrightedly to starboard, rose, and came down with the right wheel pogoing up and down over something—somethings—that Dees vaguely realized were landing lights.

Go port! his mind screamed. Go port, you asshole!

He almost did before his colder mind asserted itself. If he hauled the wheel to port at this speed, he would ground-loop. Probably wouldn't explode, considering how little fuel was left in the tanks, but it was possible. Or the Beech might simply twist apart, leaving Richard Dees from the gut on down twitching in his seat, while Richard Dees from the gut on up went in a different direction, trailing severed intestines like party-favors and dropping his kidneys on the concrete like a couple of oversized chunks of birdshit.

Ride it out! he screamed at himself. Ride it out, you son of a bitch, ride it out!

Something—the genny's secondary LP tanks, he guessed when he had time for guessing—exploded then, buffeting the Beech even farther to starboard, but that was okay, it got him off the dead landing lights, and all at once he was running with relative smoothness again, port wheel on the edge of Runway 34, starboard wheel on the spooky verge between the lights and the ditch he had observed on the right of the runway. The Beech was still shuddering, but not badly, and he understood that he was running on one flat, the starboard tire shredded by the landing lights it had crushed.

He was slowing down, that was what mattered, the Beech finally beginning to understand that it had become a different thing, a thing that belonged to the land again. Dees was starting to relax when he saw the wide-body Learjet, the one the pilots called Fat Albert, looming ahead of him, parked insanely across the runway where the pilot had stopped on his taxi out to Runway 5.

Dees bore down on it, saw lighted windows, saw faces staring out at him with the gape of idiots in an asylum watching a magic trick, and then, without thinking, he pushed full right rudder, bouncing the Beech off the runway and into the ditch, missing the Lear by approximately an inch and a half. He heard faint screams but was really aware of nothing but the now exploding in front of him like a string of firecrackers as the Beech tried to become a thing of the air again, helpless to do so with the flaps down and the engines dropping revs but trying anyway; there was a leap like a convulsion

in the dying light of the secondary explosion, and then he was skidding across a taxiway, seeing the General Aviation Terminal for a moment with its corners lit by emergency lights that ran on storage batteries, seeing the parked planes—one of them almost surely the Night Flier's Skymaster—as dark crepe-paper silhouettes against a baleful orange light that was the sunset, now revealed by the parting thunderheads.

I'm going over! he screamed to himself, and the Beech did try to roll; the port wing struck a fountain of sparks from the taxiway nearest the terminal and its tip actually broke free, wheeling off into the scrub where friction-heat awoke a dim fire in the wet weeds.

Then the Beech was still, and the only sounds were the snowy roar of static from the radio, the sound of broken bottles fizzing their contents onto the carpet of the passenger compartment, and the frenzied hammering of Dees's own heart. He slammed the pop release on his harness and headed for the pressurized hatch even before he was totally sure he was alive.

What happened later he remembered with eidetic clarity, but from the moment the Beech skidded to a stop on the taxiway, ass-end to the Lear and tilted to one side, to the moment he heard the first screams from the terminal, all he remembered for sure was swinging back to get his camera. He couldn't leave the plane without his camera; the Nikon was the closest thing Dees had to a wife. He'd bought it in a Toledo hockshop when he was seventeen and kept it with him ever since. He had added lenses, but the basic box was about the same now as it had been then; the only modifications had been the occasional scratch or dent that came with the job. The Nikon was in the elasticized pocket behind his seat. He pulled it out, looked at it to make sure it was intact, saw that it was. He slung it around his neck and bent over the hatch.

He threw the lever, jumped out and down, staggered, almost fell, and caught his camera before it could strike the concrete of the taxiway. There was another growl of thunder, but only a growl this time, distant and unthreatening. A breeze touched him like the caressing

touch of a kind hand on his face... but more icily below the belt. Dees grimaced. How he had pissed his pants when his Beech and the Piedmont jet had barely scraped by each other would also not be in the story.

Then a thin, drilling shriek came from the General Aviation Terminal—a scream of mingled agony and horror. It was as if someone had slapped Dees across the face. He came back to himself. He centered on his goal again. He looked at his watch. It wasn't working. Either the concussion had broken it or it had stopped. It was one of those amusing antiques you had to wind up, and he couldn't remember when he had last done it.

Was it sunset? It was fucking dark out, yes, but with all the thunderheads massed around the airport, it was hard to tell how much that meant. Was it?

Another scream came—no, not a scream, a screech—and the sound of breaking glass.

Dees decided sunset no longer mattered.

He ran, vaguely aware that the genny's auxiliary tanks were still burning and that he could smell gas in the air. He tried to increase his speed but it seemed he was running in cement. The terminal was getting closer, but not very fast. Not fast enough.

“Please, no! Please, no! PLEASE NO! OH PLEASE, NO!”

This scream, spiraling up and up, was suddenly cut off by a terrible, inhuman howl. Yet there was something human in it, and that was perhaps the most terrible thing of all. In the chancy light of the emergency lamps mounted on the corners of the terminal, Dees saw something dark and flailing shatter more glass in the wall of the terminal that faced the parking area—that wall was almost entirely glass—and come flying out. It landed on the ramp with a soggy thud, rolled, and Dees saw it was a man.

The storm was moving away but lightning still flickered fitfully, and as Dees ran into the parking area, panting now, he finally saw the Night Flier's plane, N101BL painted boldly on the tail. The letters and numbers looked black in this light, but he knew they were red and it didn't matter, anyway. The camera was loaded with fast black-and-white film and armed with a smart flash which would fire only when the light was too low for the film's speed.

The Skymaster's belly-hold hung open like the mouth of a corpse. Below it was a large pile of earth in which things squirmed and moved. Dees saw this, did a double-take, and skidded to a stop. Now his heart was filled not just with fright but with a wild, capering happiness. How good it was that everything had come together like this!

Yes, he thought, but don't you call it luck—don't you dare call it luck. Don't you even call it hunch.

Correct. It wasn't luck that had kept him holed up in that shitty little motel room with the clanky air-conditioner, not hunch—not precisely hunch, anyway—that had tied him to the phone hour after hour, calling fly speck airports and giving the Night Flier's tail-number over and over again. That was pure reporter's instinct, and here was where it all started paying off. Except this was no ordinary payoff; this was the jackpot, El Dorado, that fabled Big Enchilada.

He skidded to a stop in front of the yawning belly-hold and tried to bring the camera up. Almost strangled himself on the strap. Cursed. Unwound the strap. Aimed.

From the terminal came another scream—that of a woman or a child. Dees barely noticed. The thought that there was a slaughter going on in there was followed by the thought that slaughter would only fatten the story, and then both thoughts were gone as he snapped three quick shots of the Cessna, making sure to get the gaping belly-hold and the number on the tail. The auto-winder hummed.

Dees ran on. More glass smashed. There was another thud as another body was ejected onto the cement like a rag doll that had been stuffed full of some thick dark liquid like cough-syrup. Dees looked, saw confused movement, the billowing of something that might have been a cape ... but he was still too far away to tell. He turned. Snapped two more pictures of the plane, these shots dead-on. The gaping belly-hold and the pile of earth would be stark and undeniable in the print.

Then he whirled and ran for the terminal. The fact that he was armed with only an old Nikon never crossed his mind.

He stopped ten yards away. Three bodies out here, two adults, one of each sex, and one that might have been either a small woman or a girl of thirteen or so. It was hard to tell with the head gone.

Dees aimed the camera and fired off six quick shots, the flash flickering its own white lightning, the auto-winder making its contented little whizzing sound.

His mind never lost count. He was loaded with thirty-six shots. He had taken eleven. That left twenty-five. There was more film stuffed into the deep pockets of his slacks, and that was great ... if he got a chance to reload. You could never count on that, though; with photographs like these, you had to grab while the grabbing was good. It was strictly a fast-food banquet.

Dees reached the terminal and yanked open the door.

9

He thought he had seen everything there was to see, but he had never seen anything like this. Never.

How many? his mind yammered. How many you got? Six? Eight? Maybe a dozen?

He couldn't tell. The Night Flier had turned the little private terminal into a knacker's shop. Bodies and parts of bodies lay everywhere. Dees saw a foot clad in a black Converse sneaker; shot it. A ragged torso; shot it. Here was a man in a greasy mechanic's coverall who was still alive, and for a weird moment he thought it was Ezra the Amazing Gin-Head Mechanic from Cumberland County Airport, but this guy wasn't just going bald; this guy had entirely made the grade. His face had been chopped wide open from forehead to chin. His nose lay in halves, reminding Dees for some mad reason of a grilled frankfurter, split and ready for the bun.

Dees shot it.

And suddenly, just like that, something inside him rebelled and screamed No more! in an imperative voice it was impossible to ignore, let alone deny.

No more, stop, it's over!

He saw an arrow painted on the wall, with the words THIS WAY TO COMFORT STATIONS below it. Dees ran in the direction the arrow pointed, his camera flapping.

The men's room happened to be the first one he came to, but Dees wouldn't have cared if it was the aliens' room. He was weeping in great, harsh, hoarse sobs. He could barely credit the fact that these sounds were coming from him. It had been years since he had wept. He'd been a kid the last time.

He slammed through the door, skidded like a skier almost out of control, and grabbed the edge of the second basin in line.

He leaned over it, and everything came out in a rich and stinking flood, some of it splattering back onto his face, some landing in brownish clots on the mirror. He smelled the takeout chicken Creole he'd eaten hunched over the phone in the motel room—this had been just before he'd hit pay dirt and gone racing for his plane—and threw up again, making a huge grating sound like overstressed machinery about to strip its gears.

Jesus, he thought, dear Jesus, it's not a man, it can't be a man—

That was when he heard the sound.

It was a sound he had heard at least a thousand times before, a sound that was commonplace in any American man's life ... but now it filled him with a dread and a creeping terror beyond all his experience or belief.

It was the sound of a man voiding into a urinal.

But although he could see all three of the bathroom's urinals in the vomit-splattered mirror, he could see no one at any of them.

Dees thought: Vampires don't cast reflec—

Then he saw reddish liquid striking the porcelain of the center urinal, saw it running down that porcelain, saw it swirling into the geometric arrangement of holes at the bottom.

There was no stream in the air; he saw it only when it struck the dead porcelain.

That was when it became visible.

He was frozen. He stood, hands on the edge of the basin, his mouth and throat and nose and sinuses thick with the taste and smell of

chicken Creole, and watched the incredible yet prosaic thing that was happening just behind him.

I am, he thought dimly, watching a vampire take a piss.

It seemed to go on forever—the bloody urine striking the porcelain, becoming visible, and swirling down the drain. Dees stood with his hands planted on the sides of the basin into which he had thrown up, gazing at the reflection in the mirror, feeling like a frozen gear in some vast jammed machine.

I'm almost certainly dead meat, he thought.

In the mirror he saw the chromed handle go down by itself. Water roared.

Dees heard a rustle and flap and knew it was a cape, just as he knew that if he turned around, he could strike the “almost certainly” from his last thought. He stayed where he was, palms biting the edge of the basin.

A low, ageless voice spoke from directly behind him. The owner of the voice was so close Dees could feel its cold breath on his neck.

“You have been following me,” the ageless voice said.

Dees moaned.

“Yes,” the ageless voice said, as if Dees had disagreed with him. “I know you, you see. I know all about you. Now listen closely, my inquisitive friend, because I say this only once: don't follow me anymore.”

Dees moaned again, a doglike sound, and more water ran into his pants.

“Open your camera,” the ageless voice said.

My film! part of Dees cried. My film! All I've got! All I've got! My pictures!

Another dry, batlike flap of the cape. Although Dees could see nothing, he sensed the Night Flier had moved even closer.

"Now."

His film wasn't all he had.

There was his life.

Such as it was.

He saw himself whirling and seeing what the mirror would not, could not, show him; saw himself seeing the Night Flier, his batty buddy, a grotesque thing splattered with blood and bits of flesh and clumps of torn-out hair; saw himself snapping shot after shot while the auto-winder hummed ... but there would be nothing.

Nothing at all.

Because you couldn't take their pictures, either.

"You're real," he croaked, never moving, his hands seemingly welded to the edge of the basin.

"So are you," the ageless voice rasped, and now Dees could smell ancient crypts and sealed tombs on its breath. "For now, at least. This is your last chance, my inquisitive would-be biographer. Open your camera ... or I'll do it."

With hands that seemed totally numb, Dees opened his Nikon.

Air hummed past his chilly face; it felt like moving razor blades. For a moment he saw a long white hand, streaked with blood; saw ragged nails silted with filth.

Then his film parted and spooled spinelessly out of his camera.

There was another dry flap. Another stinking breath. For a moment he thought the Night Flier would kill him anyway. Then in the mirror he saw the door of the men's room open by itself.

He doesn't need me, Dees thought. He must have eaten very well tonight. He immediately threw up again, this time directly onto the reflection of his own staring face.

The door wheezed shut on its pneumatic elbow.

Dees stayed right where he was for the next three minutes or so; stayed there until the approaching sirens were almost on top of the terminal; stayed there until he heard the cough and roar of an airplane engine.

The engine of a Cessna Skymaster 337, almost undoubtedly.

Then he walked out of the bathroom on legs like stilts, struck the far wall of the corridor outside, rebounded, and walked back into the terminal. He slid in a pool of blood, and almost fell.

"Hold it mister!" a cop screamed behind him. "Hold it right there! One move and you're dead!"

Dees didn't even turn around.

"Press, dickface," he said, holding up his camera in one hand and his ID card in the other. He went to one of the shattered windows with exposed film still straggling from his camera like long strips of brown confetti, and stood there watching the Cessna accelerate down Runway 5. For a moment it was a black shape against the billowing fire of the genny and the auxiliary tanks, a shape that looked quite a lot like a bat, and then it was up, it was gone, and the cop was slamming Dees up against the wall hard enough to make his nose bleed and he didn't care, he didn't care about anything, and when the sobs began to tear their way out of his chest again he closed his eyes, and still he saw the Night Flier's bloody urine striking the porcelain, becoming visible, and swirling down the drain.

He thought he would see it forever.

THE NIGHT OF THE TIGER

Stephen King

I first saw Mr. Legere when the circus swung through Steubenville, but I'd only been with the show for two weeks; he might have been making his irregular visits indefinitely. No one much wanted to talk about Mr. Legere, not even that last night when it seemed that the world was coming to an end — the night that Mr. Indrasil disappeared.

But if I'm going to tell it to you from the beginning, I should start by saying that I'm Eddie Johnston, and I was born and raised in Sauk City. Went to school there, had my first girl there, and worked in Mr. Lillie's five-and-dime there for a while after I graduated from high school. That was a few years back... more than I like to count, sometimes. Not that Sauk City's such a bad place; hot, lazy summer nights sitting on the front porch is all right for some folks, but it just seemed to itch me, like sitting in the same chair too long. So I quit the five-and-dime and joined Farnum & Williams' All-American 3-Ring Circus and Side Show. I did it in a moment of giddiness when the calliope music kind of fogged my judgment, I guess.

So I became a roustabout, helping put up tents and take them down, spreading sawdust, cleaning cages, and sometimes selling cotton candy when the regular salesman had to go away and bark for Chips Baily, who had malaria and sometimes had to go someplace far away, and holler. Mostly things that kids do for free passes — things I used to do when I was a kid. But times change. They don't seem to come around like they used to.

We swung through Illinois and Indiana that hot summer, and the crowds were good and everyone was happy. Everyone except Mr. Indrasil. Mr. Indrasil was never happy. He was the lion tamer, and he looked like old pictures I've seen of Rudolph Valentine. He was tall, with handsome, arrogant features and a shock of wild black hair. And strange, mad eyes — the maddest eyes I've ever seen. He was silent most of the time; two syllables from Mr. Indrasil was a sermon. All the circus people kept a mental as well as a physical distance, because his rages were legend. There was a whispered story about coffee spilled on his hands after a particularly difficult performance

and a murder that was almost done to a young roustabout before Mr. Indrasil could be hauled off him. I don't know about that. I do know that I grew to fear him worse than I had cold-eyed Mr. Edmont, my high school principal, Mr. Lillie, or even my father, who was capable of cold dressing-downs that would leave the recipient quivering with shame and dismay.

When I cleaned the big cats' cages, they were always spotless. The memory of the few times I had the vituperative wrath of Mr. Indrasil called down on me still have the power to turn my knees watery in retrospect.

Mostly it was his eyes - large and dark and totally blank. The eyes, and the feeling that a man capable of controlling seven watchful cats in a small cage must be part savage himself.

And the only two things he was afraid of were Mr. Legere and the circus's one tiger, a huge beast called Green Terror.

As I said, I first saw Mr. Legere in Steubenville, and he was staring into Green Terror's cage as if the tiger knew all the secrets of life and death.

He was lean, dark, quiet. His deep, recessed eyes held an expression of pain and brooding violence in their green-flecked depths, and his hands were always crossed behind his back as he stared moodily in at the tiger.

Green Terror was a beast to be stared at. He was a huge, beautiful specimen with a flawless striped coat, emerald eyes, and heavy fangs like ivory spikes. His roars usually filled the circus grounds - fierce, angry, and utterly savage. He seemed to scream defiance and frustration at the whole world.

Chips Baily, who had been with Farnum & Williams since Lord knew when, told me that Mr. Indrasil used to use Green Terror in his act, until one night when the tiger leaped suddenly from its perch and almost ripped his head from his shoulders before he could get out of

the cage. I noticed that Mr. Indrasil always wore, his hair long down the back of his neck.

I can still remember the tableau that day in Steubenville. It was hot, sweatingly hot, and we had a shirtsleeve crowd. That was why Mr. Legere and Mr. Indrasil stood out. Mr. Legere, standing silently by the tiger cage, was fully dressed in a suit and vest, his face unmarked by perspiration. And Mr. Indrasil, clad in one of his beautiful silk shirts and white whipcord breeches, was staring at them both, his face dead-white, his eyes bulging in lunatic anger, hate, and fear. He was carrying a currycomb and brush, and his hands were trembling as they clenched on them spasmodically.

Suddenly he saw me, and his anger found vent. "You!" He shouted. "Johnston!"

"Yes sir?" I felt a crawling in the pit of my stomach. I knew I was about to have the wrath of Indrasil vented on me, and the thought turned me weak with fear. I like to think I'm as brave as the next, and if it had been anyone else, I think I would have been fully determined to stand up for myself. But it wasn't anyone else. It was Mr. Indrasil, and his eyes were mad.

"These cages, Johnston. Are they supposed to be clean?" He pointed a finger, and I followed it. I saw four errant wisps of straw and an incriminating puddle of hose water in the far corner of one.

"Y-yes, sir," I said, and what was intended to be firmness became palsied bravado.

Silence, like the electric pause before a downpour. People were beginning to look, and I was dimly aware that Mr. Legere was staring at us with his bottomless eyes.

"Yes, sir?" Mr. Indrasil thundered suddenly. "Yes, sir? Yes, sir? Don't insult my intelligence, boy! Don't you think I can see? Smell? Did you use the disinfectant?"

“I used disinfectant yes—”

“Don’t answer me back!” He screeched, and then the sudden drop in his voice made my skin crawl. “Don’t you dare answer me back.” Everyone was staring now. I wanted to retch, to die. “Now you get the hell into that tool shed, and you get that disinfectant and swab out those cages,” he whispered, measuring every word. One hand suddenly shot out, grasping my shoulder. “And don’t you ever, ever, speak back to me again.”

I don’t know where the words came from, but they were suddenly there, spilling off my lips. “I didn’t speak back to you, Mr. Indrasil, and I don’t like you saying I did. I— resent it. Now let me go.”

His face went suddenly red, then white, then almost saffron with rage. His eyes were blazing doorways to hell.

Right then I thought I was going to die.

He made an inarticulate gagging sound, and the grip on my shoulder became excruciating. His right hand went up...up...up, and then descended with unbelievable speed.

If that hand had connected with my face, it would have knocked me senseless at best. At worst, it would have broken my neck.

It did not connect.

Another hand materialized magically out of space, right in front of me. The two straining limbs came together with a flat Smacking sound. It was Mr. Legere.

“Leave the boy alone,” he said emotionlessly.

Mr. Indrasil stared at him for a long second, and I think there was nothing so unpleasant in the whole business as watching the fear of Mr. Legere and the mad lust to hurt (or to kill!) mix in those terrible eyes.

Then he turned and stalked away.

I turned to look at Mr. Legere. "Thank you," I said.

"Don't thank me." And it wasn't a "don't thank me," but a "don't thank me." Not a gesture of modesty but a literal command. In a sudden flash of intuition A empathy if you will A I understood exactly what he meant by that comment. I was a pawn in what must have been a long combat between the two of them. I had been captured by Mr. Legere rather than Mr. Indrasil. He had stopped the lion tamer not because he felt for me, but because it gained him an advantage, however slight, in their private war.

"What's your name?" I asked, not at all offended by what I had inferred. He had, after all, been honest with me.

"Legere," he said briefly. He turned to go.

"Are you with a circus?" I asked, not wanting to let him go so easily. "You seemed to know - him."

A faint smile touched his thin lips, and warmth kindled in his eyes for a moment; "No. You might call me a-policeman." And before I could reply, he had disappeared into the surging throng passing by.

The next day we picked up stakes and moved on.

I saw Mr. Legere again in Danville and, two weeks later, in Chicago. In the time between I tried to avoid Mr. Indrasil as much as possible and kept the cat cages spotlessly clean. On the day before we pulled out for St. Louis, I asked Chips Baily and Sally O'Hara, the red-headed wire walker, if Mr. Legere and Mr. Indrasil knew each other. I was pretty sure they did, because Mr. Legere was hardly following the circus to eat our fabulous lime ice.

Sally and Chips looked at each other over their coffee cups. "No one knows much about what's between those, two," she said. "But it's

been going on for a long time maybe twenty years. Ever since Mr. Indrasil came over from Ringling Brothers, and maybe before that.”

Chips nodded. “This Legere guy picks up the circus almost every year when we swing through the Midwest and stays with us until we catch the train for Florida in Little Rock. Makes old Leopard Man touchy as one of his cats.”

“He told me he was a policeman,” I said. “What do you suppose he looks for around here? You don’t suppose Mr. Indrasil—?”

Chips and Sally looked at each other strangely, and both just about broke their backs getting up. “Got to see those weights and counter weights get stored right,” Sally said, and Chips muttered something not too convincing about checking on the rear axle of his U-Haul.

And that’s about the way any conversation concerning Mt. Indrasil or Mr. Legere usually broke up-hurriedly, with many hard-forced excuses.

We said farewell to Illinois and comfort at the same time. A killing hot spell came on, seemingly at the very instant we crossed the border, and it stayed with us for the next month and a half, as we moved slowly across Missouri and into Kansas. Everyone grew short of temper, including the animals. And that, of course, included the cats, which were Mr. Indrasil’s responsibility. He rode the roustabouts unmercifully, and myself in particular. I grinned and tried to bear it, even though I had my own case of prickly heat. You just don’t argue with a crazy man, and I’d pretty well decided that was what Mr. Indrasil was.

No one was getting any sleep, and that is the curse of all circus performers. Loss of sleep slows up reflexes, and slow reflexes make for danger. In Independence Sally O’Hara fell seventy-five feet into the nylon netting and fractured her shoulder. Andrea Solienni, our bareback rider, fell off one of her horses during rehearsal and was knocked unconscious by a flying hoof. Chips Baily suffered silently

with the fever that was always with him, his face a waxen mask, with cold perspiration clustered at each temple.

And in many ways, Mr. Indrasil had the roughest row to hoe of all. The cats were nervous and short-tempered, and every time he stepped into the Demon Cat Cage, as it was billed, he took his life in his hands. He was feeding the lions ordinate amounts of raw meat right before he went on, something that lion tamers rarely do, contrary to popular belief. His face grew drawn and haggard, and his eyes were wild.

Mr. Legere was almost always there, by Green Terror's cage, watching him. And that, of course, added to Mr. Indrasil's load. The circus began eyeing the silk-shirted figure nervously as he passed, and I knew they were all thinking the same thing I was: He's going to crack wide open, and when he does -

When he did, God alone knew what would happen.

The hot spell went on, and temperatures were climbing well into the nineties every day. It seemed as if the rain gods were mocking us. Every town we left would receive the showers of blessing. Every town we entered was hot, parched, sizzling.

And one night, on the road between Kansas City and Green Bluff, I saw something that upset me more than anything else.

It was hot — abominably hot. It was no good even trying to sleep. I rolled about on my cot like a man in a fever-delirium, chasing the sandman but never quite catching him. Finally I got up, pulled on my pants, and went outside.

We had pulled off into a small field and drawn into a circle. Myself and two other roustabouts had unloaded the cats so they could catch whatever breeze there might be. The cages were there now, painted dull silver by the swollen Kansas moon, and a tall figure in white whipcord breeches was standing by the biggest of them. Mr. Indrasil.

He was baiting Green Terror with a long, pointed pike. The big cat was padding silently around the cage, trying to avoid the sharp tip. And the frightening thing was, when the staff did punch into the tiger's flesh, it did not roar in pain and anger as it should have. It maintained an ominous silence, more terrifying to the person who knows cats than the loudest of roars.

It had gotten to Mr. Indrasil, too. "Quiet bastard, aren't you?" He grunted. Powerful arms flexed, and the iron shaft slid forward. Green Terror flinched, and his eyes rolled horribly. But he did not make a sound. "Yowl!" Mr. Indrasil hissed. "Go ahead and yowl, you monster Yowl!" And he drove his spear deep into the tiger's flank.

Then I saw something odd. It seemed that a shadow moved in the darkness under one of the far wagons, and the moonlight seemed to glint on staring eyes — green eyes.

A cool wind passed silently through the clearing, lifting dust and rumpling my hair.

Mr. Indrasil looked up, and there was a queer listening expression on his face. Suddenly he dropped the bar, turned, and strode back to his trailer.

I stared again at the far wagon, but the shadow was gone. Green Tiger stood motionlessly at the bars of his cage, staring at Mr. Indrasil's trailer. And the thought came to me that it hated Mr. Indrasil not because he was cruel or vicious, for the tiger respects these qualities in its own animalistic way, but rather because he was a deviate from even the tiger's savage norm. He was a rogue. That's the only way I can put it. Mr. Indrasil was not only a human tiger, but a rogue tiger as well.

The thought jelled inside me, disquieting and a little scary. I went back inside, but still I could not sleep.

The heat went on.

Every day we fried, every night we tossed and turned, sweating and sleepless. Everyone was painted red with sunburn, and there were fistfights over trifling affairs. Everyone was reaching the point of explosion.

Mr. Legere remained with us, a silent watcher, emotionless on the surface, but, I sensed, with deep-running currents of - what? Hate? Fear? Vengeance? I could not place it. But he was potentially dangerous, I was sure of that. Perhaps more so than Mr. Indrasil was, if anyone ever lit his particular fuse.

He was at the circus at every performance, always dressed in his nattily creased brown suit, despite the killing temperatures. He stood silently by Green Terror's cage, seeming to commune deeply with the tiger, who was always quiet when he was around.

From Kansas to Oklahoma, with no letup in the temperature. A day without a heat prostration case was a rare day indeed. Crowds were beginning to drop off; who wanted to sit under a stifling canvas tent when there was an air-conditioned movie just around the block?

We were all as jumpy as cats, to coin a particularly applicable phrase. And as we set down stakes in Wildwood Green, Oklahoma, I think we all knew a climax of some sort was close at hand. And most of us knew it would involve Mr. Indrasil. A bizarre occurrence had taken place just prior to our first Wildwood performance. Mr. Indrasil had been in the Demon Cat Cage, putting the ill-tempered lions through their paces. One of them missed its balance on its pedestal, tottered and almost regained it. Then, at that precise moment, Green Terror let out a terrible, ear-splitting roar.

The lion fell, landed heavily, and suddenly launched itself with rifle-bullet accuracy at Mr. Indrasil. With a frightened curse, he heaved his chair at the cat's feet, tangling up the driving legs. He darted out just as the lion smashed against the bars.

As he shakily collected himself preparatory to re-entering the cage, Green Terror let out another roar — but this one monstrously like a

huge, disdainful chuckle.

Mr. Indrasil stared at the beast, white-faced, then turned and walked away. He did not come out of his trailer all afternoon.

That afternoon wore on interminably. But as the temperature climbed, we all began looking hopefully toward the west, where huge banks of thunderclouds were forming.

“Rain, maybe,” I told Chips, stopping by his barking platform in front of the sideshow.

But he didn’t respond to my hopeful grin. “Don’t like it,” he said. “No wind. Too hot. Hail or tornadoes.” His face grew grim. “It ain’t no picnic, ridin’ out a tornado with a pack of crazy-wild animals all over the place, Eddie. I’ve thanked God mor’n once when we’ve gone through the tornado belt that we don’t have no elephants.

“Yeah” he added gloomily, “you better hope them clouds stay right on the horizon.”

But they didn’t. They moved slowly toward us, cyclopean pillars in the sky, purple at the bases and awesome blue-black through the cumulonimbus. All air movement ceased, and the heat lay on us like a woolen winding-shroud. Every now and again, thunder would clear its throat further west.

About four, Mr. Farnum himself, ringmaster and half-owner of the circus, appeared and told us there would be no evening performance; just batten down and find a convenient hole to crawl into in case of trouble. There had been corkscrew funnels spotted in several places between Wildwood and Oklahoma City, some within forty miles of us.

There was only a small crowd when the announcement came, apathetically wandering through the sideshow exhibits or ogling the animals. But Mr. Legere had not been present all day; the only person at Green Terror’s cage was a sweaty high-school boy with

clutch of books. When Mr. Farnum announced the U.S. Weather Bureau tornado warning that had been issued, he hurried quickly away.

I and the other two roustabouts spent the rest of the-afternoon working our tails off, securing tents, loading animals back into their wagons, and making generally sure that everything was nailed down.

Finally only the cat cages were left, and there was a special arrangement for those. Each cage had a special mesh “breezeway” accorded up against it, which, when extended completely, connected with the Demon Cat Cage. When the smaller cages had to be moved, the felines could be herded into the big cage while they were loaded up. The big cage itself rolled on gigantic casters and could be muscled around to a position where each cat could be let back into its original cage. It sounds complicated, and it was, but it was just the only way.

We did the lions first, then Ebony Velvet, the docile black panther that had set the circus back almost one season’s receipts. It was a tricky business coaxing them up and then back through the breezeways, but all of us preferred it to calling Mr. Indrasil to help.

By the time we were ready for Green Terror, twilight had come - a queer, yellow twilight that hung humidly around us. The sky above had taken on a flat, shiny aspect that I had never seen and which I didn’t like in the least.

“Better hurry,” Mr. Farnum said, as we laboriously trundled the Demon Cat Cage back to where we could hook it to the back of Green Terror’s show cage. “Barometer’s falling off fast.” He shook his head worriedly. “Looks bad, boys. Bad.” He hurried on, still shaking his head.

We got Green Terror’s breezeway hooked up and opened the back of his cage. “In you go,” I said encouragingly.

Green Terror looked at me menacingly and didn’t move.

Thunder rumbled again, louder, closer, sharper. The sky had gone jaundice, the ugliest color I have ever seen. Wind-devils began to pick jerkily at our clothes and whirl away the flattened candy wrappers and cotton-candy cones that littered the area.

“Come on, come on,” I urged and poked him easily with the blunt-tipped rods we were given to herd them with.

Green Terror roared ear-splittingly, and one paw lashed out with blinding speed. The hardwood pole was jerked from my hands and splintered as if it had been a greenwood twig. The tiger was on his feet now, and there was murder in his eyes.

“Look,” I said shakily. “One of you will have to go get Mr. Indrasil, that’s all. We can’t wait around.”

As if to punctuate my words, thunder cracked louder, the clapping of mammoth hands.

Kelly Nixon and Mike McGregor flipped for it; I was excluded because of my previous run-in with Mr. Indrasil. Kelly drew the task, threw us a wordless glance that said he would prefer facing the storm and then started off.

He was gone almost ten minutes. The wind was picking up velocity now, and twilight was darkening into a weird six o’clock night. I was scared, and am not afraid to admit it. That rushing, featureless sky, the deserted circus grounds, the sharp, tugging wind-vortices all that makes a memory that will stay with me always, undimmed.

And Green Terror would not budge into his breezeway.

Kelly Nixon came rushing back, his eyes wide. “I pounded on his door for ‘most five minutes!” He gasped. “Couldn’t raise him!”

We looked at each other, at a loss. Green Terror was a big investment for the circus. He couldn’t just be left in the open. I turned bewilderedly, looking for Chips, Mr. Farnum, or anybody who could

tell me what to do. But everyone was gone. The tiger was our responsibility. I considered trying to load the cage bodily into the trailer, but I wasn't going to get my fingers in that cage.

"Well, we've just got to go and get him," I said. "The three of us. Come on." And we ran toward Mr. Indrasil's trailer through the gloom of coming night.

We pounded on his door until he must have thought all the demons of hell were after him. Thankfully, it finally jerked open. Mr. Indrasil swayed and stared down at us, his mad eyes rimmed and oversheened with drink. He smelled like a distillery.

"Damn you, leave me alone," he snarled.

"Mr. Indrasil —" I had to shout over the rising whine of the wind. It was like no storm I had ever heard of or read about, out there. It was like the end of the world .

"You," he gritted softly. He reached down and gathered my shirt up in a knot. "I'm going to teach you a lesson you'll never forget." He glared at Kelly and Mike, cowering back in the moving storm shadows. "Get out!"

They ran. I didn't blame them; I've told you — Mr. Indrasil was crazy. And not just ordinary crazy — he was like a crazy animal, like one of his own cats gone bad.

"All right," he muttered, staring down at me, his eyes like hurricane lamps. "No juju to protect you now. No grisgris." His lips twitched in a wild, horrible smile. "He isn't here now, is he? We're two of a kind, him and me. Maybe the only two left. My nemesis — and I'm his." He was rambling, and I didn't try to stop him. At least his mind was off me.

"Turned that cat against me, back in '58. Always had the power more'n me. Fool could make a million — the two of us could make a million if he wasn't so damned high and mighty...what's that?"

It was Green Terror, and he had begun to roar ear-splittingly.

“Haven’t you got that damned tiger in?” He screamed, almost falsetto. He shook me like a rag doll.

“He won’t go!” I found myself yelling back. “You’ve got to —”

But he flung me away. I stumbled over the fold-up steps in front of his trailer and crashed into a bone-shaking heap at the bottom. With something between a sob and a curse, Mr. Indrasil strode past me, face mottled with anger and fear.

I got up, drawn after him as if hypnotized. Some intuitive part of me realized I was about to see the last act played out.

Once clear of the shelter of Mr. Indrasil’s trailer, the power of the wind was appalling. It screamed like a runaway freight train. I was an ant, a speck, an unprotected molecule before that thundering, cosmic force.

And Mr. Legere was standing by Green Terror’s cage.

It was like a tableau from Dante. The near-empty cage-clearing inside the circle of trailers; the two men, facing each other silently, their clothes and hair rippled by the shrieking gale; the boiling sky above; the twisting wheatfields in the background, like damned souls bending to the whip of Lucifer.

“It’s time, Jason,” Mr. Legere said, his words flayed across the clearing by the wind.

Mr. Indrasil’s wildly whipping hair lifted around the livid scar across the back of his neck. His fists clenched, but he said nothing. I could almost feel him gathering his will, his life force, his id. It gathered around him like an unholy nimbus.

And, then, I saw with sudden horror that Mr. Legere was unhooking Green Terror’s breezeway — and the back of the cage was open!

I cried out, but the wind ripped my words away.

The great tiger leaped out and almost flowed past Mr. Legere. Mr. Indrasil swayed, but did not run. He bent his head and stared down at the tiger.

And Green Terror stopped.

He swung his huge head back to Mr. Legere, almost turned, and then slowly turned back to Mr. Indrasil again. There was a terrifyingly palpable sensation of directed force in the air, a mesh of conflicting wills centered around the tiger. And the wills were evenly matched.

I think, in the end, it was Green Terror's own will — his hate of Mr. Indrasil — that tipped the scales.

The cat began to advance, his eyes hellish, flaring beacons. And something strange began to happen to Mr. Indrasil. He seemed to be folding in on himself, shriveling, accordioning. The silk-shirt lost shape, the dark, whipping hair became a hideous toadstool around his collar.

Mr. Legere called something across to him, and, simultaneously, Green Terror leaped.

I never saw the outcome. The next moment I was slammed flat on my back, and the breath seemed to be sucked from my body. I caught one crazily tilted glimpse of a huge, towering cyclone funnel, and then the darkness descended.

When I awoke, I was in my cot just aft of the grainery bins in the all-purpose storage trailer we carried. My body felt as if it had been beaten with padded Indian clubs.

Chips Baily appeared, his face lined and pale. He saw my eyes were open and grinned relievedly. "Didn't know as you were ever gonna wake up. How you feel?"

“Dislocated,” I said. “What happened? How’d I get here?”

“We found you piled up against Mr. Indrasil’s trailer. The tornado almost carried you away for a souvenir, m’boy.”

At the mention of Mr. Indrasil, all the ghastly memories came flooding back. “Where is Mr. Indrasil? And Mr. Legere?”

His eyes went murky, and he started to make some kind of an evasive answer.

“Straight talk,” I said, struggling up on one elbow. “I have to know, Chips. I have to.”

Something in my face must have decided him. “Okay. But this isn’t exactly what we told the cops — in fact we hardly told the cops any of it. No sense havin’ people think we’re crazy. Anyhow, Indrasil’s gone. I didn’t even know that Legere guy was around.”

“And Green Tiger?”

Chips’ eyes were unreadable again. “He and the other tiger fought to death.”

“Other tiger? There’s no other -”

“Yeah, but they found two of ‘em, lying in each other’s blood. Hell of a mess. Ripped each other’s throats out.”

“What — where —”

“Who knows? We just told the cops we had two tigers. Simpler that way.” And before I could say another word, he was gone.

And that’s the end of my story — except for two little items. The words Mr. Legere shouted just before the tornado hit: “When a man and an animal live in the same shell, Indrasil, the instincts determine the mold!”

The other thing is what keeps me awake nights. Chips told me later, offering it only for what it might be worth. What he told me was that the strange tiger had a long scar on the back of its neck.

FROM THE STORY BY STEPHEN KING



NIGHT SURF

ONLY THE UNLUCKY SURVIVE

KING'S RANSOM PRESENTS IN ASSOCIATION WITH UPSTART FILM COLLECTIVE "NIGHT SURF"
CLARENCE JOHN WOODS BARCY HALSEY GEOFFREY EMERY MATTHEW OLIVA MARY F. RIDLE
SHON ROBERT SEWARD AND JACK ERDIE WRITTEN BY SEAN KENNEDY DIRECTED BY MICHELLE GARDIE
WITH JASON GRAMMET COSTUME DESIGNER SEAN OLSON EXECUTIVE PRODUCERS MIKE BOODIE PRODUCED BY CHRISTOPHER W. JONES
PRODUCED BY CLARENCE JOHN WOODS PETER SULLIVAN JASON CHARNICK
BASED ON THE GREAT STORY BY STEPHEN KING WRITTEN FOR THE SCREEN AND DIRECTED BY PETER SULLIVAN

KING'S
RANSOM



COMING SOON



UPSTART
FILM
COLLECTIVE

NIGHT SURF

Stephen King

After the guy was dead and the smell of his burning flesh was off the air, we all went back down to the beach. Corey had his radio, one of those suitcase-sized transistor jobs that take about forty batteries and also make and play tapes. You couldn't say the sound reproduction was great, but it sure was loud. Corey had been well-to-do before A6, but stuff like that didn't matter anymore. Even his big radio/tape-player was hardly more than a nice-looking hunk of junk. There were only two radio stations left on the air that we could get. One was WKDM in Portsmouth—some backwoods deejay who had gone nutty-religious. He'd play a Perry Como record, say a prayer, bawl, play a Johnny Ray record, read from Psalms (complete with each "selah," just like James Dean in *East of Eden*), then bawl some more. Happy-time stuff like that. One day he sang "Bringing in the Sheaves" in a cracked, moldy voice that sent Needles and me into hysterics.

The Massachusetts station was better, but we could only get it at night. It was a bunch of kids. I guess they took over the transmitting facilities of WRKO or WBZ after everybody left or died. They only gave gag call letters, like WDOPE or KUNT or WA6 or stuff like that. Really funny, you know—you could die laughing. That was the one we were listening to on the way back to the beach. I was holding hands with Susie; Kelly and Joan were ahead of us, and Needles was already over the brow of the point and out of sight. Corey was bringing up the rear, swinging his radio. The Stones were singing "Angie."

"Do you love me?" Susie was asking. "That's all I want to know, do you love me?" Susie needed constant reassurance. I was her teddy bear.

"No," I said. She was getting fat, and if she lived long enough, which wasn't likely, she would get really flabby. She was already mouthy.

"You're rotten," she said, and put a hand to her face. Her lacquered fingernails twinkled dimly with the half-moon that had risen about an hour ago.

“Are you going to cry again?”

“Shut up!” She sounded like she was going to cry again, all right.

We came over the ridge and I paused. I always have to pause. Before A6, this had been a public beach. Tourists, picnickers, runny-nosed kids and fat baggy grandmothers with sunburned elbows. Candy wrappers and popsicle sticks in the sand, all the beautiful people necking on their beach blankets, intermingled stench of exhaust from the parking lot, seaweed, and Coppertone oil.

But now all the dirt and all the crap was gone. The ocean had eaten it, all of it, as casually as you might eat a handful of Cracker Jacks. There were no people to come back and dirty it again. Just us, and we weren't enough to make much mess. We loved the beach too, I guess—hadn't we just offered it a kind of sacrifice? Even Susie, little bitch Susie with her fat ass and her cranberry bellbottoms.

The sand was white and duned, marked only by the high-tide line—twisted skein of seaweed, kelp, hunks of driftwood. The moonlight stitched inky crescent-shaped shadows and folds across everything. The deserted lifeguard tower stood white and skeletal some fifty yards from the bathhouse, pointing toward the sky like a finger bone.

And the surf, the night surf, throwing up great bursts of foam, breaking against the headlands for as far as we could see in endless attacks. Maybe that water had been halfway to England the night before.

” ‘Angie,’ by the Stones,” the cracked voice on Corey's radio said. “I'm sureya dug that one, a blast from the past that's a golden gas, straight from the grooveyard, a platta that mattas. I'm Bobby. This was supposed to be Fred's night, but Fred got the flu. He's all swelled up.” Susie giggled then, with the first tears still on her eyelashes. I started toward the beach a little faster to keep her quiet.

“Wait up!” Corey called. “Bernie? Hey, Bernie, wait up!”

The guy on the radio was reading some dirty limericks, and a girl in the background asked him where did he put the beer. He said something back, but by that time we were on the beach. I looked back to see how Corey was doing. He was coming down on his backside, as usual, and he looked so ludicrous I felt a little sorry for him.

“Run with me,” I said to Susie.

“Why?”

I slapped her on the can and she squealed. “Just because it feels good to run.”

We ran. She fell behind, panting like a horse and calling for me to slow down, but I put her out of my head. The wind rushed past my ears and blew the hair off my forehead. I could smell the salt in the air, sharp and tart. The surf pounded. The waves were like foamed black glass. I kicked off my rubber sandals and pounded across the sand barefoot, not minding the sharp digs of an occasional shell. My blood roared.

And then there was the lean-to with Needles already inside and Kelly and Joan standing beside it, holding hands and looking at the water. I did a forward roll, feeling sand go down the back of my shirt, and fetched up against Kelly’s legs. He fell on top of me and rubbed my face in the sand while Joan laughed.

We got up and grinned at each other. Susie had given up running and was plodding toward us. Corey had almost caught up to her.

“Some fire,” Kelly said.

“Do you think he came all the way from New York, like he said?” Joan asked.

“I don’t know.” I couldn’t see that it mattered anyway. He had been behind the wheel of a big Lincoln when we found him, semi-

conscious and raving. His head was bloated to the size of a football and his neck looked like a sausage. He had Captain Trips and not far to go, either. So we took him up to the Point that overlooks the beach and burned him. He said his name was Alvin Sackheim. He kept calling for his grandmother. He thought Susie was his grandmother. This struck her funny, God knows why. The strangest things strike Susie funny.

It was Corey's idea to burn him up, but it started off as a joke. He had read all those books about witchcraft and black magic at college, and he kept leering at us in the dark beside Alvin Sackheim's Lincoln and telling us that if we made a sacrifice to the dark gods, maybe the spirits would keep protecting us against A6.

Of course none of us really believed that bullshit, but the talk got more and more serious. It was a new thing to do, and finally we went ahead and did it. We tied him to the observation gadget up there—you put a dime in it and on a clear day you can see all the way to Portland Headlight. We tied him with our belts, and then we went rooting around for dry brush and hunks of driftwood like kids playing a new kind of hide-and-seek. All the time we were doing it Alvin Sackheim just sort of leaned there and mumbled to his grandmother. Susie's eyes got very bright and she was breathing fast. It was really turning her on. When we were down in the ravine on the other side of the outcrop she leaned against me and kissed me. She was wearing too much lipstick and it was like kissing a greasy plate.

I pushed her away and that was when she started pouting.

We went back up, all of us, and piled dead branches and twigs up to Alvin Sackheim's waist. Needles lit the pyre with his Zippo, and it went up fast. At the end, just before his hair caught on fire, the guy began to scream. There was a smell just like sweet Chinese pork.

"Got a cigarette, Bernie?" Needles asked.

"There's about fifty cartons right behind you."

He grinned and slapped a mosquito that was probing his arm. "Don't want to move."

I gave him a smoke and sat down. Susie and I met Needles in Portland. He was sitting on the curb in front of the State Theater, playing Leadbelly tunes on a big old Gibson guitar he had looted someplace. The sound had echoed up and down Congress Street as if he were playing in a concert hall.

Susie stopped in front of us, still out of breath. "You're rotten, Bernie."

"Come on, Sue. Turn the record over. That side stinks."

"Bastard. Stupid, unfeeling son of a bitch. Creep!"

"Go away," I said "or I'll black your eye, Susie. See if I don't."

She started to cry again. She was really good at it. Corey came up and tried to put an arm around her. She elbowed him in the crotch and he spit in her face.

"I'll kill you!" She came at him, screaming and weeping, making propellers with her hands. Corey backed off, almost fell, then turned tail and ran. Susie followed him, hurling hysterical obscenities. Needles put back his head and laughed. The sound of Corey's radio came back to us faintly over the surf.

Kelly and Joan had wandered off. I could see them down by the edge of the water, walking with their arms around each other's waist. They looked like an ad in a travel agent's window—Fly to Beautiful St. Lorca. It was all right. They had a good thing.

"Bernie?"

"What?" I sat and smoked and thought about Needles flipping back the top of his Zippo, spinning the wheel, making fire with flint and steel like a caveman.

“I’ve got it,” Needles said.

“Yeah?” I looked at him. “Are you sure?”

“Sure I am. My head aches. My stomach aches. Hurts to piss.”

“Maybe it’s just Hong Kong flu. Susie had Hong Kong flu. She wanted a Bible.” I laughed. That had been while we were still at the University, about a week before they closed it down for good, a month before they started carrying bodies away in dump trucks and burying them in mass graves with payloaders.

“Look.” He lit a match and held it under the angle of his jaw. I could see the first triangular smudges, the first swelling. It was A6, all right.

“Okay,” I said.

“I don’t feel so bad,” he said. “In my mind, I mean. You, though. You think about it a lot. I can tell.”

“No I don’t.” A lie.

“Sure you do. Like that guy tonight. You’re thinking about that, too. We probably did him a favor, when you get right down to it. I don’t think he even knew it was happening.”

“He knew.”

He shrugged and turned on his side. “It doesn’t matter.

We smoked and I watched the surf come in and go out. Needles had Captain Trips. That made everything real all over again. It was late August already, and in a couple of weeks the first chill of fall would be creeping in. Time to move inside someplace. Winter. Dead by Christmas, maybe, all of us. In somebody’s front room with Corey’s expensive radio/tape-player on top of a bookcase full of Reader’s Digest Condensed Books and the weak winter sun lying on the rug in meaningless windowpane patterns.

The vision was clear enough to make me shudder. Nobody should think about winter in August. It's like a goose walking over your grave.

Needles laughed. "See? You do think about it."

What could I say? I stood up. "Going to look for Susie."

"Maybe we're the last people on earth, Bernie. Did you ever think of that?" In the faint moonlight he already looked half dead, with circles under his eyes and pallid, unmoving fingers like pencils.

I walked down to the water and looked out across it. There was nothing to see but the restless, moving humps of the waves, topped by delicate curls of foam. The thunder of the breakers was tremendous down here, bigger than the world. Like standing inside a thunderstorm. I closed my eyes and rocked on my bare feet. The sand was cold and damp and packed. And if we were the last people on earth, so what? This would go on as long as there was a moon to pull the water.

Susie and Corey were up the beach. Susie was riding him as if he were a bucking bronc, pounding his head into the running boil of the water. Corey was flailing and splashing. They were both soaked. I walked down and pushed her off with my foot. Corey splashed away on all fours, spluttering and whoofing.

"I hate you!" Susie screamed at me. Her mouth was a dark grinning crescent. It looked like the entrance to a fun house. When I was a kid my mother used to take us kids to Harrison State Park and there was a fun house with a big clown face on the front, and you walked in through the mouth.

"Come on, Susie. Up, Fido." I held out my hand. She took it doubtfully and stood up. There was damp sand clotted on her blouse and skin.

"You didn't have to push me, Bernie. You don't ever—"

“Come on.” She wasn’t like a jukebox; you never had to put in a dime and she never came unplugged.

We walked up the beach toward the main concession. The man who ran the place had had a small overhead apartment. There was a bed. She didn’t really deserve a bed, but Needles was right about that. It didn’t matter. No one was really scoring the game anymore.

The stairs went up the side of the building, but I paused for just a minute to look in the broken window at the dusty wares inside that no one had cared enough about to loot—stacks of sweatshirts (“Anson Beach” and a picture of sky and waves printed on the front), glittering bracelets that would green the wrist on the second day, bright junk earrings, beachballs, dirty greeting cards, badly painted ceramic madonnas, plastic vomit (So realistic! Try it on your wife!), Fourth of July sparklers for a Fourth that never was, beach towels with a voluptuous girl in a bikini standing amid the names of a hundred famous resort areas, pennants (Souvenir of Anson Beach and Park), balloons, bathing suits. There was a snack bar up front with a big sign saying TRY OUR CLAM CAKE SPECIAL.

I used to come to Anson Beach a lot when I was still in high school. That was seven years before A6, and I was going with a girl named Maureen. She was a big girl. She had a pink checked bathing suit. I used to tell her it looked like a tablecloth. We had walked along the boardwalk in front of this place, barefoot, the boards hot and sandy beneath our heels. We had never tried the clam cake special.

“What are you looking at?”

“Nothing. Come on.”

I had sweaty, ugly dreams about Alvin Sackheim. He was propped behind the wheel of his shiny yellow Lincoln, talking about his grandmother. He was nothing but a bloated, blackened head and a charred skeleton. He smelled burnt. He talked on and on, and after a while I couldn’t make out a single word. I woke up breathing hard.

Susie was sprawled across my thighs, pale and bloated. My watch said 3:50, but it had stopped. It was still dark out. The surf pounded and smashed. High tide. Make it 4:15. Light soon. I got out of bed and went to the doorway. The sea breeze felt fine against my hot body. In spite of it all I didn't want to die.

I went over in the corner and grabbed a beer. There were three or four cases of Bud stacked against the wall. It was warm, because there was no electricity. I don't mind warm beer like some people do, though. It just foams a little more. Beer is beer. I went back out on the landing and sat down and pulled the ring tab and drank up.

So here we were, with the whole human race wiped out, not by atomic weapons or bio-warfare or pollution or anything grand like that. Just the flu. I'd like to put down a huge plaque somewhere, in the Bonneville Salt Flats, maybe. Bronze Square. Three miles on a side. And in big raised letters it would say, for the benefit of any landing aliens: JUST THE FLU.

I tossed the beer can over the side. It landed with a hollow clank on the cement walk that went around the building. The lean-to was a dark triangle on the sand. I wondered if Needles was awake. I wondered if I would be.

"Bernie?"

She was standing in the doorway wearing one of my shirts. I hate that. She sweats like a pig.

"You don't like me much anymore, do you, Bernie?"

I didn't say anything. There were times when I could still feel sorry for everything. She didn't deserve me any more than I deserved her.

"Can I sit down with you?"

"I doubt if it would be wide enough for both of us."

She made a choked hiccupping noise and started to go back inside.

“Needles has got A6,” I said.

She stopped and looked at me. Her face was very still. “Don’t joke, Bernie.”

I lit a cigarette.

“He can’t! He had—”

“Yes, he had A2. Hong Kong flu. Just like you and me and Corey and Kelly and Joan.”

“But that would mean he isn’t—”

“Immune.”

“Yes. Then we could get it.”

“Maybe he lied when he said he had A2. So we’d take him along with us that time,” I said.

Relief spilled across her face. “Sure, that’s it. I would have lied if it had been me. Nobody likes to be alone, do they?” She hesitated.

“Coming back to bed?”

“Not just now.”

She went inside. I didn’t have to tell her that A2 was no guarantee against A6. She knew that. She had just blocked it out. I sat and watched the surf. It was really up. Years ago, Anson had been the only halfway decent surfing spot in the state. The Point was a dark, jutting hump against the sky. I thought I could see the upright that was the observation post, but it probably was just imagination. Sometimes Kelly took Joan up to the point. I didn’t think they were up there tonight.

I put my face in my hands and clutched it, feeling the skin, its grain and texture. It was all narrowing so swiftly, and it was all so mean—there was no dignity in it.

The surf coming in, coming in, coming in. Limitless. Clean and deep. We had come here in the summer, Maureen and I, the summer after high school, the summer before college and reality and A6 coming out of Southeast Asia and covering the world like a pall, July, we had eaten pizza and listened to her radio, I had put oil on her back, she had put oil on mine, the air had been hot, the sand bright, the sun like a burning glass.



NONA

Stephen King

Do you love?

I hear her voice saying this—sometimes I still hear it. In my dreams.

Do you love?

Yes, I answer. Yes—and true love will never die.

Then I wake up screaming.

I don't know how to explain it, even now. I can't tell you why I did those things. I couldn't do it at the trial, either. And there are a lot of people here who ask me about it. There's a psychiatrist who does. But I am silent. My lips are sealed. Except here in my cell. Here I am not silent. I wake up screaming.

In the dream I see her walking toward me. She is wearing a white gown, almost transparent, and her expression is one of mingled desire and triumph. She comes to me across a dark room with a stone floor and I smell dry October roses. Her arms are held open and I go to her with mine out to enfold her.

I feel dread, revulsion, unutterable longing. Dread and revulsion because I know what this place is, longing because I love her. I will always love her. There are times when I wish there were still a death penalty in this state. A short walk down a dim corridor, a straightbacked chair fitted with a steel skullcap, clamps ... then one quick jolt and I would be with her.

As we come together in the dream my fear grows, but it is impossible for me to draw back from her. My hands press against the smooth plane of her back, her skin near under silk. She smiles with those

deep, black eyes. Her head tilts up to mine and her lips part, ready to be kissed.

That's when she changes, shrivels. Her hair grows coarse and matted, melting from black to an ugly brown that spills down over the creamy whiteness of her cheeks. The eyes shrink and go beady. The whites disappear and she is glaring at me with tiny eyes like two polished pieces of jet. The mouth becomes a maw through which crooked yellow teeth protrude.

I try to scream. I try to wake up.

I can't. I'm caught again. I'll always be caught.

I am in the grip of a huge, noisome graveyard rat. Lights sway in front of my eyes. October roses. Somewhere a dead bell is chanting.

"Do you love?" this thing whispers. "Do you love?" The smell of roses is its breath as it swoops toward me, dead flowers in a charnel house.

"Yes," I tell the rat-thing. "Yes—and true love will never die." Then I do scream, and I am awake.

They think what we did together drove me crazy. But my mind is still working in some way or other, and I've never stopped looking for the answers. I still want to know how it was, and what it was.

They've let me have paper and a pen with a felt tip. I'm going to write everything down. Maybe I'll answer some of their questions and maybe while I'm doing that I can answer some of my own. And when I'm done, there's something else. Something they don't know I have. Something I took. It's here under my mattress. A knife from the prison dining hall.

I'll have to start by telling you about Augusta.

As I write this it is night, a fine August night poked through with blazing stars. I can see them through the mesh of my window, which overlooks the exercise yard and a slice of sky I can block out with two fingers. It's hot, and I'm naked except for my shorts. I can hear the soft summer sound of frogs and crickets. But I can bring back winter just by closing my eyes. The bitter cold of that night, the bleakness, the hard, unfriendly lights of a city that was not my city. It was the fourteenth of February.

See, I remember everything.

And look at my arms—covered with sweat, they've pulled into gooseflesh.

Augusta ...

When I got to Augusta I was more dead than alive, it was that cold. I had picked a fine day to say good-bye to the college scene and hitchhike west; it looked like I might freeze to death before I got out of the state.

A cop had kicked me off the interstate ramp and threatened to bust me if he caught me thumbing there again. I was almost tempted to wisemouth him and let him do it. The flat, four-lane stretch of highway had been like an airport landing strip, the wind whooping and pushing membranes of powdery snow skirling along the concrete. And to the anonymous Them behind their Saf-T-Glas windshields, everyone standing in the breakdown lane on a dark night is either a rapist or a murderer, and if he's got long hair you can throw in child molester and faggot on top.

I tried it awhile on the access road, but it was no good. And along about a quarter of eight I realized that if I didn't get someplace warm quick, I was going to pass out.

I walked a mile and a half before I found a combination diner and diesel stop on 202 just inside the city limits. JOE'S GOOD EATS, the neon said. There were three big rigs parked in the crushed-stone

parking lot, and one new sedan. There was a wilted Christmas wreath on the door that nobody had bothered to take down, and next to it a thermometer showing just five degrees of mercury above big zero. I had nothing to cover my ears but my hair, and my rawhide gloves were falling apart. The tips of my fingers felt like pieces of furniture.

I opened the door and went in.

The heat was the first thing that struck me, warm and good. Next a hillbilly song on the juke, the unmistakable voice of Merle Haggard: "We don't let our hair grow long and shaggy, like the hippies out in San Francisco do."

The third thing that struck me was The Eye. You know about The Eye once you let your hair get down below the lobes of your ears. Right then people know you don't belong to the Lions, Elks, or the VFW. You know about The Eye, but you never get used to it.

Right now the people giving me The Eye were four truckers in one booth, two more at the counter, a pair of old ladies wearing cheap fur coats and blue rinses, the short-order cook, and a gawky kid with soapsuds on his hands. There was a girl sitting at the far end of the counter, but all she was looking at was the bottom of her coffee cup.

She was the fourth thing that struck me.

I'm old enough to know there's no such thing as love at first sight. It's just something Rodgers and Hammerstein thought up one day to rhyme with moon and June. It's for kids holding hands at the Prom, right?

But looking at her made me feel something. You can laugh, but you wouldn't have if you'd seen her. She was almost unbearably beautiful. I knew without a doubt that everybody else in Joe's knew that the same as me. Just like I knew she had been getting The Eye before I came in. She had coal-colored hair, so black that it seemed nearly blue under the fluorescents. It fell freely over the shoulders of

her scuffed tan coat. Her skin was cream-white, with just the faintest blooded touch lingering beneath the skin—the cold she had brought in with her. Dark, sooty lashes. Solemn eyes that slanted up the tiniest bit at the corners. A full and mobile mouth below a straight, patrician nose. I couldn't tell what her body looked like. I didn't care. You wouldn't, either. All she needed was that face, that hair, that look. She was exquisite. That's the only word we have for her in English.

Nona.

I sat two stools down from her, and the short-order cook came over and looked at me. "What?"

"Black coffee, please."

He went to get it. From behind me someone said: "Well I guess Christ came back, just like my mamma always said He would."

The gawky dishwasher laughed, a quick yuk-yuk sound. The truckers at the counter joined in.

The short-order cook brought me my coffee back, jarred it down on the counter and spilled some on the thawing meat of my hand. I jerked it back.

"Sorry," he said indifferently.

"He's gonna heal it hisself," one of the truckers in the booth called over.

The blue-rinse twins paid their checks and hurried out. One of the knights of the road sauntered over to the juke and put another dime in. Johnny Cash began to sing "A Boy Named Sue." I blew on my coffee.

Someone tugged at my sleeve. I turned my head and there she was—she'd moved over to the empty stool. Looking at that face close up

was almost blinding. I spilled some more of my coffee.

“I’m sorry.” Her voice was low, almost atonal.

“My fault. I can’t feel what I’m doing yet.”

“I”

She stopped, seemingly at a loss. I suddenly realized that she was scared. I felt my first reaction to her swim over me again—to protect her and take care of her, make her not afraid. “I need a ride,” she finished in a rush. “I didn’t dare ask any of them.” She made a barely perceptible gesture toward the truckers in the booth.

How can I make you understand that I would have given anything—anything—to be able to tell her, Sure, finish your coffee, I’m parked right outside. It sounds crazy to say I felt that way after half a dozen words out of her mouth, and the same number out of mine, but I did. Looking at her was like looking at the Mona Lisa or the Venus de Milo come to breathing life. And there was another feeling. It was as if a sudden, powerful light had been turned on in the confused darkness of my mind. It would make it easier if I could say she was a pickup and I was a fast man with the ladies, quick with a funny line and lots of patter, but she wasn’t and I wasn’t. All I knew was I didn’t have what she needed and it tore me up.

“I’m thumbing,” I told her. “A cop kicked me off the interstate and I only came here to get out of the cold. I’m sorry.”

“Are you from the university?”

“I was. I quit before they could fire me.”

“Are you going home?”

“No home to go to. I was a state ward. I got to school on a scholarship. I blew it. Now I don’t know where I’m going.” My life story in five sentences. I guess it made me feel depressed.

She laughed—the sound made me run hot and cold. “We’re cats out of the same bag, I guess.”

I thought she said cats. I thought so. Then. But I’ve had time to think, in here, and more and more it seems to me that she might have said rats. Rats out of the same bag. Yes. And they are not the same, are they?

I was about to make my best conversational shot—something witty like “Is that so?”—when a hand came down on my shoulder.

I turned around. It was one of the truckers from the booth. He had blond stubble on his chin and there was a wooden kitchen match poking out of his mouth. He smelled of engine oil and looked like something out of a Steve Ditko drawing.

“I think you’re done with that coffee,” he said. His lips parted around the match in a grin. He had a lot of very white teeth.

“What?”

“You stinking the place up, fella. You are a fella, aren’t you? Kind of hard to tell.”

“You aren’t any rose yourself,” I said. “What’s that after-shave, handsome? Eau de Crankcase?”

He gave me a hard shot across the side of the face with his open hand. I saw little black dots.

“Don’t fight in here,” the short-order cook said. “If you’re going to scramble him, do it outside.”

“Come on, you goddammed commie,” the trucker said.

This is the spot where the girl is supposed to say something like “Unhand him” or “You brute.” She wasn’t saying anything. She was watching both of us with feverish intensity. It was scary. I think it was the first time I’d noticed how huge her eyes really were.

“Do I have to sock you again?”

“No. Come on, shitheels.”

I don't know how that jumped out of me. I don't like to fight. I'm not a good fighter. I'm an even worse name-caller. But I was angry, just then. It came up on me all at once that I wanted to kill him.

Maybe he got a mental whiff of it. For just a second a shade of uncertainty flicked over his face, an unconscious wondering if maybe he hadn't picked the wrong hippie. Then it was gone. He wasn't going to back off from some long-haired elitist effeminate snob who used the flag to Wipe his ass with—at least not in front of his buddies. Not a big ole truck-driving son-of-a-gun like him.

The anger pounded over me again. Faggot? Faggot? I felt out of control, and it was good to feel that way. My tongue was thick in my mouth. My stomach was a slab.

We walked across to the door, and my buddy's buddies almost broke their backs getting up to watch the fun.

Nona? I thought of her, but only in an absent, back-of-my-mind way. I knew Nona would be there. Nona would take care of me. I knew it the same way I knew it would be cold outside. It was strange to know that about a girl I had only met five minutes before. Strange, but I didn't think about that until later. My mind was taken up—no, almost blotted out—by the heavy cloud of rage. I felt homicidal.

The cold was so clear and so clean that it felt as if we were cutting it with our bodies like knives. The frosted gravel of the parking lot gritted harshly under his heavy boots and under my shoes. The moon, full and bloated, looked down on us with a vapid eye. It was faintly ringed, suggesting bad weather on the way. The sky was as black as a night in hell. We left tiny dwarfed shadows behind our feet in the monochrome glare of a single sodium light set high on a pole beyond the parked rigs. Our breath plumed the air in short bursts. The trucker turned to me, his gloved fists balled.

“Okay, you son-of-a-bitch,” he said.

I seemed to be swelling—my whole body seemed to be swelling. Somehow, numbly, I knew that my intellect was about to be eclipsed by an invisible something that I had never suspected might be in me. It was terrifying—but at the same time I welcomed it, desired it, lusted for it. In that last instant of coherent thought it seemed that my body had become a stone pyramid or a cyclone that could sweep everything in front of it like colored pick-up sticks. The trucker seemed small, puny, insignificant. I laughed at him. I laughed, and the sound was as black and as bleak as that moonstruck sky overhead.

He came at me swinging his fists. I batted down his right, took his left on the side of my face without feeling it, and then kicked him in the guts. The air barfed out of him in a white cloud. He tried to back away, holding himself and coughing.

I ran around in back of him, still laughing like some farmer’s dog barking at the moon, and I had pounded him three times before he could make even a quarter turn—the neck, the shoulder, one red ear.

He made a yowling noise, and one of his flailing hands brushed my nose. The fury that had taken me over mushroomed and I kicked him again, bringing my foot up high and hard, like a punter. He screamed into the night and I heard a rib snap. He folded up and I jumped him.

At the trial one of the other truck drivers testified I was like a wild animal. And I was. I can’t remember much of it, but I can remember that, snarling and growling at him like a wild dog.

I straddled him, grabbed double handfuls of his greasy hair, and began to rub his face into the gravel. In the flat glare of the sodium light his blood seemed black, like beetle’s blood.

“Jesus, stop it!” somebody yelled.

Hands grabbed my shoulders and pulled me off. I saw whirling faces and I struck at them.

The trucker was trying to creep away. His face was a staring mask of blood from which his dazed eyes peered. I began to kick him, dodging away from the others, grunting with satisfaction each time I connected on him.

He was beyond fighting back. All he knew was to try to get away. Each time I kicked him his eyes would squeeze closed, like the eyes of a tortoise, and he would halt. Then he would start to crawl again. He looked stupid. I decided I was going to kill him. I was going to kick him to death. Then I would kill the rest of them—all but Nona.

I kicked him again and he flopped over on his back and looked up at me dazedly.

“Uncle,” he croaked. “I cry Uncle. Please. Please—”

I knelt down beside him, feeling the gravel bite into my knees through my thin jeans.

“Here you are, handsome,” I whispered. “Here’s your uncle.”

I hooked my hands onto his throat.

Three of them jumped me all at once and knocked me off him. I got up, still grinning, and started toward them. They backed away, three big men, all of them scared green.

And it clicked off.

Just like that it clicked off and it was just me, standing in the parking lot of Joe’s Good Eats, breathing hard and feeling sick and horrified.

I turned and looked back toward the diner. The girl was there; her beautiful features were lit with triumph. She raised one fist to shoulder height in salute like the one those black guys gave at the Olympics that time.

I turned back to the man on the ground. He was still trying to crawl away, and when I approached him his eyeballs rolled fearfully.

“Don’t you touch him!” one of his friends cried.

I looked at them, confused. “I’m sorry ... I didn’t mean to ... to hurt him so bad. Let me help—”

“You get out of here, that’s what you do,” the short-order cook said. He was standing in front of Nona at the foot of the steps, clutching a greasy spatula in one hand. “I’m calling the cops.”

“Hey, man, he was the guy who started it! He—”

“Don’t give me any of your lip, you lousy queer,” he said, backing up. “All I know is you just about killed that guy. I’m calling the cops!” He dashed back inside.

“Okay,” I said to nobody in particular. “Okay, that’s good, okay.”

I had left my rawhide gloves inside, but it didn’t seem like a good idea to go back in and get them. I put my hands in my pockets and started to walk back to the interstate access road. I figured my chances of hitching a ride before the cops picked me up were about one in ten. My ears were freezing and I felt sick to my stomach. Some purty night.

“Wait! Hey, wait!”

I turned around. It was her, running to catch up with me, her hair flying out behind her.

“You were wonderful!” she said. “Wonderful!”

“I hurt him bad,” I said dully. “I never did anything like that before.”

“I wish you’d killed him!”

I blinked at her in the frosty light.

“You should have heard the things they were saying about me before you came in. Laughing in that big, brave, dirty way—haw, haw, lookit the little girl out so long after dark. Where you going, honey? Need a lift? I’ll give you a ride if you’ll give me a ride. Damn!”

She glared back over her shoulder as if she could strike them dead with a sudden bolt from her dark eyes. Then she turned them on me, and again it seemed like that searchlight had been turned on in my mind. “My name’s Nona. I’m coming with you.”

“Where? To jail?” I tugged at my hair with both hands. “With this, the first guy who gives us a ride is apt to be a state cop. That cook meant what he said about calling them.”

“I’ll hitch. You stand behind me. They’ll stop for me. They stop for a girl, if she’s pretty.”

I couldn’t argue with her about that and didn’t want to. Love at first sight? Maybe not. But it was something. Can you get that wave?

“Here,” she said, “you forgot these.” She held out my gloves.

She hadn’t gone back inside, and that meant she’d had them all along. She’d known she was coming with me. It gave me an eerie feeling. I put on my gloves and we walked up the access road to the turnpike ramp.

She was right about the ride. We got one with the first car that swung onto the ramp.

We didn’t say anything else while we waited, but it seemed as if we did. I won’t give you a load of bull about ESP and that stuff; you know what I’m talking about. You’ve felt it yourself if you’ve ever been with someone you were really close to, or if you’ve taken one of those drugs with initials for a name. You don’t have to talk. Communication seems to shift over to some high-frequency emotional band. A twist of the hand does it all. We were strangers. I only knew her first name and now that I think back I don’t believe I

ever told her mine at all. But we were doing it. It wasn't love. I hate to keep repeating that, but I feel I have to. I wouldn't dirty that word with whatever we had—not after what we did, not after Castle Rock, not after the dreams.

A high, wailing shriek filled the cold silence of the night, rising and falling.

“That’s an ambulance I think,” I said.

“Yes.”

Silence again. The moon’s light was fading behind a thickening membrane of cloud. I thought the ring around the moon hadn’t lied; we would have snow before the night was over.

Lights poked over the hill.

I stood behind her without having to be told. She brushed her hair back and raised that beautiful face. As I watched the car signal for the entrance ramp I was swept with a feeling of unreality—it was unreal that this beautiful girl had elected to come with me, it was unreal that I had beaten a man to the point where an ambulance had to be called for him, it was unreal to think I might be in jail by morning. Unreal. I felt caught in a spiderweb. But who was the spider?

Nona put out her thumb. The car, a Chevrolet sedan, went by us and I thought it was going to keep right on going. Then the taillights flashed and Nona grabbed my hand. “Come on, we got a ride!” She grinned at me with childish delight and I grinned back at her.

The guy was reaching enthusiastically across the seat to open the door for her. When the dome light flashed on I could see him—a fairly big man in an expensive camel’s hair coat, graying around the edges of his hat, prosperous features softened by years of good meals. A businessman or a salesman. Alone. When he saw me he did a double take, but it was a second or two too late to put the car

back in gear and haul ass. And it was easier for him this way. Later he could fib himself into believing he had seen both of us, that he was a truly good-hearted soul giving a young couple a break.

“Cold night,” he said as Nona slid in beside him and I got in beside her.

“It certainly is,” Nona said sweetly. “Thank you!”

“Yeah,” I said. “Thanks.”

“Don’t mention it.” And we were off, leaving sirens, busted-up truckers, and Joe’s Good Eats behind us.

I had gotten kicked off the interstate at seven-thirty. It was only eight-thirty then. It’s amazing how much you can do in a short time, or how much can be done to you.

We were approaching the yellow flashing lights that signal the Augusta toll station.

“How far are you going?” the driver asked.

That was a stumper. I had been hoping to make it as far as Kittery and crash with an acquaintance who was teaching school there. It still seemed as good an answer as any and I was opening my mouth to give it when Nona said:

“We’re going to Castle Rock. It’s a small town just south and west of Lewiston-Auburn.”

Castle Rock. That made me feel strange. Once upon a time I had been on pretty good terms with Castle Rock. But that was before Ace Merrill messed me up.

The guy brought his car to a stop, took a toll ticket, and then we were on our way again.

“I’m only going as far as Gardiner, myself,” he said, lying smoothly. “One exit up. But that’s a start for you.”

“It sure is,” Nona said, just as sweetly as before. “It was nice of you to stop on such a cold night.” And while she was saying it I was getting her anger on that high emotional wavelength, naked and full of venom. It scared me, the way ticking from a wrapped package might scare me.

“My name’s Blanchette,” he said. “Norman Blanchette.” He waved his hand in our direction to be shaken.

“Cheryl Craig,” Nona said, taking it daintily.

I took her cue and gave him a false name. “Pleasure,” I mumbled.

His hand was soft and flabby. It felt like a hot-water bottle in the shape of a hand. The thought sickened me. It sickened me that we had been forced to beg a ride with this patronizing man who thought he had seen a chance to pick up a pretty girl hitching all by herself, a girl who might or might not agree to an hour spent in a motel room in return for enough cash to buy a bus ticket. It sickened me to know that if I had been alone this man who had just offered me his flabby, hot hand would have zipped by without a second look. It sickened me to know he would drop us at the Gardiner exit, cross over, and then dart right back on the interstate, bypassing us on the southbound ramp without a look, congratulating himself on how smoothly he had solved an annoying situation. Everything about him sickened me. The porky droop of his jowls, the slicked-back wigs of his hair, the smell of his cologne.

And what right did he have? What right?

The sickness curdled, and the flowers of rage began to bloom again. The headlights of his prosperous Impala sedan cut the night with smooth ease, and my rage wanted to reach out and strangle everything that he was set in among—the kind of music I knew he would listen to as he lay back in his La-Z-Boy recliner with the

evening paper in his hot-water-bottle hands, the rinse his wife would use in her hair, the Underalls I knew she would wear, the kids always sent off to the movies or off to school or off to camp—as long as they were off somewhere—his snobbish friends and the drunken parties they would attend with them.

But his cologne—that was the worst. It filled the car with sweet, sickish scent. It smelled like the perfumed disinfectant they use in a slaughterhouse at the end of each shift.

The car ripped through the night with Norman Blanchette holding the wheel with his bloated hands. His manicured nails gleamed softly in the lights from the instrument panel. I wanted to crack a wing window and get away from that cloying smell. No, more—I wanted to crank the whole window down and stick my head out into the cold air, wallow in chilled freshness—but I was frozen, frozen in the dumb maw of my wordless, inexpressible hate.

That was when Nona put the nail file into my hand.

When I was three I got a bad case of the flu and had to go to the hospital. While I was there, my dad fell asleep smoking in bed and the house burned down with my folks and my older brother Drake in it. I have their pictures. They look like actors in an old 1958 American International horror movie, faces you don't know like those of the big stars, more like Elisha Cook, Jr. , and Mara Corday and some child actor you can't quite remember—Brandon de Wilde, maybe.

I had no relatives to go to and so I was sent to a home in Portland for five years. Then I became a state ward. That means a family takes you in and the state pays them thirty dollars a month for your keep. I don't think there was ever a state ward who acquired a taste for lobster. Usually a couple will take two or three wards—not because the milk of human kindness flows in their veins but as a business investment. They feed you. They take the thirty the state gives them and they feed you. If a kid is fed up he can earn his keep doing chores around the place. That thirty turns into forty, fifty, maybe sixty-

five bucks. Capitalism as it applies to the unhomed. Greatest country in the world, right? .

My “folks” were named Hollis and they lived in Harlow, across the river from Castle Rock. They had a three-story farmhouse with fourteen rooms. There was coal heat in the kitchen that got upstairs any way it could. In January you went to bed with three quilts over you and still weren’t sure if your feet were on when you woke in the morning. You had to put them on the floor where you could look at them to be sure. Mrs. Hollis was fat. Mr. Hollis was skimpy and rarely spoke. He wore a red-and-black hunting cap all year round. The house was a helter-skelter mess of white-elephant furniture, rummage-sale stuff, moldy mattresses, dogs, cats, and automotive parts laid on newspaper. I had three “brothers,” all of them wards. We had a nodding acquaintance, like co-travelers on a three-day bus trip.

I made good grades in school and went out for spring baseball when I was a high-school sophomore. Hollis was yapping after me to quit, but I stuck with it until the thing with Ace Merrill happened. Then I didn’t want to go anymore, not with my face all puffed out and cut, not with the stories Betsy Malenfant was telling around. So I quit the team, and Hollis got me a job jerking sodas in the local drugstore.

In February of my junior year I took the College Boards, paying for them with the twelve bucks I had socked away in my mattress. I got accepted at the university with a small scholarship and a good work-study job in the library. The expression on the Hollises’ faces when I showed them the financial-aid papers is the best memory of my life.

One of my “brothers,” Curt, ran away. I couldn’t have done that. I was too passive to take a step like that. I would have been back after two hours on the road. School was the only way out for me, and I took it.

The last thing Mrs. Hollis said when I left was, “You send us something when you can.” I never saw either of them again. I made good grades my freshman year and got a job that summer working

full-time in the library. I sent them a Christmas card that first year, but that was the only one.

In the first semester of my sophomore year I fell in love. It was the biggest thing that had ever happened to me. Pretty? She would have knocked you back two steps. To this day I have no idea what she saw in me. I don't even know if she loved me or not. I think she did at first. After that I was just a habit that's hard to break, like smoking or driving with your elbow poked out the window. She held me for a while, maybe not wanting to break the habit. Maybe she held me for wonder, or maybe it was just her vanity. Good boy, roll over, sit up, fetch the paper. Here's a kiss good night. It doesn't matter. For a while it was love, then it was like love, then it was over.

I slept with her twice, both times after other things had taken over for love. That fed the habit for a little while. Then she came back from the Thanksgiving break and said she was in love with a Delta Tau Delta who came from her hometown. I tried to get her back and almost made it once, but she had something she hadn't had before—perspective.

Whatever I had been building up all those years since the fire wiped out the B-movie actors who had once been my family, that broke it down. That guy's pin on her blouse.

After that, I was on-again-off-again with three or four girls who were willing to sleep with me. I could blame it on my childhood, say I never had good sexual models, but that wasn't it. I'd never had any trouble with the girl. Only now that the girl was gone.

I started being afraid of girls, a little. And it wasn't so much the ones I was impotent with as the ones I wasn't, the ones I could make it with. They made me uneasy. I kept asking myself where they were hiding whatever axes they liked to grind and when they were going to let me have it. I'm not so strange at that. You show me a married man or a man with a steady woman, and I'll show you someone who is asking himself (maybe only in the early hours of the morning or on Friday afternoon when she's off buying groceries), What is she doing

when I'm not around? What does she really think of me? And maybe most of all, How much of me has she got? How much is left? Once I started thinking about those things, I thought about them all the time.

I started to drink and my grades took a nose dive. During semester break I got a letter saying that if they didn't improve in six weeks, my second-semester scholarship check would be withheld. I and some guys I hung around with got drunk and stayed drunk for the whole holiday. On the last day we went to a whorehouse and I operated just fine. It was too dark to see faces.

My grades stayed about the same. I called the girl once and cried over the telephone. She cried too, and in a way I think that pleased her. I didn't hate her then and I don't now. But she scared me. She scared me plenty.

On February 9 I got a letter from the dean of Arts and Sciences saying I was flunking two or three courses in my major field. On February 13 I got a hesitant sort of letter from the girl. She wanted everything to be all right between us. She was planning to marry the guy from Delta Tau Delta in July or August, and I could be invited if I wanted to be. That was almost funny. What could I give her for a wedding gift? My heart with a red ribbon tied around it? My head? My cock?

On the fourteenth, Valentine's Day, I decided it was time for a change of scene. Nona came next, but you know about that.

You have to understand how she was to me if this is to do any good at all. She was more beautiful than the girl, but that wasn't it. Good looks are cheap in a wealthy country. It was the her inside. She was sexy, but the sexiness that came from her was somehow plantlike—blind sex, a kind of clinging, not-to-be-denied sex that is not so important because it is as instinctual as photosynthesis. Not like an animal but like a plant. You get that wave? I knew we would make love, that we would make it as men and women do, but that our joining would be as blunt and remote and meaningless as ivy clinging its way up a trellis in the August sun.

The sex was important only because it was unimportant.

I think—no, I'm sure—that violence was the real motive force. The violence was real and not just a dream. It was as big and as fast and as hard as Ace Merrill's '52 Ford. The violence of Joe's Good Eats, the violence of Norman Blanchette. And there was even something blind and vegetative about that. Maybe she was only a clinging vine after all, because the Venus flytrap is a species of vine, but that plant is carnivorous and will make animal motion when a fly or a bit of raw meat is placed in its jaws. And it was all real. The sporulating vine may only dream that it fornicates, but I am sure the Venus flytrap tastes that fly, relishes its diminishing struggle as its jaws close around it.

The last part was my own passivity. I could not fill up the hole in my life. Not the hole left by the girl when she said good-bye—I don't want to lay this at her door—but the hole that had always been there, the dark, confused swirling that never stopped down in the middle of me. Nona filled that hole. She made me move and act.

She made me noble.

Now maybe you understand a little of it. Why I dream of her. Why the fascination remains in spite of the remorse and the revulsion. Why I hate her. Why I fear her. And why even now I still love her.

It was eight miles from the Augusta ramp to Gardiner and we did it in a few short minutes. I grasped the nail file woodenly at my side and watched the green reflectorized sign—KEEP RIGHT FOR EXIT 14—twinkle up out of the night. The moon was gone and it had begun to spit snow.

“Wish I were going farther,” Blanchette said.

“That's all right,” Nona said warmly, and I could feel her fury buzzing and burrowing into the meat under my skull like a drill bit. “Just drop us at the top of the ramp.”

He drove up, observing the ramp speed of thirty miles an hour. I knew what I was going to do. It felt as if my legs had turned to warm lead.

The top of the ramp was lit by one overhead light. To the left I could see the lights of Gardiner against the thickening cloud cover. To the right, nothing but blackness. There was no traffic coming either way along the access road.

I got out. Nona slid across the seat, giving Norman Blanchette a final smile. I wasn't worried. She was quarterbacking the play.

Blanchette was smiling an infuriating porky smile, relieved at being rid of us. "Well, good ni—"

"Oh my purse! Don't drive off with my purse!"

"I'll get it," I told her. I leaned back into the car. Blanchette saw what I had in my hand, and the porky smile on his face froze solid.

Now lights showed on the hill, but it was too late to stop. Nothing could have stopped me. I picked up Nona's purse with my left hand. With my right I plunged the steel nail file into Blanchette's throat. He bleated once.

I got out of the car. Nona was waving the oncoming vehicle down. I couldn't see what it was in the dark and snow; all I could make out were the two bright circles of its headlamps. I crouched behind Blanchette's car, peeking through the back windows.

The voices were almost lost in the filling throat of the wind.

"... trouble, lady?"

"... father ... wind ... had a heart attack! Will you ..."

I scurried around the trunk of Norman Blanchette's Impala, bent over. I could see them now. Nona's slender silhouette and a taller form. They appeared to be standing by a pickup truck. They turned

and approached the driver's-side window of the Chevy, where Norman Blanchette was slumped over the wheel with Nona's file in his throat. The driver of the pickup was a young kid in what looked like an Air Force parka. He leaned inside. I came up behind him.

"Jesus, lady!" he said. "There's blood on this guy! What—"

I hooked my right elbow around his throat and grabbed my right wrist with my left hand. I pulled him up hard. His head connected with the top of the door and made a hollow thock! He went limp in my arms.

I could have stopped then. He hadn't gotten a good look at Nona, hadn't seen me at all. I could have stopped. But he was a busybody, a meddler, somebody else in our way, trying to hurt us. I was tired of being hurt. I strangled him.

When it was done I looked up and saw Nona spotlighted in the conflicting lights of the car and the truck, her face a grotesque rictus of hate, love, triumph, and joy. She held her arms out to me and I went into them. We kissed. Her mouth was cold but her tongue was warm. I plunged both hands into the secret hollows of her hair, and the wind screamed around us.

"Now fix it," she said. "Before someone else comes."

I fixed it. It was a slipshod job, but I knew that was all we needed. A little more time. After that it wouldn't matter. We would be safe.

The kid's body was light. I picked him up in both arms, carried him across the road, and threw him into the gully beyond the guardrails. His body tumbled loosely all the way to the bottom, head over heels, like the ragbag man Mr. Hollis had me put out in the cornfield every July. I went back to get Blanchette.

He was heavier, and bleeding like a stuck pig. I tried to pick him up, staggered three steps backward, and then he slipped out of my arms and fell onto the road. I turned him over. The new snow had stuck to his face, turning it into a skier's mask.

I bent over, grabbed him under the arms, and dragged him to the gully. His feet left trailing grooves behind him. I threw him over and watched him slide down the embankment on his back, his arms up over his head. His eyes were wide open, staring raptly at the snowflakes falling into them. If the snow kept coming, they would both be just two vague humps by the time the plows came by.

I went back across the road. Nona had already climbed into the pickup truck without having to be told which vehicle we would use. I could see the pallid smear of her face, the dark holes of her eyes, but that was all. I got into Blanchette's car, sitting in the streaks of his blood that had gathered on the nubby vinyl seat cover, and drove it onto the shoulder. I turned off the headlights, put on the fourway flashers, and got out. To anyone passing by, it would look like a motorist who had engine trouble and then walked into town to find a garage. I was very pleased with my improvisation. It was as if I had been murdering people all my life. I trotted back to the idling truck, got in behind the wheel, and pointed it toward the turnpike entrance ramp.

She sat next to me, not touching but close. When she moved I could sometimes feel a strand of her hair on my neck. It was like being touched with a tiny electrode. Once I had to put my hand out and feel her leg, to make sure she was real. She laughed quietly. It was all real. The wind howled around the windows, driving snow in great, flapping gusts.

We ran south.

Just across the bridge from Harlow as you go up 126 toward Castle Heights, you come up on a huge renovated farm that goes under the laughable title of the Castle Rock Youth League. They have twelve lanes of candlepin bowling with cranky automatic pinsetters that usually take the last three days of the week off, a few ancient pinball machines, a juke featuring the greatest hits of 1957, three Brunswick pool tables, and a Coke-and-chips counter where you also rent bowling shoes that look like they might have just come off the feet of dead winos. The name of the place is laughable because most of the

Castle Rock youth head up to the drive-in at Jay Hill at night or go to the stock-car races at Oxford Plains. The people who do hang out there are mostly toughies from Gretna, Harlow, and the Rock itself. The average is one fight per evening in the parking lot.

I started hanging out there when I was a high-school sophomore. One of my acquaintances, Bill Kennedy, was working there three nights a week and if there was nobody waiting for a table he'd let me shoot some pool for free. It wasn't much, but it was better than going back to the Hollises' house.

That's where I met Ace Merrill. Nobody much doubted that he was the toughest guy in three towns. He drove a chopped and channeled '52 Ford, and it was rumored that he could push it all the way to 130 if he had to. He'd come in like a king, his hair greased back and glistening in a perfect duck's-ass pompadour, shoot a few games of double-bank for a dime a ball (Was he good? You guess.), buy Betsy a Coke when she came in, and then they'd leave. You could almost hear a reluctant sigh of relief from those present when the scarred front door wheezed shut. Nobody ever went out in the parking lot with Ace Merrill.

Nobody, that is, but me.

Betsy Malenfant was his girl, the prettiest girl in Castle Rock, I guess. I don't think she was terrifically bright, but that didn't matter when you got a look at her. She had the most flawless complexion I had ever seen, and it didn't come out of a cosmetic bottle, either. Hair as black as coal, dark eyes, generous mouth, a body that just wouldn't quit—and she didn't mind showing it off. Who was going to drag her out back and try to stoke her locomotive while Ace was around? Nobody sane, that's who.

I fell hard for her. Not like the girl and not like Nona, even though Betsy did look like a younger version of her, but it was just as desperate and just as serious in its way. If you've ever had the worst case of puppy love going around, you know how I felt. She was seventeen, two years older than I.

I started going down there more and more often, even nights when Billy wasn't on, just to catch a glimpse of her. I felt like a birdwatcher, except it was a desperate kind of game for me. I'd go back home, lie to the Hollises about where I'd been, and climb up to my room. I'd write long, passionate letters to her, telling her everything I'd like to do to her, and then tear them up. Study halls at school I'd dream about asking her to marry me so we could run away to Mexico together.

She must have tumbled to what was happening, and it must have flattered her a little, because she was nice to me when Ace wasn't around. She'd come over and talk to me, let me buy her a Coke, sit on a stool, and kind of rub her leg against mine. It drove me crazy.

One night in early November I was just mooning around, shooting a little pool with Bill, waiting for her to come in. The place was deserted because it wasn't even eight o'clock yet, and a lonesome wind was snuffling around outside, threatening winter.

"You better lay off," Bill said, shooting the nine straight into the corner.

"Lay off what?"

"You know."

"No I don't." I scratched and Billy added a ball to the table. He ran six and while he was running them I went over to put a dime in the juke.

"Betsy Malenfant." He lined up the one carefully and sent it walking up the rail. "Charlie Hogan was telling Ace about the way you been sniffing around her. Charlie thought it was really funny, her being older and all, but Ace wasn't laughing. "

"She's nothing to me," I said through paper lips.

"She better not be," Bill said, and then a couple of guys came in and he went over to the counter and gave them a cue ball.

Ace came in around nine and he was alone. He'd never taken any notice of me before, and I'd just about forgotten what Billy said. When you're invisible you get to thinking you're invulnerable. I was playing pinball and I was pretty involved. I didn't even notice the place get quiet as people stopped bowling or shooting pool. The next thing I knew, somebody had thrown me right across the pinball machine. I landed on the floor in a heap. I got up feeling scared and sick. He had tilted the machine, wiping out my three replays. He was standing there and looking at me with not a strand of hair out of place, his garrison jacket half unzipped.

"You stop messing around," he said softly, "or I'm going to change your face."

He went out. Everybody was looking at me and I wanted to sink right down through the floor until I saw there was a kind of grudging admiration on most of their faces. So I brushed myself off, unconcerned, and put another dime in the pinball machine. The TILT light went out. A couple of guys came over and clapped me on the back before they went out, not saying anything.

At eleven, when the place closed, Billy offered me a ride home.

"You're going to take a fall if you don't watch out."

"Don't worry about me," I said.

He didn't answer.

Two or three nights later Betsy came in by herself around seven. There was one other kid there, this weird little four-eyes named Vern Tessio, who flunked out of school a couple of years before. I hardly noticed him. He was even more invisible than I was.

She came right over to where I was shooting, close enough so I could smell the clean-soap smell on her skin. It made me feel dizzy.

“I heard about what Ace did to you,” she said. “I’m not supposed to talk to you anymore and I’m not going to, but I’ve got something to make it all better.” She kissed me. Then she went out, before I could even get my tongue down from the roof of my mouth. I went back to my game in a daze. I didn’t even see Tessio when he went out to spread the word. I couldn’t see anything but her dark, dark eyes.

So later that night I ended up in the parking lot with Ace Merrill, and he beat the living Jesus out of me. It was cold, bitterly cold, and at the end I began to sob, not caring who was watching or listening, which by then was everybody. The single sodium arc lamp looked down on all of it mercilessly. I didn’t even land a punch on him.

“Okay,” he said, squatting down next to me. He wasn’t even breathing hard. He took a switchblade out of his pocket and pressed the chrome button. Seven inches of moon-drenched silver sprang into the world. “This is what you get next time. I’ll carve my name on your balls.” Then he got up, gave me one last kick, and left. I just lay there for maybe ten minutes, shivering on the hard-packed dirt. No one came to help me up or pat me on the back, not even Bill. Betsy didn’t show up to make it all better.

Finally I got up by myself and hitchhiked home. I told Mrs. Hollis I’d hitched a ride with a drunk and he drove off the road. I never went back to the bowling alley again.

I understand that Ace dropped Betsy not long after, and from then on she went downhill at a rapidly increasing rate of speed—like a pulp truck with no brakes. She picked up a case of the clap on the way. Billy said he saw her one night in the Manoir up in Lewiston, hustling guys for drinks. She had lost most of her teeth, and her nose had been broken somewhere along the line, he said. He said I would never recognize her. By then I didn’t much care one way or the other.

The pickup had no snow tires, and before we got to the Lewiston exit I had begun to skid around in the new powder. It took us over forty-five minutes to make the twenty-two miles.

The man at the Lewiston exit point took my toll card and my sixty cents. “Slippery traveling?”

Neither of us answered him. We were getting close to where we wanted to go now. If I hadn’t had that odd kind of wordless contact with her, I would have been able to tell just by the way she sat on the dusty seat of the pickup, her hands folded tightly over her purse, those eyes fixed straight ahead on the road with fierce intensity. I felt a shudder work through me.

We took Route 136. There weren’t many cars on the road; the wind was freshening and the snow was coming down harder than ever. On the other side of Harlow Village we passed a big Buick Riviera that had slewed around sideways and climbed the curb. Its fourway flashers were going and I had a ghostly double image of Norman Blanchette’s Impala. It would be drifted in with snow now, nothing but a ghostly lump in the darkness.

The Buick’s driver tried to flag me down but I went by him without slowing, spraying him with slush. My wipers were clogging with snow and I reached out and snapped at the one on my side. Some of the snow loosened and I could see a little better.

Harlow was a ghost town, everything dark and closed. I signaled right to go over the bridge into Castle Rock. The rear wheels wanted to slide out from under me, but I handled the skid. Up ahead and across the river I could see the dark shadow that was the Castle Rock Youth League building. It looked shut up and lonely. I felt suddenly sorry, sorry that there had been so much pain. And death. That was when Nona spoke for the first time since the Gardiner exit.

“There’s a policeman behind you.”

“Is he—?”

“No. His flasher is off.”

But it made me nervous and maybe that's why it happened. Route 136 makes a ninety-degree turn on the Harlow side of the river and then it's straight across the bridge into Castle Rock. I made the first turn, but there was ice on the Rock side.

"Damn—"

The rear end of the truck flirted around and before I could steer clear, it had smashed into one of the heavy steel bridge stanchions. We went sliding all the way around like kids on a Flexible Flyer, and the next thing I saw was the bright headlights of the police car behind us. He put on his brakes—I could see the red reflections in the falling snow—but the ice got him, too. He plowed right into us. There was a grinding, jarring shock as we went into the supporting girders again. I was jolted into Nona's lap, and even in that confused split second I had time to relish the smooth firmness of her thigh. Then everything stopped. Now the cop had his flasher on. It sent blue, revolving shadows chasing across the hood of the truck and the snowy steel crosswork of the Harlow-Castle Rock bridge. The dome light inside the cruiser came on as the cop got out.

If he hadn't been behind us it wouldn't have happened. That thought was playing over and over in my mind, like a phonograph needle stuck in a single flawed groove. I was grinning a strained, frozen grin into the dark as I groped on the floor of the truck's cab for something to hit him with.

There was an open toolbox. I came up with a socket wrench and laid it on the seat between Nona and me. The cop leaned in the window, his face changing like a devil's in the light from his flasher.

"Traveling a little fast for the conditions, weren't you, guy?"

"Following a little close, weren't you?" I asked. "For the conditions?"

He might have flushed. It was hard to tell in the flickering light.

"Are you lipping off to me, son?"

“I am if you’re trying to pin the dents in your cruiser on me.”

“Let’s see your driver’s license and your registration.”

I got out my wallet and handed him my license.

“Registration?”

“It’s my brother’s truck. He carries the registration in his wallet.”

“That right?” He looked at me hard, trying to stare me down. When he saw it would take a while, he looked past me at Nona. I could have ripped his eyes out for what I saw in them. “What’s your name?”

“Cheryl Craig, sir.”

“What are you doing riding around in his brother’s pickup in the middle of a snowstorm, Cheryl?”

“We’re going to see my uncle.”

“In the Rock.”

“That’s right, yes.”

“I don’t know any Craigs in Castle Rock.”

“His name is Emonds. On Bowen Hill.”

“That right?” He walked around to the back of the truck to look at the plate. I opened the door and leaned out. He was writing it down. He came back while I was still leaning out, spotlighted from the waist up in the glare of his headlights. “I’m going to ... What’s that all over you, boy?”

I didn’t have to look down to know what was all over me. I used to think that leaning out like that was just absentmindedness, but writing all of this has changed my mind. I don’t think it was

absentminded at all. I think I wanted him to see it. I held on to the socket wrench.

“What do you mean?”

He came two steps closer. “You’re hurt—cut yourself, looks like. Better—”

I swung at him. His hat had been knocked off in the crash and his head was bare. I hit him dead on, just above the forehead. I’ve never forgotten the sound that made, like a pound of butter falling onto a hard floor.

“Hurry,” Nona said. She put a calm hand on my neck. It was very cool, like air in a root cellar. My foster mother had a root cellar.

Funny I should remember that. She sent me down there for vegetables in the winter. She canned them herself. Not in real cans, of course, but in thick Mason jars with those rubber sealers that go under the lid.

I went down there one day to get a jar of waxed beans for our supper. The preserves were all in boxes, neatly marked in Mrs. Hollis’s hand. I remember that she always misspelled raspberry, and that used to fill me with a secret superiority.

On this day I went past the boxes marked “razberry” and into the corner where she kept the beans. It was cool and dark. The walls were plain dark earth and in wet weather they exuded moisture in trickling, crooked streams. The smell was a secret, dark effluvium composed of living things and earth and stored vegetables, a smell remarkably like that of a woman’s private parts. There was an old, shattered printing press in one corner that had been there ever since I came, and sometimes I used to play with it and pretend I could get it going again. I loved the root cellar. In those days—I was nine or ten—the root cellar was my favorite place. Mrs. Hollis refused to set foot in it, and it was against her husband’s dignity to go down and fetch up vegetables. So I went there and smelled that peculiar secret

earthy smell and enjoyed the privacy of its womblike confinement. It was lit by one cobwebby bulb that Mr. Hollis had strung, probably before the Boer War. Sometimes I wiggled my hands and made huge, elongated rabbits on the wall.

I got the beans and was about to go back when I heard a rustling movement under one of the old boxes. I went over and lifted it up.

There was a brown rat beneath it, lying on its side. It rolled its-head up at me and stared. Its sides were heaving violently and it bared its teeth. It was the biggest rat I had ever seen, and I leaned closer. It was in the act of giving birth. Two of its young, hairless and blind, were already nursing at its belly. Another was halfway into the world.

The mother glared at me helplessly, ready to bite. I wanted to kill it, kill all of them, squash them, but I couldn't. It was the most horrible thing I'd ever seen. As I watched, a small brown spider—a daddy longlegs, I think—crawled rapidly across the floor. The mother snatched it up and ate it.

I fled. Halfway up the stairs I fell and broke the jar of beans. Mrs. Hollis thrashed me, and I never went into the root cellar again unless I had to.

I stood looking down at the cop, remembering.

“Hurry,” Nona said again.

He was much lighter than Norman Blanchette had been, or perhaps my adrenaline was just flowing more freely. I gathered him up in both arms and carried him over to the edge of the bridge. I could barely make out the falls downstream, and upstream the GS&WM railroad trestle was only a gaunt shadow, like a scaffold. The night wind whooped and screamed, and the snow beat against my face. For a moment I held the cop against my chest like a sleeping newborn child, and then I remembered what he really was and threw him over the side and down into the darkness.

We went back to the truck and got in, but it wouldn't start. I cranked the engine until I could smell the sweetish aroma of gas from the flooded carb, and then stopped.

"Come on," I said.

We went to the cruiser. The front seat was littered with violation tags, forms, two clipboards. The shortwave under the dash crackled and sputtered.

"Unit Four, come in, Four. Do you copy?"

I reached under and turned it off, banging my knuckles on something as I searched for the right toggle switch. It was a shotgun, pump action. Probably the cop's personal property. I unclipped it and handed it to Nona. She put it on her lap. I backed the cruiser up. It was dented but otherwise not hurt. It had snow tires and they bit nicely once we got over the ice that had done the damage.

Then we were in Castle Rock. The houses, except for an occasional shanty trailer set back from the road, had disappeared. The road itself hadn't been plowed yet and there were no tracks except the ones we were leaving behind us. Monolithic fir trees, weighted with snow, towered all around us, and they made me feel tiny and insignificant, just some tiny morsel caught in the throat of this night. It was now after ten o'clock.

I didn't see much of college social life during my freshman year at the university. I studied hard and worked in the library shelving books and repairing bindings and learning how to catalogue. In the spring there was JV baseball.

Near the end of the academic year, just before finals, there was a dance at the gym. I was at loose ends, studied up for my first two tests, and I wandered down. I had the buck admission, so I went in.

It was dark and crowded and sweaty and frantic as only a college social before the ax of finals can be. There was sex in the air. You

didn't have to smell it; you could almost reach out and grab it in both hands, like a wet piece of heavy cloth. You knew that love was going to be made later on, or what passes for love. People were going to make it under bleachers and in the steam plant parking lot and in apartments and dormitory rooms. It was going to be made by desperate man/boys with the draft one step behind them and by pretty coeds who were going to drop out this year and go home and start a family. It would be made with tears and laughter, drunk and sober, stiffly and with no inhibition. But mostly it would be made quickly.

There were a few stags, but not many. It wasn't a night you needed to go anyplace stag. I drifted down by the raised bandstand. As I got closer to the sound, the beat, the music got to be a palpable thing. The group had a half circle of five-foot amplifiers behind them, and you could feel your eardrums flapping in and out with the bass signature.

I leaned up against the wall and watched. The dancers moved in prescribed patterns (as if they were trios instead of couples, the third invisible but between, being humped from the front and back), feet moving through the sawdust that had been sprinkled over the varnished floor. I didn't see anybody I knew and I began to feel lonely, but pleasantly so. I was at that stage of the evening where you fantasize that everyone is looking at you, the romantic stranger, out of the corners of their eyes.

About a half hour later I went out and got a Coke in the lobby. When I went back in somebody had started a circle dance and I was pulled in, my arms around the shoulders of two girls I had never seen before. We went around and around. There were maybe two hundred people in the circle and it covered half the gym floor. Then part of it collapsed and twenty or thirty people formed another circle in the middle of the first and started to go around the other way. It made me feel dizzy. I saw a girl who looked like Betsy Malenfant, but I knew that was a fantasy. When I looked for her again I couldn't see her or anyone who looked like her.

When the thing finally broke up I felt weak and not at all well. I made my way back over to the bleachers and sat down. The music was too loud, the air too greasy. My mind kept pitching and yawing. I could hear my heartbeat in my head, the way you do after you throw the biggest drunk of your life.

I used to think what happened next happened because I was tired and a little nauseated from going around and around, but as I said before, all this writing has brought everything into sharper focus. I can't believe that anymore.

I looked up at them again, all the beautiful, hurrying people in the semidarkness. It seemed to me that all the men looked terrified, their faces elongated into grotesque, slow-motion masks. It was understandable. The women—coeds in their sweaters, short skirts, their bell-bottoms—were all turning into rats. At first it didn't frighten me. I even chuckled. I knew what I was seeing was some kind of hallucination, and for a while I could watch it almost clinically.

Then some girl stood on tiptoe to kiss her fellow, and that was too much. Hairy, twisted face with black buckshot eyes reaching up, mouth spreading to reveal teeth ...

I left.

I stood in the lobby for a moment, half distracted. There was a bathroom down the hall, but I went past it and up the stairs.

The locker room was on the third floor and I had to run the last flight. I pulled the door open and ran for one of the bathroom stalls. I threw up amid the mixed smells of liniment, sweaty uniforms, oiled leather. The music was far away down there, the silence up here virginal. I felt comforted.

We had to come to a stop sign at Southwest Bend. The memory of the dance had left me excited for a reason I didn't understand. I began to shake.

She looked at me, smiling with her dark eyes. “Now?”

I couldn't answer her. I was shaking too badly for that. She nodded slowly, for me.

I drove onto a spur of Route 7 that must have been a logging road in the summertime. I didn't drive in too deeply because I was afraid of getting stuck. I popped off the headlights and flecks of snow began to gather silently on the windshield.

“Do you love?” she asked, almost kindly.

Some kind of sound kept escaping me, being dragged out of me. I think it must have been a close oral counterpart to the thoughts of a rabbit caught in a snare.

“Here,” she said. “Right here.”

It was ecstasy.

We almost didn't get back onto the main road. The snowplow had gone by, orange lights winking and flashing in the night, throwing up a huge wall of snow in our way.

There was a shovel in the trunk of the police car. It took me half an hour to dig out, and by then it was almost midnight. She turned on the police radio while I was doing it, and it told us what we had to know. The bodies of Blanchette and the kid from the pickup truck had been found. They suspected that we had taken the cruiser. The cop's name had been Essegian, and that's a funny name. There used to be a major-league ballplayer named Essegian—I think he played for the Dodgers. Maybe I had killed one of his relatives. It didn't bother me to know the cop's name. He had been following too close and he had gotten in our way.

We drove back onto the main road.

I could feel her excitement, high and hot and burning. I stopped long enough to clear the windshield with my arm and then we were going again.

We went through west Castle Rock and I knew without having to be told where to turn. A snow-crueted sign said it was Stackpole Road.

The plow had not been here, but one vehicle had been through before us. The tracks of its tires were still freshly cut in the blowing, restless snow.

A mile, then less than a mile. Her fierce eagerness, her need, came to me and I began to feel jumpy again. We came around a curve and there was the power truck, bright orange body and warning flashers pulsing the color of blood. It was blocking the road.

You can't imagine her rage—our rage, really—because now, after what happened, we were really one. You can't imagine the sweeping feeling of intense paranoia, the conviction that every hand was now turned against us.

There were two of them. One was a bending shadow in the darkness ahead. The other was holding a flashlight. He came toward us, his light bobbing like a lurid eye. And there was more than hate. There was fear—fear that it was all going to be snatched away from us at the last moment.

He was yelling, and I cranked down my window.

“You can't get through here! Go on back by the Bowen Road! We got a live line down here! You can't—”

I got out of the car, lifted the shotgun, and gave him both barrels. He was flung back against the orange truck and I staggered back against the cruiser. He slipped down an inch at a time, staring at me incredulously, and then he fell into the snow.

“Are there more shells?” I asked Nona.

“Yes.” She gave them to me. I broke the shotgun, ejected the spent cartridges, and put in new ones.

The guy’s buddy had straightened up and was watching incredulously. He shouted something at me that was lost in the wind. It sounded like a question but it didn’t matter. I was going to kill him. I walked toward him and he just stood there, looking at me. He didn’t move, even when I raised the shotgun. I don’t think he had any conception of what was happening. I think he thought it was a dream.

I fired one barrel and was low. A great flurry of snow exploded up, coating him. Then he bellowed a great terrified scream and ran, taking one gigantic bound over the fallen power cable in the road. I fired the other barrel and missed again. Then he was gone into the dark and I could forget him. He wasn’t in our way anymore. I went back to the cruiser.

“We’ll have to walk,” I said.

We walked past the fallen body, stepped over the spitting power line, and walked up the road, following the widely spaced tracks of the fleeing man. Some of the drifts were almost up to her knees, but she was always a little ahead of me. We were both panting.

We came over a hill and descended into a narrow dip. On one side was a leaning, deserted shed with glassless windows. She stopped and gripped my arm.

“There,” she said, and pointed across to the other side. Her grip was strong and painful even through my coat. Her face was set in a glaring, triumphant rictus. “There. There.”

It was a graveyard.

We slipped and stumbled up the banking and clambered over a snow-covered stone wall. I had been here too, of course. My real mother had come from Castle Rock, and although she and my father

had never lived there, this was where the family plot had been. It was a gift to my mother from her parents, who had lived and died in Castle Rock. During the thing with Betsy I had come here often to read the poems of John Keats and Percy Shelley. I suppose you think that was a silly, sophomoric thing to do, but I don't. Not even now. I felt close to them, comforted. After Ace Merrill beat me up I never went there again. Not until Nona led me there.

I slipped and fell in the loose powder, twisting my ankle. I got up and walked on it, using the shotgun as a crutch. The silence was infinite and unbelievable. The snow fell in soft, straight lines, mounding atop the leaning stones and crosses, burying all but the tips of the corroded flagholders that would only hold flags on Memorial Day and Veterans Day. The silence was unholy in its immensity, and for the first time I felt terror.

She led me toward a stone building set into the rise of the hill at the back of the cemetery. A vault. A snow-whited sepulcher. She had a key. I knew she would have a key, and she did.

She blew the snow away from the door's flange and found the keyhole. The sound of the turning tumblers seemed to scratch across the darkness. She leaned on the door and it swung inward.

The odor that came out at us was as cool as autumn, as cool as the air in the Hollis root cellar. I could see in only a little way. There were dead leaves on the stone floor. She entered, paused, looked back over her shoulder at me.

"No," I said.

"Do you love?" she asked, and laughed at me.

I stood in the darkness, feeling everything begin to run together—past, present, future. I wanted to run, run screaming, run fast enough to take back everything I had done.

Nona stood there looking at me, the most beautiful girl in the world, the only thing that had ever been mine. She made a gesture with her hands on her body. I'm not going to tell you what it was. You would know it if you saw it.

I went in. She closed the door.

It was dark but I could see perfectly well. The place was alight with a slowly running green fire. It ran over the walls and snaked across the leaf-littered floor in tongues. There was a bier in the center of the vault, but it was empty. Withered rose petals were scattered across it like an ancient bridal offering. She beckoned to me, then pointed to the small door at the rear. Small, unmarked door. I dreaded it. I think I knew then. She had used me and laughed at me. Now she would destroy me.

But I couldn't stop. I went to that door because I had to. The mental telegraph was still working at what I felt was glee—a terrible, insane glee—and triumph. My hand trembled toward the door. It was coated with green fire.

I opened the door and saw what was there.

It was the girl, my girl. Dead. Her eyes stared vacantly into that October vault, into my own eyes. She smelled of stolen kisses. She was naked and she had been ripped open from throat to crotch, her whole body turned into a womb. And something lived in there. The rats. I could not see them but I could hear them, rustling inside her. I knew that in a moment her dry mouth would open and she would ask me if I loved. I backed away, my whole body numb, my brain floating on a dark cloud.

I turned to Nona. She was laughing, holding her arms out to me. And with a sudden blaze of understanding I knew, I knew, I knew. The last test. The last final. I had passed it and I was free!

I turned back to the doorway and of course it was nothing but an empty stone closet with dead leaves on the floor.

I went to Nona. I went to my life.

Her arms reached around my neck and I pulled her against me. That was when she began to change, to ripple and run like wax. The great dark eyes became small and beady. The hair coarsened, went brown. The nose shortened, the nostrils dilated. Her body lumped and hunched against me.

I was being embraced by a rat.

“Do you love?” it squealed. “Do you love, do you love?”

Her lipless mouth stretched upward for mine.

I didn't scream. There were no screams left. I doubt if I will ever scream again.

It's so hot in here.

I don't mind the heat, not really. I like to sweat if I can shower. I've always thought of sweat as a good thing, a masculine thing, but sometimes, in the heat, there are bugs that bite—spiders, for instance. Did you know that the female spiders sting and eat their mates? They do, right after copulation.

Also, I've heard scurrings in the walls. I don't like that.

I've given myself writer's cramp, and the felt tip of the pen is all soft and mushy. But I'm done now. And things look different. It doesn't seem the same anymore at all.

Do you realize that for a while they almost had me believing that I did all those horrible things myself? Those men from the truck stop, the guy from the power truck who got away. They said I was alone. I was alone when they found me, almost frozen to death in that graveyard by the stones that mark my father, my mother, my brother Drake. But that only means she left, you can see that. Any fool could. But I'm

glad she got away. Truly I am. But you must realize she was with me all the time, every step of the way.

I'm going to kill myself now. It will be much better. I'm tired of all the guilt and agony and bad dreams, and also I don't like the noises in the walls. Anybody could be in there. Or anything.

I'm not crazy. I know that and trust that you do, too. If you say you aren't crazy that's supposed to mean you are, but I am beyond all those little games. She was with me, she was real. I love her. True love will never die. That's how I signed all my letters to Betsy, the ones I tore up.

But Nona was the only one I ever really loved.

It's so hot in here. And I don't like the sounds in the walls.

Do you love?

Yes, I love.

And true love will never die.

ONE FOR THE ROAD

Stephen King

It was quarter past ten and Herb Tooklander was thinking of closing for the night when the man in the fancy overcoat and the white, staring face burst into Tookey's Bar, which lies in the northern part of Falmouth. It was the tenth of January, just about the time most folks are learning to live comfortably with all the New Year's resolutions they broke, and there was one hell of a northeaster blowing outside. Six inches had come down before dark and it had been going hard and heavy since then. Twice we had seen Billy Larribee go by high in the cab of the town plow, and the second time Tookey ran him out a beer—an act of pure charity my mother would have called it, and my God knows she put down enough of Tookey's beer in her time. Billy told him they were keeping ahead of it on the main road, but the side ones were closed and apt to stay that way until next morning. The radio in Portland was forecasting another foot and a forty-mile-an-hour wind to pile up the drifts.

There was just Tookey and me in the bar, listening to the wind howl around the eaves and watching it dance the fire around on the hearth. "Have one for the road, Booth," Tookey says, "I'm gonna shut her down."

He poured me one and himself one and that's when the door cracked open and this stranger staggered in, snow up to his shoulders and in his hair, like he had rolled around in confectioner's sugar. The wind billowed a sand-fine sheet of snow in after him.

"Close the door!" Tookey roars at him. "Was you born in a barn?"

I've never seen a man who looked that scared. He was like a horse that's spent an afternoon eating fire nettles. His eyes rolled toward Tookey and he said, "My wife—my daughter—" and he collapsed on the floor in a dead faint.

"Holy Joe," Tookey says. "Close the door, Booth, would you?"

I went and shut it, and pushing it against the wind was something of a chore. Tookey was down on one knee holding the fellow's head up

and patting his cheeks. I got over to him and saw right off that it was nasty. His face was fiery red, but there were gray blotches here and there, and when you've lived through winters in Maine since the time Woodrow Wilson was President, as I have, you know those gray blotches mean frostbite.

"Fainted," Tookey said. "Get the brandy off the backbar, will you?"

I got it and came back. Tookey had opened the fellow's coat. He had come around a little; his eyes were half open and he was muttering something too low to catch.

"Pour a capful," Tookey says.

"Just a cap?" I asks him.

"That stuffs dynamite," Tookey says. "No sense overloading his carb."

I poured out a capful and looked at Tookey. He nodded. "Straight down the hatch."

I poured it down. It was a remarkable thing to watch. The man trembled all over and began to cough. His face got redder. His eyelids, which had been at half-mast, flew up like window shades. I was a bit alarmed, but Tookey only sat him up like a big baby and clapped him on the back.

The man started to retch, and Tookey clapped him again.

"Hold onto it," he says, "that brandy comes dear."

The man coughed some more, but it was diminishing now. I got my first good look at him. City fellow, all right, and from somewhere south of Boston, at a guess. He was wearing kid gloves, expensive but thin. There were probably some more of those grayish-white patches on his hands, and he would be lucky not to lose a finger or two. His coat was fancy, all right; a three-hundred-dollar job if ever

I'd seen one. He was wearing tiny little boots that hardly came up over his ankles, and I began to wonder about his toes.

"Better," he said.

"All right," Tookey said. "Can you come over to the fire?"

"My wife and my daughter," he said. "They're out there ... in the storm."

"From the way you came in, I didn't figure they were at home watching the TV," Tookey said. "You can tell us by the fire as easy as here on the floor. Hook on, Booth."

He got to his feet, but a little groan came out of him and his mouth twisted down in pain. I wondered about his toes again, and I wondered why God felt he had to make fools from New York City who would try driving around in southern Maine at the height of a northeast blizzard. And I wondered if his wife and his little girl were dressed any warmer than him.

We hiked him across to the fireplace and got him sat down in a rocker that used to be Missus Tookey's favorite until she passed on in '74. It was Missus Tookey that was responsible for most of the place, which had been written up in Down East and the Sunday Telegram and even once in the Sunday supplement of the Boston Globe. It's really more of a public house than a bar, with its big wooden floor, pegged together rather than nailed, the maple bar, the old barn-raftered ceiling, and the monstrous big fieldstone hearth. Missus Tookey started to get some ideas in her head after the Down East article came out, wanted to start calling the place Tookey's Inn or Tookey's Rest, and I admit it has sort of a Colonial ring to it, but I prefer plain old Tookey's Bar. It's one thing to get uppish in the summer, when the state's full of tourists, another thing altogether in the winter, when you and your neighbors have to trade together. And there had been plenty of winter nights, like this one, that Tookey and I had spent all alone together, drinking scotch and water or just a few beers. My own Victoria passed on in '73, and Tookey's was a place

to go where there were enough voices to mute the steady ticking of the deathwatch beetle—even if there was just Tookey and me, it was enough. I wouldn't have felt the same about it if the place had been Tookey's Rest. It's crazy but it's true.

We got this fellow in front of the fire and he got the shakes harder than ever. He hugged onto his knees and his teeth clattered together and a few drops of clear mucus spilled off the end of his nose. I think he was starting to realize that another fifteen minutes out there might have been enough to kill him. It's not the snow, it's the wind-chill factor. It steals your heat.

"Where did you go off the road?" Tookey asked him.

"S-six miles s-s-south of h-here," he said.

Tookey and I stared at each other, and all of a sudden I felt cold. Cold all over.

"You sure?" Tookey demanded. "You came six miles through the snow?"

He nodded. "I checked the odometer when we came through t-town. I was following directions ... going to see my wife's s-sister ... in Cumberland ... never been there before ... we're from New Jersey ..."

New Jersey. If there's anyone more purely foolish than a New Yorker it's a fellow from New Jersey.

"Six miles, you're sure?" Tookey demanded.

"Pretty sure, yeah. I found the turnoff but it was drifted in ... it was ..."

Tookey grabbed him. In the shifting glow of the fire his face looked pale and strained, older than his sixty-six years by ten. "You made a right turn?"

“Right turn, yeah. My wife—”

“Did you see a sign?”

“Sign?” He looked up at Tookey blankly and wiped the end of his nose. “Of course I did. It was on my instructions. Take Jointner Avenue through Jerusalem’s Lot to the 295 entrance ramp.” He looked from Tookey to me and back to Tookey again. Outside, the wind whistled and howled and moaned through the eaves. “Wasn’t that right, mister?”

“The Lot,” Tookey said, almost too soft to hear. “Oh my God.”

“What’s wrong?” the man said. His voice was rising. “Wasn’t that right? I mean, the road looked drifted in, but I thought ... if there’s a town there, the plows will be out and ... and then I ...”

He just sort of tailed off.

“Booth,” Tookey said to me, low. “Get on the phone. Call the sheriff.”

“Sure,” this fool from New Jersey says, “that’s right. What’s wrong with you guys, anyway? You look like you saw a ghost.”

Tookey said, “No ghosts in the Lot, mister. Did you tell them to stay in the car?”

“Sure I did,” he said, sounding injured. “I’m not crazy.”

Well, you couldn’t have proved it by me.

“What’s your name?” I asked him. “For the sheriff.”

“Lumley,” he says. “Gerard Lumley.”

He started in with Tookey again, and I went across to the telephone. I picked it up and heard nothing but dead silence. I hit the cutoff buttons a couple of times. Still nothing.

I came back. Tookey had poured Gerard Lumley another tot of brandy, and this one was going down him a lot smoother.

“Was he out?” Tookey asked.

“Phone’s dead.”

“Hot damn,” Tookey says, and we look at each other. Outside the wind gusted up, throwing snow against the windows.

Lumley looked from Tookey to me and back again.

“Well, haven’t either of you got a car?” he asked. The anxiety was back in his voice. “They’ve got to run the engine to run the heater. I only had about a quarter of a tank of gas, and it took me an hour and a half to ... Look, will you answer me?” He stood up and grabbed Tookey’s shirt.

“Mister,” Tookey says, “I think your hand just ran away from your brains, there.”

Lumley looked at his hand, at Tookey, then dropped it. “Maine,” he hissed. He made it sound like a dirty word about somebody’s mother. “All right,” he said. “Where’s the nearest gas station? They must have a tow truck—”

“Nearest gas station is in Falmouth Center,” I said. “That’s three miles down the road from here.”

“Thanks,” he said, a bit sarcastic, and headed for the door, buttoning his coat.

“Won’t be open, though,” I added.

He turned back slowly and looked at us.

“What are you talking about, old man?”

“He’s trying to tell you that the station in the Center belongs to Billy Larribee and Billy’s out driving the plow, you damn fool,” Tookey says patiently. “Now why don’t you come back here and sit down, before you bust a gut?”

He came back, looking dazed and frightened. “Are you telling me you can’t ... that there isn’t ... ?”

“I ain’t telling you nothing,” Tookey says. “You’re doing all the telling, and if you stopped for a minute, we could think this over.”

“What’s this town, Jerusalem’s Lot?” he asked. “Why was the road drifted in? And no lights on anywhere?”

I said, “Jerusalem’s Lot burned out two years back.”

“And they never rebuilt?” He looked like he didn’t believe it.

“It appears that way,” I said, and looked at Tookey. “What are we going to do about this?”

“Can’t leave them out there,” he said.

I got closer to him. Lumley had wandered away to look out the window into the snowy night.

“What if they’ve been got at?” I asked.

“That may be,” he said. “But we don’t know it for sure. I’ve got my Bible on the shelf. You still wear your Pope’s medal?”

I pulled the crucifix out of my shirt and showed him. I was born and raised Congregational, but most folks who live around the Lot wear something—crucifix, St. Christopher’s medal, rosary, something. Because two years ago, in the span of one dark October month, the Lot went bad. Sometimes, late at night, when there were just a few regulars drawn up around Tookey’s fire, people would talk it over. Talk around it is more like the truth. You see, people in the Lot started to disappear. First a few, then a few more, than a whole slew.

The schools closed. The town stood empty for most of a year. Oh, a few people moved in—mostly damn fools from out of state like this fine specimen here—drawn by the low property values, I suppose. But they didn't last. A lot of them moved out a month or two after they'd moved in. The others ... well, they disappeared. Then the town burned flat. It was at the end of a long dry fall. They figure it started up by the Marsten House on the hill that overlooked Jointner Avenue, but no one knows how it started, not to this day. It burned out of control for three days. After that, for a time, things were better. And then they started again.

I only heard the word "vampires" mentioned once. A crazy pulp truck driver named Richie Messina from over Freeport way was in Tookey's that night, pretty well liquored up. "Jesus Christ," this stampeder roars, standing up about nine feet tall in his wool pants and his plaid shirt and his leather-topped boots. "Are you all so damn afraid to say it out? Vampires! That's what you're all thinking, ain't it? Jesus-jumped-up-Christ in a chariot-driven sidecar! Just like a bunch of kids scared of the movies! You know what there is down there in 'Salem's Lot? Want me to tell you? Want me to tell you?"

"Do tell, Richie," Tookey says. It had got real quiet in the bar. You could hear the fire popping, and outside the soft drift of November rain coming down in the dark. "You got the floor."

"What you got over there is your basic wild dog pack," Richie Messina tells us. "That's what you got. That and a lot of old women who love a good spook story. Why, for eighty bucks I'd go up there and spend the night in what's left of that haunted house you're all so worried about. Well, what about it? Anyone want to put it up?"

But nobody would. Richie was a loudmouth and a mean drunk and no one was going to shed any tears at his wake, but none of us were willing to see him go into 'Salem's Lot after dark.

"Be screwed to the bunch of you," Richie says. "I got my four-ten in the trunk of my Chevy, and that'll stop anything in Falmouth, Cumberland, or Jerusalem's Lot. And that's where I'm goin'."

He slammed out of the bar and no one said a word for a while. Then Lamont Henry says, real quiet, “That’s the last time anyone’s gonna see Richie Messina. Holy God.” And Lamont, raised to be a Methodist from his mother’s knee, crossed himself.

“He’ll sober off and change his mind,” Tookey said, but he sounded uneasy. “He’ll be back by closin’ time, makin’ out it was all a joke.”

But Lamont had the right of that one, because no one ever saw Richie again. His wife told the state cops she thought he’d gone to Florida to beat a collection agency, but you could see the truth of the thing in her eyes—sick, scared eyes. Not long after, she moved away to Rhode Island. Maybe she thought Richie was going to come after her some dark night. And I’m not the man to say he might not have done.

Now Tookey was looking at me and I was looking at Tookey as I stuffed my crucifix back into my shirt. I never felt so old or so scared in my life.

Tookey said again, “We can’t just leave them out there, Booth.”

“Yeah. I know.”

We looked at each other for a moment longer, and then he reached out and gripped my shoulder. “You’re a good man, Booth.” That was enough to buck me up some. It seems like when you pass seventy, people start forgetting that you are a man, or that you ever were.

Tookey walked over to Lumley and said, “I’ve got a four-wheel-drive Scout. I’ll get it out.”

“For God’s sake, man, why didn’t you say so before?” He had whirled around from the window and was staring angrily at Tookey. “Why’d you have to spend ten minutes beating around the bush?”

Tookey said, very softly, “Mister, you shut your jaw. And if you get urge to open it, you remember who made that turn onto an unplowed

road in the middle of a goddamned blizzard.”

He started to say something, and then shut his mouth. Thick color had risen up in his cheeks. Tookey went out to get his Scout out of the garage. I felt around under the bar for his chrome flask and filled it full of brandy. Figured we might need it before this night was over.

Maine blizzard—ever been out in one?

The snow comes flying so thick and fine that it looks like sand and sounds like that, beating on the sides of your car or pickup. You don't want to use your high beams because they reflect off the snow and you can't see ten feet in front of you. With the low beams on, you can see maybe fifteen feet. But I can live with the snow. It's the wind I don't like, when it picks up and begins to howl, driving the snow into a hundred weird flying shapes and sounding like all the hate and pain and fear in the world. There's death in the throat of a snowstorm wind, white death—and maybe something beyond death. That's no sound to hear when you're tucked up all cozy in your own bed with the shutters bolted and the doors locked. It's that much worse if you're driving. And we were driving smack into 'Salem's Lot.

“Hurry up a little, can't you?” Lumley asked.

I said, “For a man who came in half frozen, you're in one hell of a hurry to end up walking again.”

He gave me a resentful, baffled look and didn't say anything else. We were moving up the highway at a steady twenty-five miles an hour. It was hard to believe that Billy Larrabee had just plowed this stretch an hour ago; another two inches had covered it, and it was drifting in. The strongest gusts of wind rocked the Scout on her springs. The headlights showed a swirling white nothing up ahead of us. We hadn't met a single car.

About ten minutes later Lumley gasps: “Hey! What's that?”

He was pointing out my side of the car; I'd been looking dead ahead. I turned, but was a shade too late. I thought I could see some sort of slumped form fading back from the car, back into the snow, but that could have been imagination.

"What was it? A deer?" I asked.

"I guess so," he says, sounding shaky. "But its eyes—they looked red." He looked at me. "Is that how a deer's eyes look at night?" He sounded almost as if he were pleading.

"They can look like anything," I says, thinking that might be true, but I've seen a lot of deer at night from a lot of cars, and never saw any set of eyes reflect back red.

Tookey didn't say anything.

About fifteen minutes later, we came to a place where the snowbank on the right of the road wasn't so high because the plows are supposed to raise their blades a little when they go through an intersection.

"This looks like where we turned," Lumley said, not sounding too sure about it. "I don't see the sign—"

"This is it," Tookey answered. He didn't sound like himself at all. "You can just see the top of the signpost."

"Oh. Sure." Lumley sounded relieved. "Listen, Mr. Tooklander, I'm sorry about being so short back there. I was cold and worried and calling myself two hundred kinds of fool. And I want to thank you both—"

"Don't thank Booth and me until we've got them in this car," Tookey said. He put the Scout in four-wheel drive and slammed his way through the snowbank and onto Jointner Avenue, which goes through the Lot and out to 295. Snow flew up from the mudguards. The rear end tried to break a little bit, but Tookey's been driving

through snow since Hector was a pup. He jockeyed it a bit, talked to it, and on we went. The headlights picked out the bare indication of other tire tracks from time to time, the ones made by Lumley's car, and then they would disappear again. Lumley was leaning forward, looking for his car. And all at once Tookey said, "Mr. Lumley."

"What?" He looked around at Tookey.

"People around these parts are kind of superstitious about 'Salem's Lot,'" Tookey says, sounding easy enough—but I could see the deep lines of strain around his mouth, and the way his eyes kept moving from side to side. "If your people are in the car, why, that's fine. We'll pack them up, go back to my place, and tomorrow, when the storm's over, Billy will be glad to yank your car out of the snowbank. But if they're not in the car—"

"Not in the car?" Lumley broke in sharply. "Why wouldn't they be in the car?"

"If they're not in the car," Tookey goes on, not answering, "we're going to turn around and drive back to Falmouth Center and whistle for the sheriff. Makes no sense to go wallowing around at night in a snowstorm anyway, does it?"

"They'll be in the car. Where else would they be?"

I said, "One other thing, Mr. Lumley. If we should see anybody, we're not going to talk to them. Not even if they talk to us. You understand that?"

Very slow, Lumley says, "Just what are these superstitions?"

Before I could say anything—God alone knows what I would have said—Tookey broke in. "We're there."

We were coming up on the back end of a big Mercedes. The whole hood of the thing was buried in a snowdrift, and another drift had

socked in the whole left side of the car. But the taillights were on and we could see exhaust drifting out of the tailpipe.

“They didn’t run out of gas, anyway,” Lumley said.

Tookey pulled up and pulled on the Scout’s emergency brake. “You remember what Booth told you, Lumley.”

“Sure, sure.” But he wasn’t thinking of anything but his wife and daughter. I don’t see how anybody could blame him, either.

“Ready, Booth?” Tookey asked me. His eyes held on mine, grim and gray in the dashboard lights.

“I guess I am,” I said.

We all got out and the wind grabbed us, throwing snow in our faces. Lumley was first, bending into the wind, his fancy topcoat billowing out behind him like a sail. He cast two shadows, one from Tookey’s headlights, the other from his own taillights. I was behind him, and Tookey was a step behind me. When I got to the trunk of the Mercedes, Tookey grabbed me.

“Let him go,” he said.

“Janey! Francie!” Lumley yelled. “Everything okay?” He pulled open the driver’s-side door and leaned in. “Everything—”

He froze to a dead stop. The wind ripped the heavy door right out of his hand and pushed it all the way open.

“Holy God, Booth,” Tookey said, just below the scream of the wind. “I think it’s happened again.”

Lumley turned back toward us. His face was scared and bewildered, his eyes wide. All of a sudden he lunged toward us through the snow, slipping and almost falling. He brushed me away like I was nothing and grabbed Tookey.

“How did you know?” he roared. “Where are they? What the hell is going on here?”

Tookey broke his grip and shoved past him. He and I looked into the Mercedes together. Warm as toast it was, but it wasn't going to be for much longer. The little amber low-fuel light was glowing. The big car was empty. There was a child's Barbie doll on the passenger's floormat. And a child's ski parka was crumpled over the seatback.

Tookey put his hands over his face ... and then he was gone. Lumley had grabbed him and shoved him right back into the snowbank. His face was pale and wild. His mouth was working as if he had chewed down on some bitter stuff he couldn't yet unpucker enough to spit out. He reached in and grabbed the parka.

“Francie's coat?” he kind of whispered. And then loud, bellowing: “Francie's coat!” He turned around, holding it in front of him by the little fur-trimmed hood. He looked at me, blank and unbelieving. “She can't be out without her coat on, Mr. Booth. Why ... why ... she'll freeze to death.”

“Mr. Lumley—”

He blundered past me, still holding the parka, shouting: “Francie! Janey! Where are you? Where are youuu?”

I gave Tookey my hand and pulled him onto his feet. “Are you all—”

“Never mind me,” he says. “We've got to get hold of him, Booth.”

We went after him as fast as we could, which wasn't very fast with the snow hip-deep in some places. But then he stopped and we caught up to him.

“Mr. Lumley—” Tookey started, laying a hand on his shoulder.

“This way,” Lumley said. “This is the way they went. Look!”

We looked down. We were in a kind of dip here, and most of the wind went right over our heads. And you could see two sets of tracks, one large and one small, just filling up with snow. If we had been five minutes later, they would have been gone.

He started to walk away, his head down, and Tookey grabbed him back. “No! No, Lumley!”

Lumley turned his wild face up to Tookey’s and made a fist. He drew it back ... but something in Tookey’s face made him falter. He looked from Tookey to me and then back again.

“She’ll freeze,” he said, as if we were a couple of stupid kids. “Don’t you get it? She doesn’t have her jacket on and she’s only seven years old—”

“They could be anywhere,” Tookey said. “You can’t follow those tracks. They’ll be gone in the next drift.”

“What do you suggest?” Lumley yells, his voice high and hysterical. “If we go back to get the police, she’ll freeze to death! Francie and my wife!”

“They may be frozen already,” Tookey said. His eyes caught Lumley’s. “Frozen, or something worse.”

“What do you mean?” Lumley whispered. “Get it straight, goddamn it! Tell me!”

“Mr. Lumley,” Tookey says, “there’s something in the Lot—”

But I was the one who came out with it finally, said the word I never expected to say. “Vampires, Mr. Lumley. Jerusalem’s Lot is full of vampires. I expect that’s hard for you to swallow—”

He was staring at me as if I’d gone green. “Loonies,” he whispers. “You’re a couple of loonies.” Then he turned away, cupped his hands

around his mouth, and bellowed, "FRANCIE! JANEY!" He started floundering off again. The snow was up to the hem of his fancy coat.

I looked at Tookey. "What do we do now?"

"Follow him," Tookey says. His hair was plastered with snow, and he did look a little bit loony. "I can't just leave him out here. Booth. Can you?"

"No," I says. "Guess not."

So we started to wade through the snow after Lumley as best we could. But he kept getting further and further ahead. He had his youth to spend, you see. He was breaking the trail, going through that snow like a bull. My arthritis began to bother me something terrible, and I started to look down at my legs, telling myself: A little further, just a little further, keep goin', damn it, keep goin' ...

I piled right into Tookey, who was standing spread-legged in a drift. His head was hanging and both of his hands were pressed to his chest.

"Tookey," I says, "you okay?"

"I'm all right," he said, taking his hands away. "We'll stick with him, Booth, and when he fags out he'll see reason."

We topped a rise and there was Lumley at the bottom, looking desperately for more tracks. Poor man, there wasn't a chance he was going to find them. The wind blew straight across down there where he was, and any tracks would have been rubbed out three minutes after they was made, let alone a couple of hours.

He raised his head and screamed into the night: "FRANCIE! JANEY! FOR GOD'S SAKE!" And you could hear the desperation in his voice, the terror, and pity him for it. The only answer he got was the freight-train wail of the wind. It almost seemed to be laughin' at him, saying: I took them Mister New Jersey with your fancy car and

camel's-hair topcoat. I took them and I rubbed out their tracks and by morning I'll have them just as neat and frozen as two strawberries in a deepfreeze ...

"Lumley!" Tookey bawled over the wind. "Listen, you never mind vampires or boogies or nothing like that, but you mind this! You're just making it worse for them! We got to get the—"

And then there was an answer, a voice coming out of the dark like little tinkling silver bells, and my heart turned cold as ice in a cistern.

"Jerry ... Jerry, is that you?"

Lumley wheeled at the sound. And then she came, drifting out of the dark shadows of a little copse of trees like a ghost. She was a city woman, all right, and right then she seemed like the most beautiful woman I had ever seen. I felt like I wanted to go to her and tell her how glad I was she was safe after all. She was wearing a heavy green pullover sort of thing, a poncho, I believe they're called. It floated all around her, and her dark hair streamed out in the wild wind like water in a December creek, just before the winter freeze stills it and locks it in.

Maybe I did take a step toward her, because I felt Tookey's hand on my shoulder, rough and warm. And still—how can I say it?—I yearned after her, so dark and beautiful with that green poncho floating around her neck and shoulders, as exotic and strange as to make you think of some beautiful woman from a Walter de la Mare poem.

"Janey!" Lumley cried. "Janey!" He began to struggle through the snow toward her, his arms outstretched.

"No!" Tookey cried. "No, Lumley!"

He never even looked ... but she did. She looked up at us and grinned. And when she did, I felt my longing, my yearning turn to horror as cold as the grave, as white and silent as bones in a shroud.

Even from the rise we could see the sullen red glare in those eyes. They were less human than a wolf's eyes. And when she grinned you could see how long her teeth had become. She wasn't human anymore. She was a dead thing somehow come back to life in this black howling storm.

Tookey made the sign of the cross at her. She flinched back ... and then grinned at us again. We were too far away, and maybe too scared.

"Stop it!" I whispered. "Can't we stop it?"

"Too late, Booth!" Tookey says grimly.

Lumley had reached her. He looked like a ghost himself, coated in snow like he was. He reached for her ... and then he began to scream. I'll hear that sound in my dreams, that man screaming like a child in a nightmare. He tried to back away from her, but her arms, long and bare and as white as the snow, snaked out and pulled him to her. I could see her cock her head and then thrust it forward—

"Booth!" Tookey said hoarsely. "We've got to get out of here!"

And so we ran. Ran like rats, I suppose some would say, but those who would weren't there that night. We fled back down along our own backtrail, falling down, getting up again, slipping and sliding. I kept looking back over my shoulder to see if that woman was coming after us, grinning that grin and watching us with those red eyes.

We got back to the Scout and Tookey doubled over, holding his chest. "Tookey!" I said, badly scared. "What—"

"Ticker," he said. "Been bad for five years or more. Get me around in the shotgun seat, Booth, and then get us the hell out of here."

I hooked an arm under his coat and dragged him around and somehow boosted him up and in. He leaned his head back and shut his eyes. His skin was waxy-looking and yellow.

I went back around the hood of the truck at a trot, and I damned near ran into the little girl. She was just standing there beside the driver's-side door, her hair in pigtails, wearing nothing but a little bit of a yellow dress.

"Mister," she said in a high, clear voice, as sweet as morning mist, "won't you help me find my mother? She's gone and I'm so cold—"

"Honey," I said, "honey, you better get in the truck. Your mother's—"

I broke off, and if there was ever a time in my life I was close to swooning, that was the moment. She was standing there, you see, but she was standing on top of the snow and there were no tracks, not in any direction.

She looked up at me then, Lumley's daughter Francie. She was no more than seven years old, and she was going to be seven for an eternity of nights. Her little face was a ghastly corpse white, her eyes a red and silver that you could fall into. And below her jaw I could see two small punctures like pinpricks, their edges horribly mangled.

She held out her arms at me and smiled. "Pick me up, mister," she said softly. "I want to give you a kiss. Then you can take to my mommy."

I didn't want to, but there was nothing I could do. I was leaning forward, my arms outstretched. I could see her mouth opening, I could see the little fangs inside the pink ring of her lips. Something slipped down her chin, bright and silvery, and with a dim, distant, faraway horror, I realized she was drooling.

Her small hands clasped themselves around my neck and I was thinking: Well, maybe it won't be so bad, not so bad, maybe it won't be so awful after a while—when something black flew out of the Scout and struck her on the chest. There was a puff of strange-smelling smoke, a flashing glow that was gone an instant later, and then she was backing away, hissing. Her face was twisted into a vulpine mask of rage, hate, and pain. She turned sideways and then

... and then she was gone. One moment she was there, and the next there was a twisting knot of snow that looked a little bit like a human shape. Then the wind tattered it away across the fields.

“Booth!” Tookey whispered. “Be quick, now!”

And I was. But not so quick that I didn’t have time to pick up what he had thrown at that little girl from hell. His mother’s Douay Bible.

That was some time ago. I’m a sight older now, and I was no chicken then. Herb Tooklander passed on two years ago. He went peaceful, in the night. The bar is still there, some man and his wife from Waterville bought it, nice people, and they’ve kept it pretty much the same. But I don’t go by much. It’s different somehow with Tookey gone.

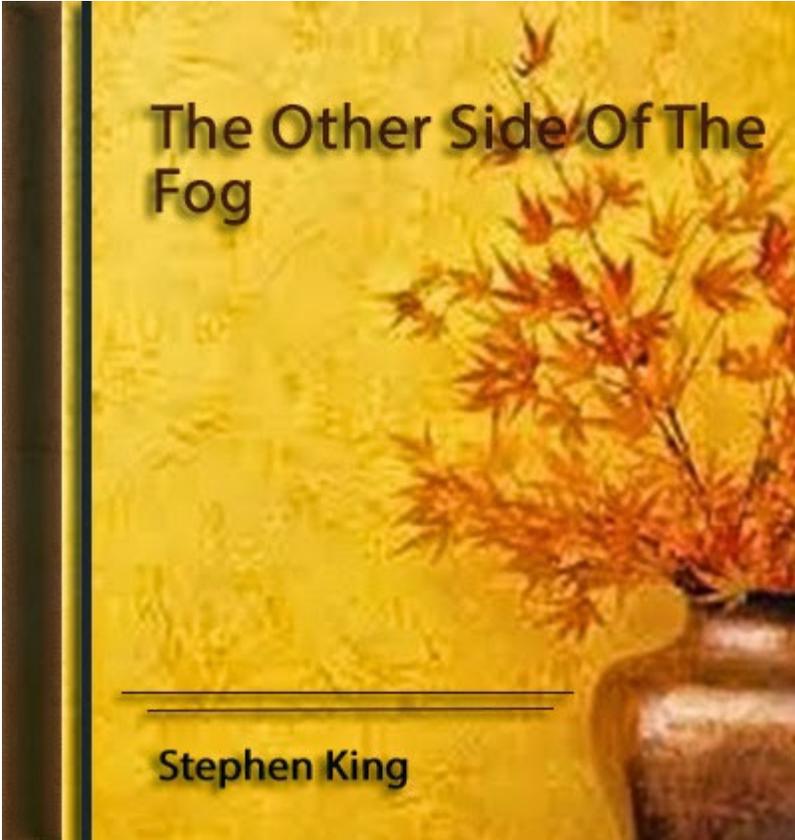
Things in the Lot go on pretty much as they always have. The sheriff found that fellow Lumley’s car the next day, out of gas, the battery dead. Neither Tookey nor I said anything about it. What would have been the point? And every now and then a hitchhiker or a camper will disappear around there someplace, up on Schoolyard Hill or out near the Harmony Hill cemetery. They’ll turn up the fellow’s packsack or a paper-back book all swollen and bleached out by the rain or snow, or some such. But never the people.

I still have bad dreams about that stormy night we went out there. Not about the woman so much as the little girl, and the way she smiled when she held her arms up so I could pick her up. So she could give me a kiss. But I’m an old man and the time comes soon when dreams are done.

You may have an occasion to be traveling in southern Maine yourself one of these days. Pretty part of the countryside. You may even stop by Tookey’s Bar for a drink. Nice place. They kept the name just the same. So have your drink, and then my advice to you is to keep right on moving north. Whatever you do, don’t go up that road to Jerusalem’s Lot.

Especially not after dark.

There's a little girl somewhere out there. And I think she's still waiting for her good-night kiss.



The Other Side Of The
Fog

Stephen King

THE OTHER SIDE OF THE FOG

Stephen King

An Pete Jacob's stepped out, the fog immediately swallowed up his house and he could see nothing but the white blanket all around him. It gave him the weird feeling of being the last man in the world.

Suddenly Pete felt dizzy. His stomach did a flip-flop. He felt like a person in a falling elevator. Then it passed and he walked on. The fog began to clear and Pete's eyes opened wide with fright, awe and wonder.

He was in the middle of the city.

But the nearest city was forty miles away!

But what a city! Pete had never seen anything like it.

Graceful buildings with high spires seemed to reach to the sky. People walked along on moving conveyor belts.

The cornerstone on a skyscraper read April, 17, 2007. Pete had walked into the future. But how?

Suddenly Pete was frightened. Horribly, terribly, frightened.

He didn't belong here. He couldn't stay. He ran after the receding fog.

A policeman in a strange uniform called angrily. Strange cars that rode six inches or so off the ground narrowly missed hitting him. But Pete succeeded. He ran back into the fog and soon everything was blanked out.

Then the feeling came again. That weird feeling of falling ... then the fog began to clear.

It looked like home ...

Suddenly there was an earsplitting screech. He turned to see a huge prehistoric brontosaurus lumbering toward him. The desire to kill was

in his small beady eyes.

Terrified, he ran into the fog again ...

The next time the fog closes in on you and you hear hurried footsteps running through the whiteness ... call out.

That would be Pete Jacobs, trying to find his side of the Fog ...

Help the poor guy.

NIGHTMARES & DREAMSCAPES
POPSY



POPSY

Stephen King

Sheridan was cruising slowly down the long blank length of the shopping mall when he saw the little kid push out through the main doors under the lighted sign which read COUSINTOWN. It was a boy-child, perhaps a big three and surely no more than five. On his face was an expression to which Sheridan had become exquisitely attuned. He was trying not to cry but soon would.

Sheridan paused for a moment, feeling the familiar soft wave of self-disgust ... though every time he took a child, that feeling grew a little less urgent. The first time he hadn't slept for a week. He kept thinking about that big greasy Turk who called himself Mr. Wizard, kept wondering what he did with the children.

"They go on a boat-ride, Mr. Sheridan," the Turk told him, only it came out Dey goo on a bot-rahd, Messtair Shurdunn. The Turk smiled. And if you know what's good for you, you won't ask any more about it, that smile said, and it said it loud and clear, without an accent.

Sheridan hadn't asked any more, but that didn't mean he hadn't kept wondering. Especially afterward. Tossing and turning, wishing he had the whole thing to do over again so he could turn it around, so he could walk away from temptation. The second time had been almost as bad... the third time a little less ... and by the fourth time he had almost stopped wondering about the bot-rahd, and what might be at the end of it for the little kids.

Sheridan pulled his van into one of the handicap parking spaces right in front of the mall. He had one of the special license plates the state gave to crips on the back of his van. That plate was worth its weight in gold, because it kept any mall security cop from getting suspicious, and those spaces were so convenient and almost always empty.

You always pretend you're not going out looking, but you always lift a crip plate a day or two before.

Never mind all that bullshit; he was in a jam and that kid over there could solve some very big problems.

He got out and walked toward the kid, who was looking around with increasing panic. Yes, Sheridan thought, he was five all right, maybe even six—just very frail. In the harsh fluorescent glare thrown through the glass doors the boy looked parchment-white, not just scared but perhaps physically ill. Sheridan reckoned it was just big fear, however. Sheridan usually recognized that look when he saw it, because he'd seen a lot of big fear in his own mirror over the last year and a half or so.

The kid looked up hopefully at the people passing around him, people going into the mall eager to buy, coming out laden with packages, their faces dazed, almost drugged, with something they probably thought was satisfaction.

The kid, dressed in Tuffskin jeans and a Pittsburgh Penguins tee-shirt, looked for help, looked for somebody to look at him and see something was wrong, looked for someone to ask the right question—You get separated from your dad, son? would do—looking for a friend.

Here I am, Sheridan thought, approaching. Here I am, sonny—I'll be your friend.

He had almost reached the kid when he saw a mall rent-a-cop ambling slowly up the concourse toward the doors. He was reaching in his pocket, probably for a pack of cigarettes. He would come out, see the boy, and there would go Sheridan's sure thing.

Shit, he thought, but at least he wouldn't be seen talking to the kid when the cop came out. That would have been worse.

Sheridan drew back a little and made a business of feeling in his own pockets, as if to make sure he still had his keys. His glance flicked from the boy to the security cop and back to the boy. The boy had started to cry. Not all-out bawling, not yet, but great big tears

that looked pinkish in the reflected glow of the red COUSINTOWN sign as they tracked down his smooth cheeks.

The girl in the information booth flagged down the cop and said something to him. She was pretty, dark-haired, about twenty-five; he was sandy-blond with a moustache. As the cop leaned on his elbows, smiling at her, Sheridan thought they looked like the cigarette ads you saw on the backs of magazines. Salem Spirit. Light My Lucky. He was dying out here and they were in there making chit-chat—whatcha doin after work, ya wanna go and get a drink at that new place, and blah-blah-blah. Now she was also batting her eyes at him. How cute.

Sheridan abruptly decided to take the chance. The kid's chest was hitching, and as soon as he started to bawl out loud, someone would notice him. Sheridan didn't like moving in with a cop less than sixty feet away, but if he didn't cover his markers at Mr. Reggie's within the next twenty-four hours, he thought a couple of very large men would pay him a visit and perform impromptu surgery on his arms, adding several elbow-bends to each.

He walked up to the kid, a big man dressed in an ordinary Van Heusen shirt and khaki pants, a man with a broad, ordinary face that looked kind at first glance. He bent over the little boy, hands on his legs just above the knees, and the boy turned his pale, scared face up to Sheridan's. His eyes were as green as emeralds, their color accentuated by the light-reflecting tears that washed them.

"You get separated from your dad, son?" Sheridan asked.

"My Popsy," the kid said, wiping his eyes. "I ... I can't find my P-P-Popsy!"

Now the kid did begin to sob, and a woman headed in glanced around with some vague concern.

"It's all right," Sheridan said to her, and she went on. Sheridan put a comforting arm around the boy's shoulders and drew him a little to

the right... in the direction of the van. Then he looked back inside.

The rent-a-cop had his face right down next to the information girl's now. Looked like maybe more than that little girl's Lucky was going to get lit tonight. Sheridan relaxed. At this point there could be a stick-up going on at the bank just up the concourse and the cop wouldn't notice a thing. This was starting to look like a cinch.

"I want my Popsy!" the boy wept.

"Sure you do, of course you do," Sheridan said. "And we're going to find him. Don't you worry."

He drew him a little more to the right.

The boy looked up at him, suddenly hopeful.

"Can you? Can you, mister?"

"Sure!" Sheridan said, and grinned heartily. "Finding lost Popsys ... well, you might say it's kind of a specialty of mine."

"It is?" The kid actually smiled a little, although his eyes were still leaking.

"It sure is," Sheridan said, glancing inside again to make sure the cop, whom he could now barely see (and who would barely be able to see Sheridan and the boy, should he happen to look up), was still enthralled. He was. "What was your Popsy wearing, son?"

"He was wearing his suit," the boy said. "He almost always wears his suit. I only saw him once in jeans." He spoke as if Sheridan should know all these things about his Popsy.

"I bet it was a black suit," Sheridan said.

The boy's eyes lit up. "You saw him! Where?"

He started eagerly back toward the doors, tears forgotten, and Sheridan had to restrain himself from grabbing the pale-faced little brat right then and there. That type of thing was no good. Couldn't cause a scene. Couldn't do anything people would remember later. Had to get him in the van. The van had sun-filter glass everywhere except in the windshield; it was almost impossible to see inside unless you had your face smashed right up against it.

Had to get him in the van first.

He touched the boy on the arm. "I didn't see him inside, son. I saw him right over there."

He pointed across the huge parking lot with its endless platoons of cars. There was an access road at the far end of it, and beyond that were the double yellow arches of McDonald's.

"Why would Popsy go over there?" the boy asked, as if either Sheridan or Popsy—or maybe both of them—had gone utterly mad.

"I don't know," Sheridan said. His mind was working fast, clicking along like an express train as it always did when it got right down to the point where you had to stop shitting and either do it up right or fuck it up righteously. Popsy. Not Dad or Daddy but Popsy. The kid had corrected him on it. Maybe Popsy meant Granddad, Sheridan decided. "But I'm pretty sure that was him. Older guy in a black suit. White hair ... green tie ..."

"Popsy had his blue tie on," the boy said. "He knows I like it the best."

"Yeah, it could have been blue," Sheridan said. "Under these lights, who can tell? Come on, hop in the van, I'll run you over there to him."

"Are you sure it was Popsy? Because I don't know why he'd go to a place where they—"

Sheridan shrugged. “Look, kid, if you’re sure that wasn’t him, maybe you better look for him on your own. You might even find him.” And he started brusquely away, heading back toward the van.

The kid wasn’t biting. He thought about going back, trying again, but it had already gone on too long—you either kept observable contact to a minimum or you were asking for twenty years in Hammerton Bay. He’d better go on to another mall. Scoterville, maybe. Or—

“Wait, mister!” It was the kid, with panic in his voice. There was the light thud of running sneakers. “Wait up! I told him I was thirsty, he must have thought he had to go way over there to get me a drink. Wait!”

Sheridan turned around, smiling. “I wasn’t really going to leave you anyway, son.”

He led the boy to the van, which was four years old and painted a nondescript blue. He opened the door and smiled at the kid, who looked up at him doubtfully, his green eyes swimming in that pallid little face, as huge as the eyes of a waif in a velvet painting, the kind they advertised in the cheap weekly tabloids like *The National Enquirer* and *Inside View*.

“Step into my parlor, little buddy,” Sheridan said, and produced a grin which looked almost entirely natural. It was really sort of creepy, how good he’d gotten at this.

The kid did, and although he didn’t know it, his ass belonged to Briggs Sheridan the minute the passenger door swung shut.

*

There was only one problem in his life. It wasn’t broads, although he liked to hear the swish of a skirt or feel the smooth smoke of silken hose as well as any man, and it wasn’t booze, although he had been known to take a drink or three of an evening. Sheridan’s problem—his fatal flaw, you might even say—was cards. Any kind of cards, as

long as it was the kind of game where wagers were allowed. He had lost jobs, credit cards, the home his mother had left him. He had never, at least so far, been in jail, but the first time he got in trouble with Mr. Reggie, he'd thought jail would be a rest-cure by comparison.

He had gone a little crazy that night. It was better, he had found, when you lost right away. When you lost right away you got discouraged, went home, watched Letterman on the tube, and then went to sleep. When you won a little bit at first, you chased. Sheridan had chased that night and had ended up owing seventeen thousand dollars. He could hardly believe it; he went home dazed, almost elated, by the enormity of it. He kept telling himself in the car on the way home that he owed Mr. Reggie not seven hundred, not seven thousand, but seventeen thousand iron men. Every time he tried to think about it he giggled and turned up the volume on the radio.

But he wasn't giggling the next night when the two gorillas—the ones who would make sure his arms bent in all sorts of new and interesting ways if he didn't pay up—brought him into Mr. Reggie's office.

"I'll pay," Sheridan began babbling at once. "I'll pay, listen, it's no problem, couple of days, a week at the most, two weeks at the outside—"

"You bore me, Sheridan," Mr. Reggie said.

"I—"

"Shut up. If I give you a week, don't you think I know what you'll do? You'll tap a friend for a couple of hundred if you've got a friend left to tap. If you can't find a friend, you'll hit a liquor store ... if you've got the guts. I doubt if you do, but anything is possible." Mr. Reggie leaned forward, propped his chin on his hands, and smiled. He smelled of Ted Lapidus cologne. "And if you do come up with two hundred dollars, what will you do with it?"

“Give it to you,” Sheridan had babbled. By then he was very close to tears. “I’ll give it to you, right away!”

“No you won’t,” Mr. Reggie said. “You’ll take it to the track and try to make it grow. What you’ll give me is a bunch of shitty excuses. You’re in over your head this time, my friend. Way over your head.”

Sheridan could hold back the tears no longer; he began to blubber.

“These guys could put you in the hospital for a long time,” Mr. Reggie said reflectively. “You would have a tube in each arm and another one coming out of your nose.”

Sheridan began to blubber louder.

“I’ll give you this much,” Mr. Reggie said, and pushed a folded sheet of paper across his desk to Sheridan. “You might get along with this guy. He calls himself Mr. Wizard, but he’s a shitbag just like you. Now get out of here. I’m gonna have you back in here in a week, though, and I’ll have your markers on this desk. You either buy them back or I’m going to have my friends tool up on you. And like Booker T. says, once they start, they do it until they’re satisfied.”

The Turk’s real name was written on the folded sheet of paper. Sheridan went to see him, and heard about the kids and the bot-rahds. Mr. Wizard also named a figure which was a fairish bit larger than the markers Mr. Reggie was holding. That was when Sheridan started cruising the malls.

*

He pulled out of the Cousintown Mall’s main parking lot, looked for traffic, then drove across the access road and into the McDonald’s in-lane. The kid was sitting all the way forward on the passenger seat, hands on the knees of his Tuffskins, eyes agonizingly alert. Sheridan drove toward the building, swung wide to avoid the drive-thru lane, and kept on going.

“Why are you going around the back?” the kid asked.

“You have to go around to the other doors,” Sheridan said. “Keep your shirt on, kid. I think I saw him in there.”

“You did? You really did?”

“I’m pretty sure, yeah.”

Sublime relief washed over the kid’s face, and for a moment Sheridan felt sorry for him—hell, he wasn’t a monster or a maniac, for Christ’s sake. But his markers had gotten a little deeper each time, and that bastard Mr. Reggie had no compunctions at all about letting him hang himself. It wasn’t seventeen thousand this time, or twenty thousand, or even twenty-five thousand. This time it was thirty-five grand, a whole damn marching battalion of iron men, if he didn’t want a few new sets of elbows by next Saturday.

He stopped in the back by the trash-compactor. Nobody was parked back here. Good. There was an elasticized pouch on the side of the door for maps and things. Sheridan reached into it with his left hand and brought out a pair of blued-steel Kreig handcuffs. The loop-jaws were open.

“Why are we stopping here, mister?” the kid asked. The fear was back in his voice, but the quality of it had changed; he had suddenly realized that maybe getting separated from good old Popsy in the busy mall wasn’t the worst thing that could happen to him, after all.

“We’re not, not really,” Sheridan said easily. He had learned the second time he’d done this that you didn’t want to underestimate even a six-year-old once he had his wind up. The second kid had kicked him in the balls and had damn near gotten away. “I just remembered I forgot to put my glasses on when I started driving. I could lose my license. They’re in that glasses-case on the floor there. They slid over to your side. Hand em to me, would you?”

The kid bent over to get the glasses-case, which was empty. Sheridan leaned over and snapped one of the cuffs on the kid's reaching hand as neat as you please. And then the trouble started. Hadn't he just been thinking it was a bad mistake to underestimate even a six-year-old? The brat fought like a timberwolf pup, twisting with a powerful muscularity Sheridan would not have credited had he not been experiencing it. He bucked and fought and lunged for the door, panting and uttering weird birdlike cries. He got the handle. The door swung open, but no domelight came on—Sheridan had broken it after that second outing.

Sheridan got the kid by the round collar of his Penguins tee-shirt and hauled him back in. He tried to clamp the other cuff on the special strut beside the passenger seat and missed. The kid bit his hand twice, bringing blood. God, his teeth were like razors. The pain went deep and sent a steely ache all the way up his arm. He punched the kid in the mouth. The kid fell back into the seat, dazed, Sheridan's blood on his lips and chin and dripping onto the ribbed neck of the tee-shirt. Sheridan locked the other cuff onto the strut and then fell back into his own seat, sucking the back of his right hand.

The pain was really bad. He pulled his hand away from his mouth and looked at it in the weak glow of the dashlights. Two shallow, ragged tears, each maybe two inches long, ran up toward his wrist from just above the knuckles. Blood pulsed in weak little rills. Still, he felt no urge to pop the kid again, and that had nothing to do with damaging the Turk's merchandise, in spite of the almost fussy way the Turk had warned him against that—demmege the goots end you demmege the velue, the Turk had said in his greasy accent.

No, he didn't blame the kid for fighting—he would have done the same. He would have to disinfect the wound as soon as he could, though, might even have to have a shot; he had read somewhere that human bites were the worst kind. Still, he couldn't help but admire the kid's guts.

He dropped the transmission into drive and pulled around the hamburger stand, past the drive-thru window, and back onto the

access road. He turned left. The Turk had a big ranch-style house in Taluda Heights, on the edge of the city. Sheridan would go there by secondary roads, just to be safe. Thirty miles. Maybe forty-five minutes, maybe an hour.

He passed a sign which read THANK YOU FOR SHOPPING THE BEAUTIFUL COUSINTOWN MALL, turned left, and let the van creep up to a perfectly legal forty miles an hour. He fished a handkerchief out of his back pocket, folded it over the back of his right hand, and concentrated on following his headlights to the forty grand the Turk had promised for a boy-child.

*

“You’ll be sorry,” the kid said.

Sheridan looked impatiently around at him, pulled from a dream in which he had just won twenty straight hands and had Mr. Reggie grovelling at his feet for a change, sweating bullets and begging him to stop, what did he want to do, break him?

The kid was crying again, and his tears still had that odd pinkish cast, even though they were now well away from the bright lights of the mall. Sheridan wondered for the first time if the kid might have some sort of communicable disease. He supposed it was a little late to start worrying about such things, so he put it out of his mind.

“When my Popsy finds you you’ll be sorry,” the kid elaborated.

“Yeah,” Sheridan said, and lit a cigarette. He turned off State Road 28 and onto an unmarked stretch of two-lane blacktop. There was a long marshy area on the left, unbroken woods on the right.

The kid pulled at the handcuffs and made a sobbing noise.

“Quit it. Won’t do you any good.”

Nevertheless, the kid pulled again. And this time there was a groaning, protesting sound Sheridan didn't like at all. He looked around and was amazed to see that the metal strut on the side of the seat—a strut he had welded in place himself—was twisted out of shape. Shit! he thought. He's got teeth like razors and now I find out he's also strong as a fucking ox. If this is what he's like when he's sick, God forbid I should have grabbed him on a day when he was feeling well.

He pulled over onto the soft shoulder and said, "Stop it!"

"I won't!"

The kid yanked at the handcuff again and Sheridan saw the metal strut bend a little more. Christ, how could any kid do that?

It's panic, he answered himself. That's how he can do it.

But none of the others had been able to do it, and many of them had been a lot more terrified than this kid by this stage of the game.

He opened the glove compartment in the center of the dash. He brought out a hypodermic needle. The Turk had given it to him, and cautioned him not to use it unless he absolutely had to. Drugs, the Turk said (pronouncing it drocks) could demmege the merchandise.

"See this?"

The kid gave the hypo a glimmering sideways glance and nodded.

"You want me to use it?"

The kid shook his head at once. Strong or not, he had any kid's instant terror of the needle, Sheridan was happy to see.

"That's very smart. It would put out your lights." He paused. He didn't want to say it—hell, he was a nice guy, really, when he didn't have his ass in a sling—but he had to. "Might even kill you."

The kid stared at him, lips trembling, cheeks papery with fear.

“You stop yanking the cuff, I put away the needle. Deal?”

“Deal,” the kid whispered.

“You promise?”

“Yes.” The kid lifted his lip, showing white teeth. One of them was spotted with Sheridan’s blood.

“You promise on your mother’s name?”

“I never had a mother.”

“Shit,” Sheridan said, disgusted, and got the van rolling again. He moved a little faster now, and not only because he was finally off the main road. The kid was a spook. Sheridan wanted to turn him over to the Turk, get his money, and split.

“My Popsy’s really strong, mister.”

“Yeah?” Sheridan asked, and thought: I bet he is, kid. Only guy in the old folks’ home who can bench-press his own truss, right?

“He’ll find me.”

“Uh-huh.”

“He can smell me.”

Sheridan believed it. He could smell the kid. That fear had an odor was something he had learned on his previous expeditions, but this was unreal—the kid smelled like a mixture of sweat, mud, and slowly cooking battery acid. Sheridan was becoming more and more sure that something was seriously wrong with the kid ... but soon that would be Mr. Wizard’s problem, not his, and caveat emptor, as those old fellows in the togas used to say; caveat fucking emptor.

Sheridan cracked his window. On the left, the marsh went on and on. Broken slivers of moonlight glimmered in the stagnant water.

“Popsy can fly.”

“Yeah,” Sheridan said, “after a couple of bottles of Night Train. I bet he flies like a sonofabitchin eagle.”

“Popsy—”

“Enough of the Popsy shit, kid—okay?”

The kid shut up.

*

Four miles farther on, the marsh on the left broadened into a wide empty pond. Sheridan made a turn onto a stretch of hardpan dirt that skirted the pond’s north side. Five miles west of here he would turn right onto Highway 41, and from there it would be a straight shot into Taluda Heights.

He glanced toward the pond, a flat silver sheet in the moonlight... and then the moonlight was gone. Blotted out.

Overhead there was a flapping sound like big sheets on a clothesline.

“Popsy!” the kid cried.

“Shut up. It was only a bird.”

But suddenly he was spooked, very spooked. He looked at the kid. The kid’s lip was drawn back from his teeth again. His teeth were very white, very big.

No... not big. Big wasn’t the right word. Long was the right word. Especially the two at the top at each side. The ... what did you call them? The canines.

His mind suddenly started to fly again, clicking along as if he were on speed.

I told him I was thirsty.

Why would Popsy go to a place where they—

(?eat was he going to say eat?)

He'll find me.

He can smell me.

Popsy can fly.

Something landed on the roof of the van with a heavy clumsy thump.

“Popsy!” the kid screamed again, almost delirious with delight, and suddenly Sheridan could not see the road anymore—a huge membranous wing, pulsing with veins, covered the windshield from side to side.

Popsy can fly.

Sheridan screamed and jumped on the brake, hoping to tumble the thing on the roof off the front. There was that groaning, protesting sound of metal under stress from his right again, this time followed by a short bitter snap. A moment later the kid's fingers were clawing into his face, pulling open his cheek.

“He stole me, Popsy!” the kid was screeching at the roof of the van in that birdlike voice. “He stole me, he stole me, the bad man stole me!”

You don't understand, kid, Sheridan thought. He groped for the hypo and found it. I'm not a bad guy, I just got in a jam.

Then a hand, more like a talon than a real hand, smashed through the side window and ripped the hypo from Sheridan's grasp—along with two of his fingers. A moment later Popsy peeled the entire

driver's-side door out of its frame, the hinges now bright twists of meaningless metal. Sheridan saw a billowing cape, black on the outside, lined with red silk on the inside, and the creature's tie ... and although it was actually a cravat, it was blue all right—just as the boy had said.

Popsy yanked Sheridan out of the car, talons sinking through his jacket and shirt and deep into the meat of his shoulders; Popsy's green eyes suddenly turned as red as blood-roses.

“We came to the mall because my grandson wanted some Ninja Turtle figures,” Popsy whispered, and his breath was like flyblown meat. “The ones they show on TV. All the children want them. You should have left him alone. You should have left us alone.”

Sheridan was shaken like a rag doll. He shrieked and was shaken again. He heard Popsy asking solicitously if the kid was still thirsty; heard the kid saying yes, very, the bad man had scared him and his throat was so dry. He saw Popsy's thumbnail for just a second before it disappeared under the shelf of his chin, the nail ragged and thick. His throat was cut with that nail before he realized what was happening, and the last things he saw before his sight dimmed to black were the kid, cupping his hands to catch the flow the way Sheridan himself had cupped his hands under the backyard faucet for a drink on a hot summer day when he was a kid, and Popsy, stroking the boy's hair gently, with grandfatherly love.



PREMIUM HARMONY

Stephen King

They've been married for ten years and for a long time everything was O.K.—swell—but now they argue. Now they argue quite a lot. It's really all the same argument. It has circularity. It is, Ray thinks, like a dog track. When they argue, they're like greyhounds chasing the mechanical rabbit. You go past the same scenery time after time, but you don't see it. You see the rabbit.

He thinks it might be different if they'd had kids, but she couldn't. They finally got tested, and that's what the doctor said. It was her problem. A year or so after that, he bought her a dog, a Jack Russell she named Biznezz. She'd spell it for people who asked. She loves that dog, but now they argue anyway.

They're going to Wal-Mart for grass seed. They've decided to sell the house—they can't afford to keep it—but Mary says they won't get far until they do something about the plumbing and get the lawn fixed. She says those bald patches make it look shanty Irish. It's because of the drought. It's been a hot summer and there's been no rain to speak of. Ray tells her grass seed won't grow without rain no matter how good it is. He says they should wait.

"Then another year goes by and we're still there," she says. "We can't wait another year, Ray. We'll be bankrupts."

When she talks, Biz looks at her from his place in the back seat. Sometimes he looks at Ray when Ray talks, but not always. Mostly he looks at Mary.

"What do you think?" he says. "It's going to rain just so you don't have to worry about going bankrupt?"

"We're in it together, in case you forgot," she says. They're driving through Castle Rock now. It's pretty dead. What Ray calls "the economy" has disappeared from this part of Maine. The Wal-Mart is on the other side of town, near the high school where Ray is a janitor. The Wal-Mart has its own spotlight. People joke about it.

“Penny wise and pound foolish,” he says. “You ever hear that one?”

“A million times, from you.”

He grunts. He can see the dog in the rearview mirror, watching her. He sort of hates the way Biz does that. It occurs to him that neither of them knows what they are talking about.

“And pull in at the Quik-Pik,” she says. “I want to get a kickball for Tallie’s birthday.” Tallie is her brother’s little girl. Ray supposes that makes her his niece, although he’s not sure that’s right, since all the blood is on Mary’s side.

“They have balls at Wal-Mart,” Ray says. “And everything’s cheaper at Wally World.”

“The ones at Quik-Pik are purple. Purple is her favorite color. I can’t be sure there’ll be purple at Wal-Mart.”

“If there aren’t, we’ll stop at the Quik-Pik on the way back.” He feels a great weight pressing down on his head. She’ll get her way. She always does on things like this. He sometimes thinks marriage is like a football game and he’s quarterbacking the underdog team. He has to pick his spots. Make short passes.

“It’ll be on the wrong side coming back,” she says—as if they are caught in a torrent of city traffic instead of rolling through an almost deserted little town where most of the stores are for sale. “I’ll just dash in and get the ball and dash right back out.”

At two hundred pounds, Ray thinks, your dashing days are over.

“They’re only ninety-nine cents,” she says. “Don’t be such a pinchpenny.”

Don’t be so pound foolish, he thinks, but what he says is “Buy me a pack of smokes while you’re in there. I’m out.”

“If you quit, we’d have an extra forty dollars a week. Maybe more.”

He saves up and pays a friend in South Carolina to ship him a dozen cartons at a time. They're twenty dollars a carton cheaper in South Carolina. That's a lot of money, even in this day and age. It's not like he doesn't try to economize. He has told her this before and will again, but what's the point? In one ear, out the other.

"I used to smoke two packs a day," he says. "Now I smoke less than half a pack." Actually, most days he smokes more. She knows it, and Ray knows she knows it. That's marriage after a while. The weight on his head gets a little heavier. Also, he can see Biz still looking at her. He feeds the damn dog, and he makes the money that pays for the food, but it's her he's looking at. And Jack Russells are supposed to be smart.

He turns into the Quik-Pik.

"You ought to buy them on Indian Island if you've got to have them," she says.

"They haven't sold tax-free smokes on the rez for ten years," he says. "I've told you that, too. You don't listen." He pulls past the gas pumps and parks beside the store. There's no shade. The sun is directly overhead. The car's air-conditioner only works a little. They are both sweating. In the back seat, Biz is panting. It makes him look like he's grinning.

"Well, you ought to quit," Mary says.

"And you ought to quit those Little Debbies," he says. He doesn't want to say this—he knows how sensitive she is about her weight—but out it comes. He can't hold it back. It's a mystery.

"I don't eat those no more," she says. "Any, I mean. Anymore."

"Mary, the box is on the top shelf. A twenty-four-pack. Behind the flour."

“Were you snooping?” A flush rises in her cheeks, and he sees how she looked when she was still beautiful. Good-looking, anyway. Everybody said she was good-looking, even his mother, who didn’t like her otherwise.

“I was hunting for the bottle opener,” he says. “I had a bottle of cream soda. The kind with the old-fashioned cap.”

“Looking for it on the top shelf of the goddam cupboard!”

“Go in and get the ball,” he says. “And get me some smokes. Be a sport.”

“Can’t you wait until we get home? Can’t you even wait that long?”

“You can get the cheap ones,” he says. “That off-brand. Premium Harmony, they’re called.” They taste like homemade shit, but all right. If she’ll only shut up about it.

“Where are you going to smoke, anyway? In the car, I suppose, so I have to breathe it.”

“I’ll open the window. I always do.”

“I’ll get the ball. Then I’ll come back. If you still feel you have to spend four dollars and fifty cents to poison your lungs, you can go in. I’ll sit with the baby.”

Ray hates it when she calls Biz the baby. He’s a dog, and he may be as bright as Mary likes to boast when they have company, but he still shits outside and licks where his balls used to be.

“Buy a few Twinkies while you’re at it,” he tells her. “Or maybe they’re having a special on Ho Hos.”

“You’re so mean,” she says. She gets out of the car and slams the door. He’s parked too close to the concrete cube of a building and she has to sidle until she’s past the trunk of the car, and he knows she knows he’s looking at her, seeing how she’s now so big she has

to sidle. He knows she thinks he parked close to the building on purpose, to make her sidle, and maybe he did.

“Well, Biz, old buddy, it’s just you and me.”

Biz lies down on the back seat and closes his eyes. He may stand up on his back paws and shuffle around for a few seconds when Mary puts on a record and tells him to dance, and if she tells him (in a jolly voice) that he’s a bad boy he may go into the corner and sit facing the wall, but he still shits outside.

He sits there and she doesn’t come out. Ray opens the glove compartment. He paws through the rat’s nest of papers, looking for some cigarettes he might have forgotten, but there aren’t any. He does find a Hostess Sno Ball still in its wrapper. He pokes it. It’s as stiff as a corpse. It’s got to be a thousand years old. Maybe older. Maybe it came over on the Ark.

“Everybody has his poison,” he says. He unwraps the Sno Ball and tosses it into the back seat. “Want that, Biz?”

Biz snarks the Sno Ball in two bites. Then he sets to work licking up bits of coconut off the seat. Mary would pitch a bitch, but Mary’s not here.

Ray looks at the gas gauge and sees it’s down to half. He could turn off the motor and roll down the windows, but then he’d really bake. Sitting here in the sun, waiting for her to buy a purple plastic kickball for ninety-nine cents when he knows they could get one for seventy-nine cents at Wal-Mart. Only that one might be yellow or red. Not good enough for Tallie. Only purple for the princess.

He sits there and Mary doesn’t come back. “Christ on a pony!” he says. Cool air trickles from the vents. He thinks again about turning off the engine, saving some gas, then thinks, Fuck it. She won’t weaken and bring him the smokes, either. Not even the cheap off-brand. This he knows. He had to make that remark about the Little Debbies.

He sees a young woman in the rearview mirror. She's jogging toward the car. She's even heavier than Mary; great big tits shuffle back and forth under her blue smock. Biz sees her coming and starts to bark.

Ray cracks the window an inch or two.

"Are you with the blond-haired woman who just came in? She your wife?" She puffs the words. Her face shines with sweat.

"Yes. She wanted a ball for our niece."

"Well, something's wrong with her. She fell down. She's unconscious. Mr. Ghosh thinks she might have had a heart attack. He called 911. You better come."

Ray locks the car and follows her into the store. It's cold inside. Mary is lying on the floor with her legs spread and her arms at her sides. She's next to a wire cylinder full of kickballs. The sign over the wire cylinder says "Hot Fun in the Summertime." Her eyes are closed. She might be sleeping there on the linoleum. Three people are standing over her. One is a dark-skinned man in khaki pants and a white shirt. A nametag on the pocket of his shirt says "MR. GHOSH MANAGER." The other two are customers. One is a thin old man without much hair. He's in his seventies at least. The other is a fat woman. She's fatter than Mary. Fatter than the girl in the blue smock, too. Ray thinks by rights she's the one who should be lying on the floor.

"Sir, are you this lady's husband?" Mr. Ghosh asks.

"Yes," Ray says. That doesn't seem to be enough. "Yes, I am."

"I am sorry to say, but I think she might be dead," Mr. Ghosh says. "I gave the artificial respiration and the mouth-to-mouth, but ..."

Ray thinks of the dark-skinned man putting his mouth on Mary's. French-kissing her, sort of. Breathing down her throat right next to the wire cylinder full of plastic kickballs. Then he kneels down.

“Mary,” he says. “Mary!” Like he’s trying to wake her up after a hard night.

She doesn’t appear to be breathing, but you can’t always tell. He puts his ear by her mouth and hears nothing. He feels air on his skin, but that’s probably just the air-conditioning.

“This gentleman called 911,” the fat woman says. She’s holding a bag of Bugles.

“Mary!” Ray says. Louder this time, but he can’t quite bring himself to shout, not down on his knees with people standing around. He looks up and says, apologetically, “She never gets sick. She’s healthy as a horse.”

“You never know,” the old man says. He shakes his head.

“She just fell down,” the young woman in the blue smock says. “Not a word.”

“Did she grab her chest?” the fat woman with the Bugles asks.

“I don’t know,” the young woman says. “I guess not. Not that I saw. She just fell down.”

There’s a rack of souvenir T-shirts near the kickballs. They say things like “My Parents Were Treated Like Royalty in Castle Rock and All I Got Was This Lousy Tee-Shirt.” Mr. Ghosh takes one and says, “Would you like me to cover her face, sir?”

“God, no!” Ray says, startled. “She might only be unconscious. We’re not doctors.” Past Mr. Ghosh, he sees three kids, teen-agers, looking in the window. One has a cell phone. He’s using it to take a picture.

Mr. Ghosh follows Ray’s look and rushes at the door, flapping his hands. “You kids get out of here! You kids get out!”

Laughing, the teen-agers shuffle backward, then turn and jog past the gas pumps to the sidewalk. Beyond them, the nearly deserted downtown shimmers. A car goes by pulsing rap. To Ray, the bass sounds like Mary's stolen heartbeat.

"Where's the ambulance?" the old man says. "How come it's not here yet?"

Ray kneels by his wife while the time goes by. His back hurts and his knees hurt, but if he gets up he'll look like a spectator.

The ambulance turns out to be a Chevy Suburban painted white with orange stripes. The red jackpot lights are flashing. "CASTLE COUNTY RESCUE" is printed across the front, only backward, so you can read it in your rearview mirror.

The two men who come in are dressed in white. They look like waiters. One pushes an oxygen tank on a dolly. It's a green tank with an American-flag decal on it. "Sorry," he says. "Just cleared a car accident over in Oxford."

The other one sees Mary lying on the floor. "Aw, gee," he says.

Ray can't believe it. "Is she still alive?" he asks. "Is she just unconscious? If she is, you better give her oxygen or she'll have brain damage."

Mr. Ghosh shakes his head. The young woman in the blue smock starts to cry. Ray wants to ask her what she's crying about, then knows. She has made up a whole story about him from what he just said. Why, if he came back in a week or so and played his cards right, she might toss him a mercy fuck. Not that he would, but he sees that maybe he could. If he wanted to.

Mary's eyes don't react to the ophthalmoscope. One E.M.T. listens to her nonexistent heartbeat, and the other takes her nonexistent blood pressure. It goes on like that for a while. The teen-agers come back with some of their friends. Other people, too. Ray guesses they're

being drawn by the flashing red lights on top of the Suburban the way bugs are drawn to a porch light. Mr. Ghosh takes another run at them, flapping his arms. They back away again. Then, when Mr. Ghosh returns to the circle around Mary and Ray, they come back.

One of the E.M.T.s says to Ray, "She was your wife?"

"Right."

"Well, sir, I'm sorry to say that she's dead."

"Mary, Mother of God," the fat lady with the Bugles says. She crosses herself.

"Oh." Ray stands up. His knees crack. "They told me she was."

Mr. Ghosh offers one of the E.M.T.s the souvenir T-shirt to put over Mary's face, but the E.M.T. shakes his head and goes outside. He tells the little crowd that there's nothing to see, as if anyone's going to believe a dead woman on the Quik-Pik floor isn't interesting.

The E.M.T. yanks a gurney from the back of the rescue vehicle. He does it with a single flip of the wrist. The legs fold down all by themselves. The old man with the thinning hair holds the door open and the E.M.T. pulls his rolling deathbed inside.

"Whoo, hot," the E.M.T. says, wiping his forehead.

"You may want to turn away for this part, sir," the other one says, but Ray watches as they lift her onto the gurney. A sheet has been tucked down at the end of it. They pull it up all the way, until it's over her face. Now Mary looks like a corpse in a movie. They roll her out into the heat. This time, the fat woman with the Bugles holds the door for them. The crowd has retreated to the sidewalk. There must be three dozen people standing in the unrelieved August sunshine.

When Mary is stored, the E.M.T.s come back. One is holding a clipboard. He asks Ray about twenty-five questions. Ray can answer

all but the one about her age. Then he remembers she's three years younger than he is and tells them thirty-five.

"We're going to take her to St. Stevie's," the E.M.T. with the clipboard says. "You can follow us if you don't know where that is."

"I know," Ray says. "What? Do you want to do an autopsy? Cut her up?"

The girl in the blue smock gives a gasp. Mr. Ghosh puts his arm around her, and she puts her face against his white shirt. Ray wonders if Mr. Ghosh is fucking her. He hopes not. Not because of Mr. Ghosh's brown skin but because he's got to be twice her age.

"Well, that's not our decision," the E.M.T. says, "but probably not. She didn't die unattended—"

"I'll say," the woman with the Bugles interjects.

"—and it's pretty clearly a heart attack. You can probably have her released to the mortuary almost immediately."

Mortuary? An hour ago they were in the car, arguing. "I don't have a mortuary," Ray says. "Not a mortuary, a burial plot, nothing. What the hell? She's thirty-five."

The two E.M.T.s exchange a look. "Mr. Burkett, there'll be someone to help you with all that at St. Stevie's. Don't worry about it."

The E.M.T. wagon pulls out with the lights still flashing but the siren off. The crowd on the sidewalk starts to break up. The counter girl, the old man, the fat woman, and Mr. Ghosh look at Ray as though he's someone special. A celebrity.

"She wanted a purple kickball for our niece," he says. "She's having a birthday. She'll be eight. Her name is Talia. Tallie for short. She was named for an actress."

Mr. Ghosh takes a purple kickball from the wire rack and holds it out to Ray in both hands. "On the house," he says.

"Thank you, sir," Ray says, trying to sound equally solemn, and the woman with the Bugles bursts into tears. "Mary, Mother of God," she says. She likes that one.

They stand around for a while, talking. Mr. Ghosh gets sodas from the cooler. These are also on the house. They drink their sodas and Ray tells them a few things about Mary. He tells them how she made a quilt that took third prize at the Castle County fair. That was in '02. Or maybe '03.

"That's so sad," the woman with the Bugles says. She has opened them and shared them around. They eat and drink.

"My wife went in her sleep," the old man with the thinning hair says. "She just laid down on the sofa and never woke up. We were married thirty-seven years. I always expected I'd go first, but that's not the way the good Lord wanted it. I can still see her laying there on the sofa."

Finally, Ray runs out of things to tell them, and they run out of things to tell him. Customers are coming in again. Mr. Ghosh waits on some, and the woman in the blue smock waits on others. Then the fat woman says she really has to go. She gives Ray a kiss on the cheek before she does.

"Now you need to see to your business, Mr. Burkett," she tells him. Her tone is both reprimanding and flirtatious.

He looks at the clock over the counter. It's the kind with a beer advertisement on it. Almost two hours have gone by since Mary went sidling between the car and the cinder-block side of the Quik-Pik. And for the first time he thinks of Biz.

When he opens the door, heat rushes out at him, and when he puts his hand on the steering wheel to lean in he pulls it back with a cry.

It's got to be a hundred and thirty in there. Biz is dead on his back. His eyes are milky. His tongue is protruding from the side of his mouth. Ray can see the wink of his teeth. There are little bits of coconut caught in his whiskers. That shouldn't be funny, but it is. Not funny enough to laugh at, but funny.

"Biz, old buddy," he says. "I'm sorry. I forgot you were in here."

Great sadness and amusement sweep over him as he looks at the baked Jack Russell. That anything so sad should be funny is just a crying shame.

"Well, you're with her now, ain't you?" he says, and this is so sad that he begins to cry. It's a hard storm. While he's crying, it comes to him that now he can smoke all he wants, and anywhere in the house. He can smoke right there at her dining-room table.

"You're with her now, Biz," he says again through his tears. His voice is clogged and thick. It's a relief to sound just right for the situation. "Poor old Mary, poor old Biz. Damn it all!"

Still crying, and with the purple kickball still tucked under his arm, he goes back into the Quik-Pik. He tells Mr. Ghosh he forgot to get cigarettes. He thinks maybe Mr. Ghosh will give him a pack of Premium Harmonys on the house as well, but Mr. Ghosh's generosity doesn't stretch that far. Ray smokes all the way to the hospital with the windows shut and the air-conditioning on.



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QUITTERS, INC.

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

‘Jimmy? Jimmy McCann?’

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

‘Dick Morrison?’

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

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

‘Bourbon and bitters,’ Morrison said. He hooked his feet around a bar stool and lighted a cigarette.

‘Meeting someone, Jimmy?’

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

‘Are you still with Crager and Barton?’

‘Executive veep now.’

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

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

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

'Sure,' he said, and gulped at his drink when it came. 'I wasn't in very good shape,' McCann said.

'Personal problems with Sharon, my dad died - heart attack - and I'd developed this hacking cough.

Bobby Crager dropped by my office one day and gave me a fatherly little pep talk. Do you remember what those are like?'

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

McCann laughed. 'You know it. Well, to put the capper on it, the doc told me I had an incipient ulcer.

He told me to quit smoking.' McCann grimaced. 'Might as well tell me to quit breathing.'

Morrison nodded in perfect understanding. Non-smokers could afford to be smug. He looked at his own cigarette with distaste and stubbed it out, knowing he would be lighting another in five minutes.

'Did you quit?' He asked.

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

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

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

QUITTERS, INC.

Stop Going Up in Smoke!

237 East 46th Street

Treatments by Appointment

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

'How?'

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

'Huh? Why not?'

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

'You signed a contract?'

McCann nodded.

'And on the basis of that -'

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

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

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

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

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

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

'No.'

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

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

'Nooo, but -'

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

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

'Did you put on any weight?'

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

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

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

The card fell out of his wallet and on to another bar a month later. He had left the office early and had come here to drink the afternoon away. Things had not been going so well at the Morton Agency. In fact, things were bloody horrible.

He gave Henry a ten to pay for his drink, then picked up the small card and reread it - 237 East Forty-sixth Street was only two blocks

over; it was a cool, sunny October day outside, and maybe, just for chuckles -When Henry brought his change, he finished his drink and then went for a walk.

Quitters, Inc., was in a new building where the monthly rent on office space was probably close to Morrison's yearly salary. From the directory in the lobby, it looked to him like their offices took up one whole floor, and that spelled money. Lots of it.

He took the elevator up and stepped off into a lushly carpeted foyer and from there into a gracefully appointed reception room with a wide window that looked out on the scurrying bugs below. Three men and one woman sat in the chairs along the walls, reading magazines. Business types, all of them. Morrison went to the desk.

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

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

'Richard Morrison.'

Clack-clackety-clack. But very muted clacks; the typewriter was an IBM.

'Your address?'

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

'Married?'

'Yes.'

'Children?'

'One.' He thought of Alvin and frowned slightly. 'One' was the wrong word. 'A half' might be better. His son was mentally retarded and

lived at a special school in New Jersey.

‘Who recommended us to you, Mr Morrison?’

‘An old school friend. James McCann.’

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

‘All right.’

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

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

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

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

Morrison walked through the door beyond her desk and found himself in an indirectly lit hallway. A heavy-set man with white hair that looked phoney shook his hand, smiled affably, and said, ‘Follow me, Mr Morrison.’

He led Morrison past a number of closed, unmarked doors and then opened one of them about halfway down the hall with a key. Beyond the door was an austere little room walled with drilled white cork

panels. The only furnishings were a desk with a chair on either side. There was what appeared to be a small oblong window in the wall behind the desk, but it was covered with a short green curtain. There was a picture on the wall to Morrison's left - a tall man with iron-grey hair. He was holding a sheet of paper in one hand. He looked vaguely familiar.

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

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

'Have a seat.'

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

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

'Yes,' he said.

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

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

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

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

'Good,' Morrison said blankly.

'We employ no drugs. We employ no Dale Carnegie people to sermonize you. We recommend no special diet. And we accept no payment until you have stopped smoking for one year.'

'My God,' Morrison said.

'Mr McCann didn't tell you that?'

'No.'

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

'He's fine.'

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

'Yes?' Morrison asked noncommittally.

'What is your wife's name?'

'Lucinda Morrison. Her maiden name was Ramsey.'

'Do you love her?'

Morrison looked up sharply, but Donatti was looking at him blandly.

'Yes, of course,' he said.

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

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

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

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

'You just have the one child?'

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

'And which school is it?'

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

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

'How nice,' Morrison said, and stood.

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

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

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

'Is that right?'

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

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

In the end, something Jimmy McCann had said convinced him to keep the appointment - It changed my

whole life. God knew his own life could do with some changing. And then there was his own curiosity.

Before going up in the elevator, he smoked a cigarette down to the filter. Too damn bad if it's the last one, he thought. It tasted horrible.

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

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

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

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

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

'Yes.'

'May I have them, please?'

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

Donatti put the pack on the desk. Then, smiling into Morrison's eyes, he curled his right hand into a fist and began to hammer it down on the pack of cigarettes, which twisted and flattened. A broken cigarette end flew out. Tobacco crumbs spilled. The sound of Donatti's fist was very loud in the closed room. The smile remained

on his face in spite of the force of the blows, and Morrison was chilled by it. Probably just the effect they want to inspire, he thought.

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

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

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

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

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

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

'Stay a bit longer.'

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

'All right. But it better be good.'

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

Extraordinary.'

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

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

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

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

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

'During World War I, when no one on the German home front could get cigarettes, the sight of German aristocrats picking butts out of the gutter was a common one. During World War II, many American women turned to pipes when they were unable to obtain cigarettes. A fascinating problem for the true pragmatist, Mr Morrison.'

'Could we get to the treatment?'

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

'Pretty bunny,' Morrison commented.

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

'Stop that! You're electrocuting him!'

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

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

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

Light dawned in Morrison's head.

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

'Wait, please, Morrison.'

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

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

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

'Sit down.' The voice was as cold as shaved ice.

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

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

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

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

'You're crazy,' Morrison said wonderingly.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Morrison looked at him dumbly.

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

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

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

Quitters, Inc., according to Donatti, was a sort of foundation - a non-profit organization begun by the man in the wall portrait. The gentleman had been extremely successful in several family businesses -

including slot machines, massage parlours, numbers, and a brisk (although clandestine) trade between New York and Turkey. Mort 'Three-Fingers' Minelli had been a heavy smoker - up in the three-pack-a-day range. The paper he was holding in the picture was a doctor's diagnosis: lung cancer.

Mort had died in 1970, after endowing Quitters, Inc., with family funds.

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

The treatment was chillingly simple. A first offence and Cindy would be brought to what Donatti called

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

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

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

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

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

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

'What do you mean?'

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

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

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

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

Quitters, Inc., Donatti had explained further, operated on a ten-step punishment scale. Steps six, seven, and eight consisted of further trips to the rabbit room (and increased voltage) and more serious beatings.

The ninth step would be the breaking of his son's arms.

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

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

'You really give up?'

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

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

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

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

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

'Since three o'clock this afternoon.'

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He slept badly that night, dozing in and out of sleep. Around three o'clock he woke up completely. His

craving for a cigarette was like a low-grade fever. He went downstairs and to his study. The room was in the middle of the house. No windows. He slid open the top drawer of his desk and looked in, fascinated by the cigarette box. He looked around and licked his lips.

Constant supervision during the first month, Donatti had said. Eighteen hours a day during the next two -

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

For the rest of his life.

'We may audit you every other month,' Donatti said. 'Or every other day. Or constantly for one week two years from now. The point is, you won't know. If you smoke, you'll be gambling with loaded dice.

Are they watching? Are they picking up my wife or sending a man after my son right now? Beautiful, isn't it? And if you do sneak a smoke, it'll taste awful. It will taste like your son's blood.'

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

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

He cursed himself for getting into this. He cursed Donatti. And most of all, he cursed Jimmy McCann.

How could he have done it? The son of a bitch had known. His hands trembled in their desire to get hold of Jimmy Judas McCann.

Stealthily, he glanced around the study again. He reached into the drawer and brought out a cigarette.

He caressed it, fondled it. What was that old slogan? So round, so firm, so fully packed. Truer words had never been spoken. He put the cigarette in his mouth and then paused, cocking his head.

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

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

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

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

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

'No.'

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

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

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

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

Morrison held her tightly.

Scenes from the life of Richard Morrison, October-November: Morrison and a crony from Larkin Studios at Jack Dempsey's bar. Crony offers a cigarette. Morrison grips his glass a little more tightly and says: I'm quitting. Crony laughs and says: I give you a week.

Morrison waiting for the morning train, looking over the top of the Times at a young man in a blue suit.

He sees the young man almost every morning now, and sometimes at other places. At Onde's, where he is meeting a client. Looking at 45s in Sam Goody's, where Morrison is looking for a Sam Cooke album.

Once in a foursome behind Morrison's group at the local golf course.

Morrison getting drunk at a party, wanting a cigarette -but not quite drunk enough to take one.

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

Morrison losing the physical compulsion to smoke little by little, but never quite losing the psychological craving, or the need to have something in his mouth - cough drops, Life Savers, a tooth-pick. Poor substitutes, all of them.

And finally, Morrison hung up in a colossal traffic jam in the Midtown Tunnel. Darkness. Horns blaring.

Air stinking. Traffic hopelessly snarled. And suddenly, thumbing open the glove compartment and seeing the half-open pack of cigarettes in there. He looked at them for a moment, then snatched one and lit it with the dashboard lighter. If anything happens, it's Cindy's fault, he told himself defiantly. I told her to get rid of all the damn cigarettes.

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

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

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

He joined the traffic flow jerkily and drove home.

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

'Cindy? Where are you, hon?'

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

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

'Have you got my wife?'

'Yes, indeed.' Donatti chuckled indulgently.

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

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

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

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

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

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

'Shaddap,' the man in the SMILEsweatshirt said.

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

Morrison tensed himself to leap at Donatti.

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

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

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

Junk motioned with the pistol.

Morrison preceded them into the room. He felt numb.

The small green curtain had been pulled. Junk prodded him with the gun. This is what being a witness at

the gas chamber must have been like, he thought.

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

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

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

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

It was the longest thirty seconds of his life.

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

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

'Come with me,' Donatti said.

'Where?' Morrison asked apathetically.

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

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

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

'Cindy?' he said gently.

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

'Shhh,' he said. 'Shhh.'

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

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

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

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

He looked at her in mute surprise.

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

'Do you mean that?'

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

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

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

'Is it -,'

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

'How did you know about that?'

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

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

'Step over here, please.'

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

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

Morrison did, and tipped the scales at one seventy-four.

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

‘Five-eleven.’

‘Okay, let’s see.’ He pulled a small card laminated in plastic from his breast pocket. ‘Well, that’s not too bad. I’m going to write you a prescrip for some highly illegal diet pills. Use them sparingly and according to directions. And I’m going to set your maximum weight at... let’s see . .

He consulted the card again. ‘One eighty-two, how does that sound? And since this is December first, I’ll expect you the first of every month for a weigh-in. No problem if you can’t make it, as long as you call in advance.’

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

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

Eight months later:

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

Crony: Lord, how’d you ever stop? I’m locked into this damn habit tighter than Tillie. The crony stubs his

cigarette out with real revulsion and drains his scotch.

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

Twelve months later:

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

QUITTERS ,INC.

237 East 46th Street

New York, N.Y. 10017

1 Treatment \$2500.00

Counsellor (Victor Donatti) \$2500.00

Electricity \$.50

TOTAL (Please pay this amount) \$5000.50

Those sons of bitches! he explodes. They charged me for the electricity they used to... to Just pay it, she says, and kisses him.

Twenty months later:

Quite by accident, Morrison and his wife meet the Jimmy McCanns at the Helen Hayes Theatre.

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

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



THE RAFT

Stephen King

It was forty miles from Horlicks University in Pittsburgh to Cascade Lake, and although dark comes early to that part of the world in October and although they didn't get going until six o'clock, there was still a little light in the sky when they got there. They had come in Deke's Camaro. Deke didn't waste any time when he was sober. After a couple of beers, he made that Camaro walk and talk.

He had hardly brought the car to a stop at the pole fence between the parking lot and the beach before he was out and pulling off his shirt. His eyes were scanning the water for the raft. Randy got out of the shotgun seat, a little reluctantly. This had been his idea, true enough, but he had never expected Deke to take it seriously. The girls were moving around in the back seat, getting ready to get out.

Deke's eyes scanned the water restlessly, side to side (sniper's eyes, Randy thought uncomfortably), and then fixed on a point.

"It's there!" he shouted, slapping the hood of the Camaro. "Just like you said, Randy! Hot damn! Last one in's a rotten egg!"

"Deke—" Randy began, resetting his glasses on his nose, but that was all he bothered with, because Deke was vaulting the fence and running down the beach, not looking back at Randy or Rachel or LaVerne, only looking out at the raft, which was anchored about fifty yards out on the lake.

Randy looked around, as if to apologize to the girls for getting them into this, but they were looking at Deke—Rachel looking at him was all right, Rachel was Deke's girl, but LaVerne was looking at him too and Randy felt a hot momentary spark of jealousy that got him moving. He peeled off his own sweatshirt, dropped it beside Deke's, and hopped the fence.

"Randy!" LaVerne called, and he only pulled his arm forward through the gray twilit October air in a come-on gesture, hating himself a little for doing it—she was unsure now, perhaps ready to cry it off. The idea of an October swim in the deserted lake wasn't just part of a

comfortable, well-lighted bull-session in the apartment he and Deke shared anymore. He liked her, but Deke was stronger. And damned if she didn't have the hots for Deke, and damned if it wasn't irritating.

Deke unbuckled his jeans, still running, and pushed them off his lean hips. He somehow got out of them all the way without stopping, a feat Randy could not have duplicated in a thousand years. Deke ran on, now only wearing bikini briefs, the muscles in his back and buttocks working gorgeously. Randy was more than aware of his own skinny shanks as he dropped his Levi's and clumsily shook them free of his feet—with Deke it was ballet, with him burlesque.

Deke hit the water and bellowed, "Cold! Mother of Jesus!"

Randy hesitated, but only in his mind, where things took longer—that water's forty-five degrees, fifty at most, his mind told him. Your heart could stop. He was pre-med, he knew that was true ... but in the physical world he didn't hesitate at all. He leaped it, and for a moment his heart did stop, or seemed to; his breath clogged in his throat and he had to force a gasp of air into his lungs as all his submerged skin went numb. This is crazy, he thought, and then: But it was your idea, Pancho. He began to stroke after Deke.

The two girls looked at each other for a moment. LaVerne shrugged and grinned. "If they can, we can," she said, stripping off her Lacoste shirt to reveal an almost transparent bra. "Aren't girls supposed to have an extra layer of fat?"

Then she was over the fence and running for the water, unbuttoning her cords. After a moment Rachel followed her, much as Randy had followed Deke.

The girls had come over to the apartment at midafternoon —on Tuesdays a one-o'clock was the latest class any of them had. Deke's monthly allotment had come in—one of the football-mad alums (the players called them "angels") saw that he got two hundred a month in cash—and there was a case of beer in the fridge and a new Night Ranger album on Randy's battered stereo. The four of them set

about getting pleasantly oiled. After a while the talk had turned to the end of the long Indian summer they had been enjoying. The radio was predicting flurries for Wednesday. LaVerne had advanced the opinion that weathermen predicting snow flurries in October should be shot, and no one had disagreed.

Rachel said that summers had seemed to last forever when she was a girl, but now that she was an adult (“a doddering senile nineteen,” Deke joked, and she kicked his ankle), they got shorter every year. “It seemed like I spent my life out at Cascade Lake,” she said, crossing the decayed kitchen linoleum to the icebox. She peered in, found an Iron City Light hiding behind a stack of blue Tupperware storage boxes (the one in the middle contained some nearly prehistoric chili which was now thickly festooned with mold—Randy was a good student and Deke was a good football player, but neither of them was worth a fart in a noisemaker when it came to housekeeping), and appropriated it. “I can still remember the first time I managed to swim all the way out to the raft. I stayed there for damn near two hours, scared to swim back.”

She sat down next to Deke, who put an arm around her. She smiled, remembering, and Randy suddenly thought she looked like someone famous or semi-famous. He couldn’t quite place the resemblance. It would come to him later, under less pleasant circumstances.

“Finally my brother had to swim out and tow me back on an inner tube. God, he was mad. And I had a sunburn like you wouldn’t believe.”

“The raft’s still out there,” Randy said, mostly to say something. He was aware that LaVerne had been looking at Deke again; just lately it seemed like she looked at Deke a lot.

But now she looked at him. “It’s almost Halloween, Randy. Cascade Beach has been closed since Labor Day.”

“Raft’s probably still out there, though,” Randy said. “We were on the other side of the lake on a geology field trip about three weeks ago

and I saw it then. It looked like ...” He shrugged. ” ... a little bit of summer that somebody forgot to clean up and put away in the closet until next year.”

He thought they would laugh at that, but no one did—not even Deke.

“Just because it was there last year doesn’t mean it’s still there,” LaVerne said.

“I mentioned it to a guy,” Randy said, finishing his own beer. “Billy DeLois, do you remember him, Deke?”

Deke nodded. “Played second string until he got hurt.”

“Yeah, I guess so. Anyway, he comes from out that way, and he said the guys who own the beach never take it in until the lake’s almost ready to freeze. Just lazy—at least, that’s what he said. He said that some year they’d wait too long and it would get ice-locked.”

He fell silent, remembering how the raft had looked, anchored out there on the lake—a square of bright white wood in all that bright blue autumn water. He remembered how the sound of the barrels under it—that buoyant clunk-clunk sound—had drifted up to them. The sound was soft, but sounds carried well on the still air around the lake. There had been that sound and the sound of crows squabbling over the remnants of some farmer’s harvested garden.

“Snow tomorrow,” Rachel said, getting up as Deke’s hand wandered almost absently down to the upper swell of her breast. She went to the window and looked out. “What a bummer. “

“I’ll tell you what,” Randy said, “let’s go on out to Cascade Lake. We’ll swim out to the raft, say good-bye to summer, and then swim back.”

If he hadn’t been half-loaded he never would have made the suggestion, and he certainly didn’t expect anyone to take it seriously. But Deke jumped on it.

“All right! Awesome, Pancho! Fooking awesome!” LaVerne jumped and spilled her beer. But she smiled—the smile made Randy a little uneasy. “Let’s do it!”

“Deke, you’re crazy,” Rachel said, also smiling—but her smile looked a little tentative, a little worried.

“No, I’m going to do it,” Deke said, going for his coat, and with a mixture of dismay and excitement, Randy noted Deke’s grin—reckless and a little crazy. The two of them had been rooming together for three years now—the Jock and the Brain, Cisco and Pancho, Batman and Robin—and Randy recognized that grin. Deke wasn’t kidding; he meant to do it. In his head he was already halfway there.

Forget it, Cisco—not me. The words rose to his lips, but before he could say them LaVerne was on her feet, the same cheerful, loony look in her own eyes (or maybe it was just too much beer). “I’m up for it!”

“Then let’s go!” Deke looked at Randy. “Whatchoo say, Pancho?”

He had looked at Rachel for a moment then, and saw something almost frantic in her eyes—as far as he himself was concerned, Deke and LaVerne could go out to Cascade Lake together and plow the back forty all night; he would not be delighted with the knowledge that they were boffing each other’s brains out, yet neither would he be surprised. But that look in the other girl’s eyes, that haunted look —

“Ohhh, Ceesco!” Randy cried.

“Ohhhh, Pancho!” Deke cried back, delighted.

They slapped palms.

Randy was halfway to the raft when he saw the black patch on the water. It was beyond the raft and to the left of it, more out toward the

middle of the lake. Five minutes later the light would have failed too much for him to tell it was anything more than a shadow ... if he had seen it at all. Oil slick? he thought, still pulling hard through the water, faintly aware of the girls splashing behind him. But what would an oil slick be doing on an October-deserted lake? And it was oddly circular, small, surely no more than five feet in diameter—

“Whoooo!” Deke shouted again, and Randy looked toward him. Deke was climbing the ladder on the side of the raft, shaking off water like a dog. “Howya doon, Pancho?”

“Okay!” he called back, pulling harder. It really wasn’t as bad as he had thought it might be, not once you got in and got moving. His body tingled with warmth and now his motor was in overdrive. He could feel his heart putting out good revs, heating him from the inside out. His folks had a place on Cape Cod, and the water there was worse than this in mid-July.

“You think it’s bad now, Pancho, wait’ll you get out!” Deke yelled gleefully. He was hopping up and down, making the raft rock, rubbing his body.

Randy forgot about the oil slick until his hands actually grasped the rough, white-painted wood of the ladder on the shore side. Then he saw it again. It was a little closer. A round dark patch on the water, like a big mole, rising and falling on the mild waves. When he had first seen it the patch had been maybe forty yards from the raft. Now it was only half that distance.

How can that be? How—

Then he came out of the water and the cold air bit his skin, bit it even harder than the water had when he first dived in. “Ohhhhhh, shit!” He yelled, laughing, shivering in his Jockey shorts.

“Pancho, you ees some kine of beeg asshole,” Deke said happily. He pulled Randy up. “Cold enough for you? You sober yet?”

“I’m sober! I’m sober!” He began to jump around as Deke had done, clapping his arms across his chest and stomach in an X. They turned to look at the girls.

Rachel had pulled ahead of LaVerne, who was doing something that looked like a dog paddle performed by a dog with bad instincts.

“You ladies okay?” Deke bellowed.

“Go to hell, Macho City!” LaVerne called, and Deke broke up again.

Randy glanced to the side and saw that odd dark circular patch was even closer—ten yards now, and still coming. It floated on the water, round and regular, like the top of a large steel drum, but the limber way it rode the swells made it clear that it was not the surface of a solid object. Fear, directionless but powerful, suddenly seized him.

“Swim!” he shouted at the girls, and bent down to grasp Rachel’s hand as she reached the ladder. He hauled her up. She bumped her knee hard—he heard the thud clearly.

“Ow! Hey! What—”

LaVerne was still ten feet away. Randy glanced to the side again and saw the round thing nuzzle the offside of the raft. The thing was as dark as oil, but he was sure it wasn’t oil—too dark, too thick, too even.

“Randy, that hurt! What are you doing, being fun—”

“LaVerne! Swim!” Now it wasn’t just fear; now it was terror.

LaVerne looked up, maybe not hearing the terror but at least hearing the urgency. She looked puzzled but she dog-paddled faster, closing the distance to the ladder.

“Randy, what’s wrong with you?” Deke asked.

Randy looked to the side again and saw the thing fold itself around the raft's square corner. For a moment it looked like a Pac-Man image with its mouth open to eat electronic cookies. Then it slipped all the way around the corner and began to slide along the raft, one of its edges now straight.

"Help me get her up!" Randy grunted to Deke, and reached for her hand. "Quick!"

Deke shrugged good-naturedly and reached for LaVerne's other hand. They pulled her up and onto the raft's board surface bare seconds before the black thing slid by the ladder, its sides dimpling as it slipped past the ladder's uprights.

"Randy, have you gone crazy?" LaVerne was out of breath, a little frightened. Her nipples were clearly visible through the bra. They stood out in cold hard points.

"That thing," Randy said, pointing. "Deke? What is it?"

Deke spotted it. It had reached the left-hand corner of the raft. It drifted off a little to one side, reassuming its round shape. It simply floated there. The four of them looked at it.

"Oil slick, I guess," Deke said.

"You really racked my knee," Rachel said, glancing at the dark thing on the water and then back at Randy. "You—"

"It's not an oil slick," Randy said. "Did you ever see a round oil slick? That thing looks like a checker."

"I never saw an oil slick at all," Deke replied. He was talking to Randy but he was looking at LaVerne. LaVerne's panties were almost as transparent as her bra, the delta of her sex sculpted neatly in silk, each buttock a taut crescent. "I don't even believe in them. I'm from Missouri."

“I’m going to bruise,” Rachel said, but the anger had gone out of her voice. She had seen Deke looking at LaVerne.

“God, I’m cold,” LaVerne said. She shivered prettily.

“It went for the girls,” Randy said.

“Come on, Pancho. I thought you said you got sober.”

“It went for the girls,” he repeated stubbornly, and thought: No one knows we’re here. No one at all.

“Have you ever seen an oil slick, Pancho?” He had put his arm around LaVerne’s bare shoulders in the same almost-absent way that he had touched Rachel’s breast earlier that day. He wasn’t touching LaVerne’s breast—not yet, anyway— but his hand was close. Randy found he didn’t care much, one way or another. That black, circular patch on the water. He cared about that.

“I saw one on the Cape, four years ago,” he said. “We all pulled birds out of the surf and tried to clean them off—”

“Ecological, Pancho,” Deke said approvingly. “Mucho ecological, I theenk.”

Randy said, “It was just this big, sticky mess all over the water. In streaks and big smears. It didn’t look like that. It wasn’t, you know, compact.”

It looked like an accident, he wanted to say. That thing doesn’t look like an accident; it looks like it’s on purpose.

“I want to go back now,” Rachel said. She was still looking at Deke and LaVerne. Randy saw dull hurt in her face. He doubted if she knew it showed.

“So go,” LaVerne said. There was a look on her face—the clarity of absolute triumph, Randy thought, and if the thought seemed pretentious, it also seemed exactly right. The expression was not

aimed precisely at Rachel ... but neither was LaVerne trying to hide it from the other girl.

She moved a step closer to Deke; a step was all there was. Now their hips touched lightly. For one brief moment Randy's attention passed from the thing floating on the water. and focused on LaVerne with an almost exquisite hate. Although he had never hit a girl, in that one moment he could have hit her with real pleasure. Not because he loved her (he had been a little infatuated with her, yes, and more than a little horny for her, yes, and a lot jealous when she had begun to come on to Deke back at the apartment, oh yes, but he wouldn't have brought a girl he actually loved within fifteen miles of Deke in the first place), but because he knew that expression on Rachel's face—how that expression felt inside.

"I'm afraid," Rachel said.

"Of an oil slick?" LaVerne asked incredulously, and then laughed. The urge to hit her swept over Randy again—to just swing a big roundhouse open-handed blow through the air, to wipe that look of half-assed hauteur from her face and leave a mark on her cheek that would bruise in the shape of a hand.

"Let's see you swim back, then," Randy said.

LaVerne smiled indulgently at him. "I'm not ready to go," she said, as if explaining to a child. She looked up at the sky, then at Deke. "I want to watch the stars come out."

Rachel was a short girl, pretty, but in a gamine, slightly insecure way that made Randy think of New York girls—you saw them hurrying to work in the morning, wearing their smartly tailored skirts with slits in the front or up one side, wearing that same look of slightly neurotic prettiness. Rachel's eyes always sparkled, but it was hard to tell if it was good cheer that lent them that lively look or just free-floating anxiety.

Deke's tastes usually ran more to tall girls with dark hair and sleepy sloe eyes, and Randy saw it was now over between Deke and Rachel—whatever there had been, something simple and maybe a little boring on his part, something deep and complicated and probably painful on hers. It was over, so cleanly and suddenly that Randy almost heard the snap: a sound like dry kindling broken over a knee.

He was a shy boy, but he moved to Rachel now and put an arm around her. She glanced up at him briefly, her face unhappy but grateful for his gesture, and he was glad he had improved the situation for her a little. That similarity bobbed into his mind again. Something in her face, her looks—

He first associated it with TV game shows, then with commercials for crackers or wafers or some damn thing. It came to him then—she looked like Sandy Duncan, the actress who had played in the revival of Peter Pan on Broadway.

“What is that thing?” she asked. “Randy? What is it?”

“I don't know.”

He glanced at Deke and saw Deke looking at him with that familiar smile that was more loving familiarity than contempt ... but the contempt was there, too. Maybe Deke didn't even know it, but it was. The expression said Here goes ole worry-wart Randy, pissing in his didies again. It was supposed to make Randy mumble an addition—It's probably nothing, Don't worry about it, It'll go away. Something like that. He didn't. Let Deke smile. The black patch on the water scared him. That was the truth.

Rachel stepped away from Randy and knelt prettily on the corner of the raft closest to the thing, and for a moment she triggered an even clearer memory-association: the girl on the White Rock labels. Sandy Duncan on the White Rock labels, his mind amended. Her hair, a close-cropped, slightly coarse blond, lay wetly against her

finely shaped skull. He could see goosebumps on her shoulder blades above the white band of her bra.

“Don’t fall in, Rache,” LaVerne said with bright malice.

“Quit it, LaVerne,” Deke said, still smiling.

Randy looked from them, standing in the middle of the raft with their arms loosely around each other’s waists, hips touching lightly, and back at Rachel. Alarm raced down his spine and out through his nerves like fire. The black patch had halved the distance between it and the corner of the raft where Rachel was kneeling and looking at it. It had been six or eight feet away before. Now the distance was three feet or less. And he saw a strange look in her eyes, a round blankness that seemed queerly like the round blankness of the thing in the water.

Now it’s Sandy Duncan sitting on a White Rock label and pretending to be hypnotized by the rich delicious flavor of Nabisco Honey Grahams, he thought idiotically, feeling his heart speed up as it had in the water, and he called out, “Get away from there, Rachel!”

Then everything happened very fast—things happened with the rapidity of fireworks going off. And yet he saw and heard each thing with perfect, hellish clarity. Each thing seemed caught in its own little capsule.

LaVerne laughed—on the quad in a bright afternoon hour it might have sounded like any college girl’s laugh, but out here in the growing dark it sounded like the arid cackle of a witch making magic in a pot.

“Rachel, maybe you better get b—” Deke said, but she interrupted him, almost surely for the first time in her life, and indubitably for the last.

“It has colors!” she cried in a voice of utter, trembling wonder. Her eyes stared at the black patch on the water with blank rapture, and

for just a moment Randy thought he saw what she was talking about—colors, yeah, colors, swirling in rich, inward-turning spirals. Then they were gone, and there was only dull, lusterless black again.

“Such beautiful colors!”

“Rachel!”

She reached for it—out and down—her white arm, marbled with gooseflesh, her hand, held out to it, meaning to touch; he saw she had bitten her nails ragged.

“Ra—”

He sensed the raft tilt in the water as Deke moved toward them. He reached for Rachel at the same time, meaning to pull her back, dimly aware that he didn't want Deke to be the one to do it.

Then Rachel's hand touched the water—her forefinger only, sending out one delicate ripple in a ring—and the black patch surged over it. Randy heard her gasp in air, and suddenly the blankness left her eyes. What replaced it was agony.

The black, viscous substance ran up her arm like mud ... and under it, Randy saw her skin dissolving. She opened her mouth and screamed. At the same moment she began to tilt outward. She waved her other hand blindly at Randy and he grabbed for it. Their fingers brushed. Her eyes met his, and she still looked hellishly like Sandy Duncan. Then she fell outward and splashed into the water.

The black thing flowed over the spot where she had landed.

“What happened?” LaVerne was screaming behind them. “What happened? Did she fall in? What happened to her?”

Randy made as if to dive in after her and Deke pushed him backwards with casual force. “No,” he said in a frightened voice that was utterly unlike Deke.

All three of them saw her flail to the surface. Her arms came up, waving—no, not arms. One arm. The other was covered with a black membrane that hung in flaps and folds from something red and knitted with tendons, something that looked a little like a rolled roast of beef.

“Help!” Rachel screamed. Her eyes glared at them, away from them, at them, away—her eyes were like lanterns being waved aimlessly in the dark. She beat the water into a froth. “Help it hurts please help it hurts IT HURTS IT HURRRRR—”

Randy had fallen when Deke pushed him. Now he got up from the boards of the raft and stumbled forward again, unable to ignore that voice. He tried to jump in and Deke grabbed him, wrapping his big arms around Randy’s thin chest.

“No, she’s dead,” he whispered harshly. “Christ, can’t you see that? She’s dead, Pancho.”

Thick blackness suddenly poured across Rachel’s face like a drape, and her screams were first muffled and then cut off entirely. Now the black stuff seemed to bind her in crisscrossing ropes. Randy could see it sinking into her like acid, and when her jugular vein gave way in a dark, pumping jet, he saw the thing send out a pseudopod after the escaping blood. He could not believe what he was seeing, could not understand it ... but there was no doubt, no sensation of losing his mind, no belief that he was dreaming or hallucinating.

LaVerne was screaming. Randy turned to look at her just in time to see her slap a hand melodramatically over her eyes like a silent movie heroine. He thought he would laugh and tell her this, but found he could not make a sound.

He looked back at Rachel. Rachel was almost not there anymore.

Her struggles had weakened to the point where they were really no more than spasms. The blackness oozed over her—bigger now, Randy thought, it’s bigger, no question about it—with mute, muscular

power. He saw her hand beat at it; saw the hand become stuck, as if in molasses or on flypaper; saw it consumed. Now there was a sense of her form only, not in the water but in the black thing, not turning but being turned, the form becoming less recognizable, a white flash—bone, he thought sickly, and turned away, vomiting helplessly over the side of the raft.

LaVerne was still screaming. Then there was a dull whap! and she stopped screaming and began to snivel.

He hit her, Randy thought. I was going to do that, remember?

He stepped back, wiping his mouth, feeling weak and ill. And scared. So scared he could think with only one tiny wedge of his mind. Soon he would begin to scream himself. Then Deke would have to slap him, Deke wouldn't panic, oh no, Deke was hero material for sure. You gotta be a football hero ... to get along with the beautiful girls, his mind sang cheerfully. Then he could hear Deke talking to him, and he looked up at the sky, trying to clear his head, trying desperately to put away the vision of Rachel's form becoming blobbish and inhuman as that black thing ate her, not wanting Deke to slap him the way he had slapped LaVerne.

He looked up at the sky and saw the first stars shining up there—the shape of the Dipper already clear as the last white light faded out of the west. It was nearly seven-thirty.

“Oh Ceeesco,” he managed. “We are in beeg trouble thees time, I theenk.”

“What is it?” His hand fell on Randy's shoulder, gripping and twisting painfully. “It ate her, did you see that? It ate her, it fucking ate her up! What is it?”

“I don't know. Didn't you hear me before?”

“You're supposed to know, you're a fucking brain-ball, you take all the fucking science courses!” Now Deke was almost screaming

himself, and that helped Randy get a little more control.

“There’s nothing like that in any science book I ever read,” Randy told him. “The last time I saw anything like that was the Halloween Shock-Show down at the Rialto when I was twelve.”

The thing had regained its round shape now. It floated on the water ten feet from the raft.

“It’s bigger,” LaVerne moaned.

When Randy had first seen it, he had guessed its diameter at about five feet. Now it had to be at least eight feet across.

“It’s bigger because it ate Rachel!” LaVerne cried, and began to scream again.

“Stop that or I’m going to break your jaw,” Deke said, and she stopped—not all at once, but winding down the way a record does when somebody turns off the juke without taking the needle off the disc. Her eyes were huge things.

Deke looked back at Randy. “You all right, Pancho?”

“I don’t know. I guess so.”

“My man.” Deke tried to smile, and Randy saw with some alarm that he was succeeding—was some part of Deke enjoying this? “You don’t have any idea at all what it might be?”

Randy shook his head. Maybe it was an oil slick, after all ... or had been, until something had happened to it. Maybe cosmic rays had hit it in a certain way. Or maybe Arthur Godfrey had pissed atomic Bisquick all over it, who knew? Who could know?

“Can we swim past it, do you think?” Deke persisted, shaking Randy’s shoulder.

“No!” LaVerne shrieked.

“Stop it or I’m gonna smoke you, LaVerne,” Deke said, raising his voice again. “I’m not kidding.”

“You saw how fast it took Rachel,” Randy said.

“Maybe it was hungry then,” Deke answered. “But maybe now it’s full.”

Randy thought of Rachel kneeling there on the corner of the raft, so still and pretty in her bra and panties, and felt his gorge rise again.

“You try it,” he said to Deke.

Deke grinned humorlessly. “Oh Pancho.”

“Oh Ceesco. “

“I want to go home,” LaVerne said in a furtive whisper. “Okay?”

Neither of them replied.

“So we wait for it to go away,” Deke said. “It came, it’ll go away.”

“Maybe,” Randy said.

Deke looked at him, his face full of a fierce concentration in the gloom. “Maybe? What’s this maybe shit?”

“We came, and it came. I saw it come—like it smelled us. If it’s full, like you say, it’ll go. I guess. If it still wants chow—” He shrugged.

Deke stood thoughtfully, head bent. His short hair was still dripping a little.

“We wait,” he said. “Let it eat fish.”

Fifteen minutes passed. They didn’t talk. It got colder. It was maybe fifty degrees and all three of them were in their underwear. After the first ten minutes, Randy could hear the brisk, intermittent clickety-

click of his teeth. LaVerne had tried to move next to Deke, but he pushed her away—gently but firmly enough.

“Let me be for now,” he said.

So she sat down, arms crossed over her breasts, hands cupping her elbows, shivering. She looked at Randy, her eyes telling him he could come back, put his arm around her, it was okay now.

He looked away instead, back at the dark circle on the water. It just floated there, not coming any closer, but not going away, either. He looked toward the shore and there was the beach, a ghostly white crescent that seemed to float. The trees behind it made a dark, bulking horizon line. He thought he could see Deke’s Camaro, but he wasn’t sure.

“We just picked up and went,” Deke said.

“That’s right,” Randy said.

“Didn’t tell anyone.”

“No.”

“So no one knows we’re here.”

“No.”

“Stop it!” LaVerne shouted. “Stop it, you’re scaring me!”

“Shut your pie-hole,” Deke said absently, and Randy laughed in spite of himself—no matter how many times Deke said that, it always slew him. “If we have to spend the night out here, we do. Somebody’ll hear us yelling tomorrow. We’re hardly in the middle of the Australian Outback, are we, Randy?”

Randy said nothing.

“Are we?”

“You know where we are,” Randy said. “You know as well as I do. We turned off Route 41, we came up eight miles of back road—”

“Cottages every fifty feet—”

“Summer cottages. This is October. They’re empty, the whole bucking funch of them. We got here and you had to drive around the damn gate, NO TRESPASSING signs every fifty feet—”

“So? A caretaker—” Deke was sounding a little pissed now, a little off-balance. A little scared? For the first time tonight, for the first time this month, this year, maybe for the first time in his whole life? Now there was an awesome thought—Deke loses his fear-cherry. Randy was not sure it was happening, but he thought maybe it was ... and he took a perverse pleasure in it.

“Nothing to steal, nothing to vandalize,” he said. “If there’s a caretaker, he probably pops by here on a bimonthly basis.”

“Hunters—”

“Next month, yeah,” Randy said, and shut his mouth with a snap. He had also succeeded in scaring himself.

“Maybe it’ll leave us alone,” LaVerne said. Her lips made a pathetic, loose little smile. “Maybe it’ll just ... you know ... leave us alone.”

Deke said, “Maybe pigs will—”

“It’s moving,” Randy said.

LaVerne leaped to her feet. Deke came to where Randy was and for a moment the raft tilted, scaring Randy’s heart into a gallop and making LaVerne scream again. Then Deke stepped back a little and the raft stabilized, with the left front corner (as they faced the shoreline) dipped down slightly more than the rest of the raft.

It came with an oily, frightening speed, and as it did, Randy saw the colors Rachel had seen—fantastic reds and yellows and blues

spiraling across an ebony surface like limp plastic or dark, lithe Naugahyde. It rose and fell with the waves and that changed the colors, made them swirl and blend. Randy realized he was going to fall over, fall right into it, he could feel himself tilting out—

With the last of his strength he brought his right fist up into his own nose—the gesture of a man stifling a cough, only a little high and a lot hard. His nose flared with pain, he felt blood run warmly down his face, and then he was able to step back, crying out: “Don’t look at it! Deke! Don’t look right at it, the colors make you loopy!”

“It’s trying to get under the raft,” Deke said grimly. “What’s this shit, Pancho?”

Randy looked—he looked very carefully. He saw the thing nuzzling the side of the raft, flattening to a shape like half a pizza. For a moment it seemed to be piling up there, thickening, and he had an alarming vision of it piling up enough to run onto the surface of the raft.

Then it squeezed under. He thought he heard a noise for a moment—a rough noise, like a roll of canvas being pulled through a narrow window—but that might have only been nerves.

“Did it go under?” LaVerne said, and there was something oddly nonchalant about her tone, as if she were trying with all her might to be conversational, but she was screaming, too. “Did it go under the raft? Is it under us?”

“Yes,” Deke said. He looked at Randy. “I’m going to swim for it right now,” he said. “If it’s under there I’ve got a good chance.”

“No!” LaVerne screamed. “No, don’t leave us here, don’t—”

“I’m fast,” Deke said, looking at Randy, ignoring LaVerne completely. “But I’ve got to go while it’s under there.”

Randy's mind felt as if it was whizzing along at Mach two—in a greasy, nauseating way it was exhilarating, like the last few seconds before you puke into the slipstream of a cheap carnival ride. There was time to hear the barrels under the raft clunking hollowly together, time to hear the leaves on the trees beyond the beach rattling dryly in a little puff of wind, time to wonder why it had gone under the raft.

“Yes,” he said to Deke. “But I don't think you'll make it.”

“I'll make it,” Deke said, and started toward the edge of the raft.

He got two steps and then stopped.

His breath had been speeding up, his brain getting his heart and lungs ready to swim the fastest fifty yards of his life and now his breath stopped like the rest of him, simply stopped in the middle of an inhale. He turned his head, and Randy saw the cords in his neck stand out.

“Panch—” he said in an amazed, choked voice, and then he began to scream.

He screamed with amazing force, great baritone bellows that splintered up toward wild soprano levels. They were loud enough to echo back from the shore in ghostly half-notes. At first Randy thought he was just screaming, and then he realized it was a word—no, two words, the same two words over and over: “My foot!” Deke was screaming. “My foot! My foot! My foot!”

Randy looked down. Deke's foot had taken on an odd sunken look. The reason was obvious, but Randy's mind refused to accept it at first—it was too impossible, too insanely grotesque. As he watched, Deke's foot was being pulled down between two of the boards that made up the surface of the raft.

Then he saw the dark shine of the black thing beyond the heel and the toes, dark shine alive with swirling, malevolent colors.

The thing had his foot (“My foot!” Deke screamed, as if to confirm this elementary deduction. “My foot, oh my foot, my FOOOOOOT!”). He had stepped on one of the cracks between the boards (step on a crack, break yer mother’s back, Randy’s mind gibbered), and the thing had been down there. The thing had—

“Pull!” he screamed back suddenly. “Pull, Deke, goddammit, PULL!”

“What’s happening?” LaVerne hollered, and Randy realized dimly that she wasn’t just shaking his shoulder; she had sunk her spade-shaped fingernails into him like claws. She was going to be absolutely no help at all. He drove an elbow into her stomach. She made a barking, coughing noise and sat down on her fanny. He leaped to Deke and grabbed one of Deke’s arms.

It was as hard as Carrara marble, every muscle standing out like the rib of a sculpted dinosaur skeleton. Pulling Deke was like trying to pull a big tree out of the ground by the roots. Deke’s eyes were turned up toward the royal purple of the post-dusk sky, glazed and unbelieving, and still he screamed, screamed, screamed.

Randy looked down and saw that Deke’s foot had now disappeared into the crack between the boards up to the ankle. That crack was perhaps only a quarter of an inch wide, surely no more than half an inch, but his foot had gone into it. Blood ran across the white boards in thick dark tendrils. Black stuff like heated plastic pulsed up and down in the crack, up and down, like a heart beating.

Got to get him out. Got to get him out quick or we’re never gonna get him out at all ... hold on, Cisco, please hold on ...

LaVerne got to her feet and backed away from the gnarled, screaming Deke-tree in the center of the raft which floated at anchor under the October stars on Cascade Lake. She was shaking her head numbly, her arms crossed over her belly where Randy’s elbow had gotten her.

Deke leaned hard against him, arms groping stupidly. Randy looked down and saw blood gushing from Deke's shin, which now tapered the way a sharpened pencil tapers to a point—only the point here was white, not black, the point was a bone, barely visible.

The black stuff surged up again, sucking, eating.

Deke wailed.

Never going to play football on that foot again, WHAT foot, ha-ha, and he pulled Deke with all his might and it was still like pulling at a rooted tree.

Deke lurched again and now he uttered a long, drilling shriek that made Randy fall back, shrieking himself, hands covering his ears. Blood burst from the pores of Deke's calf and shin; his kneecap had taken on a purple, bulging look as it tried to absorb the tremendous pressure being put on it as the black thing hauled Deke's leg down through the narrow crack inch by inch.

Can't help him. How strong it must be! Can't help him now, I'm sorry, Deke, so sorry—

“Hold me, Randy,” LaVerne screamed, clutching at him everywhere, digging her face into his chest. Her face was so hot it seemed to sizzle. “Hold me, please, won't you hold me—”

This time, he did.

It was only later that a terrible realization came to Randy: the two of them could almost surely have swum ashore while the black thing was busy with Deke—and if LaVerne refused to try it, he could have done it himself. The keys to the Camaro were in Deke's jeans, lying on the beach. He could have done it ... but the realization that he could have never came to him until too late.

Deke died just as his thigh began to disappear into the narrow crack between the boards. He had stopped shrieking minutes before.

Since then he had uttered only thick, syrupy grunts. Then those stopped, too. When he fainted, falling forward, Randy heard whatever remained of the femur in his right leg splinter in a greenstick fracture.

A moment later Deke raised his head, looked around groggily, and opened his mouth. Randy thought he meant to scream again. Instead, he voided a great jet of blood, so thick it was almost solid. Both Randy and LaVerne were splattered with its warmth and she began to scream again, hoarsely now.

“Oooog!” she cried, her face twisted in half-mad revulsion. “Oooog! Blood! Ooooog, blood! Blood!” She rubbed at herself and only succeeded in smearing it around.

Blood was pouring from Deke’s eyes, coming with such force that they had bugged out almost comically with the force of the hemorrhage. Randy thought: Talk about vitality! Christ, LOOK at that! He’s like a goddammed human fire hydrant! God! God! God!

Blood streamed from both of Deke’s ears. His face was a hideous purple turnip, swelled shapeless with the hydrostatic pressure of some unbelievable reversal; it was the face of a man being clutched in a bear hug of monstrous and unknowable force.

And then, mercifully, it was over.

Deke collapsed forward again, his hair hanging down on the raft’s bloody boards, and Randy saw with sickish amazement that even Deke’s scalp had bled.

Sounds from under the raft. Sucking sounds.

That was when it occurred to his tottering, overloaded mind that he could swim for it and stand a good chance of making it. But LaVerne had gotten heavy in his arms, ominously heavy; he looked at her slack face, rolled back an eyelid to disclose only white, and knew

that she had not fainted but fallen into a state of shock-unconsciousness.

Randy looked at the surface of the raft. He could lay her down, of course, but the boards were only a foot across. There was a diving board platform attached to the raft in the summertime, but that, at least, had been taken down and stored somewhere. Nothing left but the surface of the raft itself, fourteen boards, each a foot wide and twenty feet long. No way to put her down without laying her unconscious body across any number of those cracks.

Step on a crack, break your mother's back.

Shut up.

And then, tenebrously, his mind whispered: Do it anyway. Put her down and swim for it.

But he did not, could not. An awful guilt rose in him at the thought. He held her, feeling the soft, steady drag on his arms and back. She was a big girl.

Deke went down.

Randy held LaVerne in his aching arms and watched it happen. He did not want to, and for long seconds that might even have been minutes he turned his face away entirely; but his eyes always wandered back.

With Deke dead, it seemed to go faster.

The rest of his right leg disappeared, his left leg stretching out further and further until Deke looked like a one-legged ballet dancer doing an impossible split. There was the wishbone crack of his pelvis, and then, as Deke's stomach began to swell ominously with new pressure, Randy looked away for a long time, trying not to hear the wet sounds, trying to concentrate on the pain in his arms. He could maybe bring her around, he thought, but for the time being it was

better to have the throbbing pain in his arms and shoulders. It gave him something to think about.

From behind him came a sound like strong teeth crunching up a mouthful of candy jawbreakers. When he looked back, Deke's ribs were collapsing into the crack. His arms were up and out, and he looked like an obscene parody of Richard Nixon giving the V-for-victory sign that had driven demonstrators wild in the sixties and seventies.

His eyes were open. His tongue had popped out at Randy.

Randy looked away again, out across the lake. Look for lights, he told himself. He knew there were no lights over there, but he told himself that anyway. Look for lights over there, somebody's got to be staying the week in his place, fall foliage, shouldn't miss it, bring your Nikon, folks back home are going to love the slides.

When he looked back, Deke's arms were straight up. He wasn't Nixon anymore; now he was a football ref signaling that the extra point had been good.

Deke's head appeared to be sitting on the boards.

His eyes were still open.

His tongue was still sticking out.

"Oh Ceesco," Randy muttered, and looked away again. His arms and shoulders were shrieking now, but still he held her in his arms. He looked at the far side of the lake. The far side of the lake was dark. Stars unrolled across the black sky, a spill of cold milk somehow suspended high in the air.

Minutes passed. He'll be gone now. You can look now. Okay, yeah, all right. But don't look. Just to be safe, don't look. Agreed? Agreed. Most definitely. So say we all and so say all of us.

So he looked anyway and was just in time to see Deke's fingers being pulled down. They were moving—probably the motion of the water under the raft was being transmitted to the unknowable thing which had caught Deke, and that motion was then being transmitted to Deke's fingers. Probably, probably. But it looked to Randy as if Deke was waving to him. The Cisco Kid was waving adios. For the first time he felt his mind give a sickening wrench—it seemed to cant the way the raft itself had canted when all four of them had stood on the same side. It righted itself, but Randy suddenly understood that madness—real lunacy—was perhaps not far away at all.

Deke's football ring—All—Conference, 1981—slid slowly up the third finger of his right hand. The starlight rimmed the gold and played in the minute gutters between the engraved numbers, 19 on one side of the reddish stone, 81 on the other. The ring slid off his finger. The ring was a little too big to fit down through the crack, and of course it wouldn't squeeze.

It lay there. It was all that was left of Deke now. Deke was gone. No more dark-haired girls with sloe eyes, no more flicking Randy's bare rump with a wet towel when Randy came out of the shower, no more breakaway runs from midfield with fans rising to their feet in the bleachers and cheerleaders turning hysterical cartwheels along the sidelines. No more fast rides after dark in the Camaro with Thin Lizzy blaring "The Boys Are Back in Town" out of the tape deck. No more Cisco Kid.

There was that faint rasping noise again—a roll of canvas being pulled slowly through a slit of a window.

Randy was standing with his bare feet on the boards. He looked down and saw the cracks on either side of both feet suddenly filled with slick darkness. His eyes bulged. He thought of the way the blood had come spraying from Deke's mouth in an almost solid rope, the way Deke's eyes had bugged out as if on springs as hemorrhages caused by hydrostatic pressure pulped his brain.

It smells me. It knows I'm here. Can it come up? Can it get up through the cracks? Can it? Can it?

He stared down, unaware of LaVerne's limp weight now, fascinated by the enormity of the question, wondering what the stuff would feel like when it flowed over his feet, when it hooked into him.

The black shininess humped up almost to the edge of the cracks (Randy rose on tiptoes without being at all aware he was doing it), and then it went down. That canvasy slithering resumed. And suddenly Randy saw it on the water again, a great dark mole, now perhaps fifteen feet across. It rose and fell with the mild wavelets, rose and fell, rose and fell, and when Randy began to see the colors pulsing evenly across it, he tore his eyes away.

He put LaVerne down, and as soon as his muscles unlocked, his arms began to shake wildly. He let them shake. He knelt beside her, her hair spread across the white boards in an irregular dark fan. He knelt and watched that dark mole on the water, ready to yank her up again if it showed any signs of moving.

He began to slap her lightly, first one cheek and then the other, back and forth, like a second trying to bring a fighter around. LaVerne didn't want to come around. LaVerne did not want to pass Go and collect two hundred dollars or take a ride on the Reading. LaVerne had seen enough. But Randy couldn't guard her all night, lifting her like a canvas sack every time that thing moved (and you couldn't look at the thing too long; that was another thing). He had learned a trick, though. He hadn't learned it in college. He had learned it from a friend of his older brother's. This friend had been a paramedic in Nam, and he knew all sorts of tricks—how to catch head lice off a human scalp and make them race in a matchbox, how to cut cocaine with baby laxative, how to sew up deep cuts with ordinary needle and thread. One day they had been talking about ways to bring abysmally drunken folks around so these abysmally drunken people wouldn't puke down their own throats and die, as Bon Scott, the lead singer of AC/DC, had done.

“You want to bring someone around in a hurry?” the friend with the catalogue of interesting tricks had said. “Try this.” And he told Randy the trick which Randy now used.

He leaned over and bit LaVerne’s earlobe as hard as he could.

Hot, bitter blood squirted into his mouth. LaVerne’s eyelids flew up like windowshades. She screamed in a hoarse, growling voice and struck out at him. Randy looked up and saw the far side of the thing only; the rest of it was already under the raft. It had moved with eerie, horrible, silent speed.

He jerked LaVerne up again, his muscles screaming protest, trying to knot into charley horses. She was beating at his face. One of her hands struck his sensitive nose and he saw red stars.

“Quit it!” he shouted, shuffling his feet onto the boards. “Quit it, you bitch, it’s under us again, quit it or I’ll fucking drop you, I swear to God I will!”

Her arms immediately stopped flailing at him and closed quietly around his neck in a drowner’s grip. Her eyes looked white in the swimming starlight.

“Stop it!” She didn’t. “Stop it, LaVerne, you’re choking me!”

Tighter. Panic flared in his mind. The hollow clunk of the barrels had taken on a duller, muffled note—it was the thing underneath, he supposed.

“I can’t breathe!”

The hold loosened a little.

“Now listen. I’m going to put you down. It’s all right if you—”

But put you down was all she had heard. Her arms tightened in that deadly grip again. His right hand was on her back. He hooked it into a claw and raked at her. She kicked her legs, mewling harshly, and

for a moment he almost lost his balance. She felt it. Fright rather than pain made her stop struggling.

“Stand on the boards.”

“No!” Her air puffed a hot desert wind against his cheek.

“It can’t get you if you stand on the boards.”

“No, don’t put me down, it’ll get me, I know it will, I know—”

He raked at her back again. She screamed in anger and pain and fear. “You get down or I’ll drop you, LaVerne.”

He lowered her slowly and carefully, both of them breathing in sharp little whines—oboe and flute. Her feet touched the boards. She jerked her legs up as if the boards were hot.

“Put them down!” He hissed at her. “I’m not Deke, I can’t hold you all night!”

“Deke—”

“Dead.”

Her feet touched the boards. Little by little he let go of her. They faced each other like dancers. He could see her waiting for its first touch. Her mouth gaped like the mouth of a goldfish.

“Randy,” she whispered. “Where is it?”

“Under. Look down.”

She did. He did. They saw the blackness stuffing the cracks, stuffing them almost all the way across the raft now. Randy sensed its eagerness, and thought she did, too.

“Randy, please—”

“Shhhh.”

They stood there.

Randy had forgotten to strip off his watch when he ran into the water, and now he marked off fifteen minutes. At a quarter past eight, the black thing slid out from under the raft again. It drew about fifteen feet off and then stopped as it had before.

“I’m going to sit down,” he said.

“No!”

“I’m tired,” he said. “I’m going to sit down and you’re going to watch it. Just remember to keep looking away. Then I’ll get up and you sit down. We go like that. Here.” He gave her his watch. “Fifteen-minute shifts.”

“It ate Deke,” she whispered.

“Yes.”

“What is it?”

“I don’t know.”

“I’m cold.”

“Me too.”

“Hold me, then.”

“I’ve held you enough.”

She subsided.

Sitting down was heaven; not having to watch the thing was bliss. He watched LaVerne instead, making sure that her eyes kept shifting away from the thing on the water.

“What are we going to do, Randy?”

He thought.

“Wait,” he said.

At the end of fifteen minutes he stood up and let her first sit and then lie down for half an hour. Then he got her on her feet again and she stood for fifteen minutes. They went back and forth. At a quarter of ten, a cold rind of moon rose and beat a path across the water. At ten-thirty, a shrill, lonely cry rose, echoing across the water, and LaVerne shrieked.

“Shut up,” he said. “It’s just a loon.”

“I’m freezing, Randy—I’m numb all over.”

“I can’t do anything about it.”

“Hold me,” she said. “You’ve got to. We’ll hold each other. We can both sit down and watch it together.”

He debated, but the cold sinking into his own flesh was now bone-deep, and that decided him. “Okay.”

They sat together, arms wrapped around each other, and something happened—natural or perverse, it happened. He felt himself stiffening. One of his hands found her breast, cupped in damp nylon, and squeezed. She made a sighing noise, and her hand stole to the crotch of his underpants.

He slid his other hand down and found a place where there was some heat. He pushed her down on her back.

“No,” she said, but the hand in his crotch began to move faster.

“I can see it,” he said. His heartbeat had sped up again, pushing blood faster, pushing warmth toward the surface of his chilled bare skin. “I can watch it.”

She murmured something, and he felt elastic slide down his hips to his upper thighs. He watched it. He slid upward, forward, into her. Warmth. God, she was warm there, at least. She made a guttural noise and her fingers grabbed at his cold, clenched buttocks.

He watched it. It wasn't moving. He watched it. He watched it closely. The tactile sensations were incredible, fantastic. He was not experienced, but neither was he a virgin; he had made love with three girls and it had never been like this. She moaned and began to lift her hips. The raft rocked gently, like the world's hardest waterbed. The barrels underneath murmured hollowly.

He watched it. The colors began to swirl—slowly now, sensuously, not threatening; he watched it and he watched the colors. His eyes were wide. The colors were in his eyes. He wasn't cold now; he was hot now, hot the way you got your first day back on the beach in early June, when you could feel the sun tightening your winter-white skin, reddening it, giving it some

(colors)

color, some tint. First day at the beach, first day of summer, drag out the Beach Boys oldies, drag out the Ramones. The Ramones were telling you that Sheena is a punk rocker, the Ramones were telling you that you can hitch a ride to Rockaway Beach, the sand, the beach, the colors

(moving it's starting to move)

and the feel of summer, the texture; Gary U.S. Bonds, school is out and I can root for the Yankees from the bleachers, girls in bikinis on the beach, the beach, the beach, oh do you love do you love

(love)

the beach do you love

(love I love)

firm breasts fragrant with Coppertone oil, and if the bottom of the bikini was small enough you might see some

(hair her hair HER HAIR IS IN THE OH GOD IN THE WATER HER HAIR)

He pulled back suddenly, trying to pull her up, but the thing moved with oily speed and tangled itself in her hair like a webbing of thick black glue and when he pulled her up she was already screaming and she was heavy with it; it came out of the water in a twisting, gruesome membrane that rolled with flaring nuclear colors—scarlet-vermilion, flaring emerald, sullen ocher.

It flowed down over LaVerne's face in a tide, obliterating it.

Her feet kicked and drummed. The thing twisted and moved where her face had been. Blood ran down her neck in streams. Screaming, not hearing himself scream, Randy ran at her, put his foot against her hip, and shoved. She went flopping and tumbling over the side, her legs like alabaster in the moonlight. For a few endless moments the water frothed and splashed against the side of the raft, as if someone had hooked the world's largest bass in there and it was fighting like hell.

Randy screamed. He screamed. And then, for variety, he screamed some more.

Some half an hour later, long after the frantic splashing and struggling had ended, the loons began to scream back.

That night was forever.

The sky began to lighten in the east around a quarter to five, and he felt a sluggish rise in his spirit. It was momentary; as false as the

dawn. He stood on the boards, his eyes half closed, his chin on his chest. He had been sitting on the boards until an hour ago, and had been suddenly awakened—without even knowing until then that he had fallen asleep, that was the scary part—by that unspeakable hissing-canvas sound. He leaped to his feet bare seconds before the blackness began to suck eagerly for him between the boards. His breath whined in and out; he bit at his lip, making it bleed.

Asleep, you were asleep, you asshole!

The thing had oozed out from under again half an hour later, but he hadn't sat down again. He was afraid to sit down, afraid he would go to sleep and that this time his mind wouldn't trip him awake in time.

His feet were still planted squarely on the boards as a stronger light, real dawn this time, filled the east and the first morning birds began to sing. The sun came up, and by six o'clock the day was bright enough for him to be able to see the beach. Deke's Camaro, bright yellow, was right where Deke had parked it, nose in to the pole fence. A bright litter of shirts and sweaters and four pairs of jeans were twisted into little shapes along the beach. The sight of them filled him with fresh horror when he thought his capacity for horror must surely be exhausted. He could see his jeans, one leg pulled inside out, the pocket showing. His jeans looked so safe lying there on the sand; just waiting for him to come along and pull the inside-out leg back through so it was right, grasping the pocket as he did so the change wouldn't fall out. He could almost feel them whispering up his legs, could feel himself buttoning the brass button above the fly—

(do you love yes I love)

He looked left and there it was, black, round as a checker, floating lightly. Colors began to swirl across its hide and he looked away quickly.

"Go home," he croaked. "Go home or go to California and find a Roger Corman movie to audition for."

A plane droned somewhere far away, and he fell into a dozing fantasy: We are reported missing, the four of us. The search spreads outward from Horlicks. A farmer remembers being passed by a yellow Camaro “going like a bat out of hell.” The search centers in the Cascade Lake area. Private pilots volunteer to do a quick aerial search, and one guy, buzzing the lake in his Beechcraft Twin Bonanza, sees a kid standing naked on the raft, one kid, one survivor, one—

He caught himself on the edge of toppling over and brought his fist into his nose again, screaming at the pain.

The black thing arrowed at the raft immediately and squeezed underneath—it could hear, perhaps, or sense ... or something.

Randy waited.

This time it was forty-five minutes before it came out.

His mind slowly orbited in the growing light.

(do you love yes I love rooting for the Yankees and Catfish do you love the Catfish yes I love the

(Route 66 remember the Corvette George Maharis in the Corvette Martin Milner in the Corvette do you love the Corvette

(yes I love the Corvette

(I love do you love

(so hot the sun is like a burning glass it was in her hair and it's the light I remember best the light the summer light

(the summer light of)

afternoon.

Randy was crying.

He was crying because something new had been added now—every time he tried to sit down, the thing slid under the raft. It wasn't entirely stupid, then; it had either sensed or figured out that it could get at him while he was sitting down.

“Go away,” Randy wept at the great black mole floating on the water. Fifty yards away, mockingly close, a squirrel was scampering back and forth on the hood of Deke's Camaro. “Go away, please, go anywhere, but leave me alone. I don't love you.”

The thing didn't move. Colors began to swirl across its visible surface.

(you do you do love me)

Randy tore his eyes away and looked at the beach, looked for rescue, but there was no one there, no one at all. His jeans still lay there, one leg inside out, the white lining of one pocket showing. They no longer looked to him as if someone was going to pick them up. They looked like relics.

He thought: If I had a gun, I would kill myself now.

He stood on the raft.

The sun went down.

Three hours later, the moon came up.

Not long after that, the loons began to scream.

Not long after that, Randy turned and looked at the black thing on the water. He could not kill himself, but perhaps the thing could fix it so there was no pain; perhaps that was what the colors were for.

(do you do you do you love)

He looked for it and it was there, floating, riding the waves.

“Sing with me,” Randy croaked. “I can root for the Yankees from the bleachers ... I don’t have to worry ‘bout teachers ... I’m so glad that school is out ... I am gonna ... sing and shout.”

The colors began to form and twist. This time Randy did not look away.

He whispered, “Do you love?”

Somewhere, far across the empty lake, a loon screamed.

*

“The Raft”—I wrote this story in the year 1968 as “The Float.” In late 1969 I sold it to Adam magazine, which—like most of the girlie magazines—paid not on acceptance but only on publication. The amount promised was two hundred and fifty dollars.

In the spring of 1970, while creeping home in my white Ford station wagon from the University Motor Inn at 12:30 in the morning, I ran over a number of traffic cones which were guarding a crosswalk that had been painted that day. The paint had dried, but no one had bothered to take the cones in when it got dark. One of them bounced up and knocked my muffler loose from the rotted remains of my tailpipe. I was immediately suffused with the sort of towering, righteous rage which only drunk undergraduates can feel. I decided to circle the town of Orono, picking up traffic cones. I would leave them all in front of the police station the next morning, with a note saying that I had saved numerous mufflers and exhaust systems from extinction, and ought to get a medal.

I got about a hundred and fifty before blue lights started to swirl around in the rearview mirror.

I will never forget the Orono cop turning to me after a long, long look into the back of my station wagon and asking: “Son, are those traffic cones yours?”

The cones were confiscated and so was I; that night I was a guest of the town of Orono, that crossword-puzzle favorite. A month or so later, I was brought to trial in Bangor District Court on a charge of petty larceny. I was my own attorney and did indeed have a fool for a client. I was fined two hundred and fifty dollars, which I of course did not have. I was given seven days to come up with it, or do thirty more days as a guest of Penobscot County. I probably could have borrowed it from my mother, but the circumstances were not easy to understand (unless you had a skinful of booze, that was).

Although one is now not supposed to ever use a deus ex machina in his or her fiction because these gods from the machine are not believable, I notice that they arrive all the time in real life. Mine came three days after the judge levied my fine and arrived in the form of a check from Adam magazine for two hundred and fifty dollars. It was for my story "The Float." It was like having someone send you a real Get Out of Jail Free card. I cashed the check immediately and paid my fine. I determined to go straight and give all traffic cones a wide berth thereafter. Straight I have not exactly gone, but believe me when I tell you I'm quits with the cones.

But here's the thing: Adam paid only on publication, dammit, and since I got the money, the story must have come out. But no copy was ever sent to me, and I never saw one on the stands, although I checked regularly—I would simply push my way in between the dirty old men checking out such literary pinnacles as Boobs and Buns and Spanking Lesbians and thumb through every magazine the Knight Publishing Company put out. I never saw that story in any of them.

Somewhere along the way I lost the original manuscript, too. I got to thinking about the story again in 1981, some thirteen years later. I was in Pittsburgh, where the final Creepshow editing was going on, and I was bored. So I decided to have a go at re-creating that story, and the result was "The Raft. It is the same as the original in terms of event, but I believe it is far more gruesome in its specifics.

Anyway, if anyone out there has ever seen "The Float," or even if someone has a copy, could you send me a Xerox copy or

something? Even a postcard confirming the fact that I'm not crazy? It would have been in Adam, or Adam Quarterly, or (most likely) Adam Bedside Reader (not much of a name, I know, I know, but in those days I only had two pairs of pants and three pairs of underwear, and beggars can't be choosers, and it was a lot better than Spanking Lesbians, let me tell you). I'd just like to make sure it was published someplace other than the Dead Zone.

NIGHTMARES & DREAMSCAPES
RAINY SEASON



RAINY SEASON

Stephen King

It was half past five in the afternoon by the time John and Elise Graham finally found their way into the little village that lay at the center of Willow, Maine, like a fleck of grit at the center of some dubious pearl. The village was less than five miles from the Hempstead Place, but they took two wrong turns on the way. When they finally arrived on Main Street, both of them were hot and out of sorts. The Ford's air-conditioner had dropped dead on the trip from St. Louis, and it felt about a hundred and ten outside. Of course it wasn't anything at all like that, John Graham thought. As the old-timers said, it wasn't the heat, it was the humidity. He felt that today it would be almost possible to reach out and wring warm dribbles of water from the air itself. The sky overhead was a clear and open blue, but that high humidity made it feel as if it were going to rain any minute. Fuck that—it felt as if it were raining already.

“There's the market Milly Cousins told us about,” Elise said, and pointed.

John grunted. “Doesn't exactly look like the supermarket of the future.”

“No,” Elise agreed carefully. They were both being careful. They had been married almost two years and they still loved each other very much, but it had been a long trip across country from St. Louis, especially in a car with a broken radio and air-conditioner. John had every hope they would enjoy the summer here in Willow (they ought to, with the University of Missouri picking up the tab), but he thought it might take as long as a week for them to settle in and settle down. And when the weather turned yellow-dog hot like this, an argument could spin itself out of thin air. Neither of them wanted that kind of start to their summer.

John drove slowly down Main Street toward the Willow General Mercantile and Hardware. There was a rusty sign with a blue eagle on it hanging from one corner of the porch, and he understood this was also the postal substation. The General Mercantile looked sleepy in the afternoon light, with one single car, a beat-to-shit Volvo,

parked beside the sign advertising ITALIAN SANDWICHES PIZZA GROCS * FISHING LICENCES, but compared with the rest of the town, it seemed to be all but bursting with life. There was a neon beer sign fizzing away in the window, although it would not be dark for almost three hours yet. Pretty radical, John thought. Sure hope the owner cleared that sign with the Board of Selectmen before he put it in.

“I thought Maine turned into Vacationland in the summer,” Elise murmured.

“Judging from what we’ve seen so far, I think Willow must be a little off the tourist track,” he replied.

They got out of the car and mounted the porch steps. An elderly man in a straw hat sat in a rocker with a cane seat, looking at them from shrewd little blue eyes. He was fiddling a home-made cigarette together and dribbling little bits of tobacco on the dog which lay crashed out at his feet. It was a big yellow dog of no particular make or model. Its paws lay directly beneath one of the rocker’s curved runners. The old man took no notice of the dog, seemed not even to realize it was there, but the runner stopped a quarter of an inch from the vulnerable paws each time the old man rocked forward. Elise found this unaccountably fascinating.

“Good day to ye, lady n man,” the old gentleman said.

“Hello,” Elise answered, and offered him a small, tentative smile.

“Hi,” John said. “I’m—”

“Mr. Graham,” the old man finished placidly. “Mr. and Missus Graham. Ones that took the Hempstead Place for the summer. Heard you was writin some kind of book.”

“On the in-migration of the French during the seventeenth century,” John agreed. “Word sure gets around, doesn’t it?”

“It do travel,” the old party agreed. “Small town, don’tcha know.” He stuck the cigarette in his mouth, where it promptly fell apart, sprinkling tobacco all over his legs and the dog’s limp hide. The dog didn’t stir. “Aw, flapdoodle,” the old man said, and peeled the uncoiling paper from his lower lip. “Wife doesn’t want me to smoke nummore anyway. She says she read it’s givin her cancer as well as m’ownself.”

“We came into town to get a few supplies,” Elise said. “It’s a wonderful old house, but the cupboard is bare.”

“Ayuh,” the old man said. “Good to meet you folks. I’m Henry Eden.” He hung one bunched hand out in their direction. John shook with him, and Elise followed suit. They both did so with care, and the old man nodded as if to say he appreciated it. “I expected you half an hour ago. Must have taken a wrong turn or two, I guess. Got a lot of roads for such a small town, you know.” He laughed. It was a hollow, bronchial sound that turned into a phlegmy smoker’s cough. “Got a power of roads in Willow, oh, ayuh!” And laughed some more.

John was frowning a little. “Why would you be expecting us?”

“Lucy Doucette called, said she saw the new folks go by,” Eden said. He took out his pouch of Top tobacco, opened it, reached inside, and fished out a packet of rolling papers. “You don’t know Lucy, but she says you know her grandniece, Missus.”

“This is Milly Cousins’s great-aunt we’re talking about?” Elise asked.

“Yessum,” Eden agreed. He began to sprinkle tobacco. Some of it landed on the cigarette paper, but most went onto the dog below. Just as John Graham was beginning to wonder if maybe the dog was dead, it lifted its tail and farted. So much for that idea, he thought. “In Willow, just about everybody’s related to everybody else. Lucy lives down at the foot of the hill. I was gonna call you m’self, but since she said you was comin in anyway ...”

“How did you know we’d be coming here?” John asked.

Henry Eden shrugged, as if to say *Where else is there to go?*

“Did you want to talk to us?” Elise asked.

“Well, I kinda have to,” Eden said. He sealed his cigarette and stuck it in his mouth. John waited to see if it would fall apart, as the other one had. He felt mildly disoriented by all this, as if he had walked unknowingly into some bucolic version of the CIA.

The cigarette somehow held together. There was a charred scrap of sandpaper tacked to one of the arms of the rocker. Eden struck the match on it and applied the flame to his cigarette, half of which incinerated on contact.

“I think you and Missus might want to spend tonight out of town,” he finally said.

John blinked at him. “Out of town? Why would we want to do that? We just got here.”

“Good idea, though, mister,” a voice said from behind Eden.

The Grahams looked around and saw a tall woman with slumped shoulders standing inside the Mercantile’s rusty screen door. Her face looked out at them from just above an old tin sign advertising Chesterfield cigarettes—**TWENTY-ONE GREAT TOBACCOS MAKE TWENTY WONDERFUL SMOKES**. She opened the door and came out on the porch. Her face looked sallow and tired but not stupid. She had a loaf of bread in one hand and a six-pack of Dawson’s Ale in the other.

“I’m Laura Stanton,” she said. “It’s very nice to meet you. We don’t like to seem unsociable in Willow, but it’s the rainy season here tonight.”

John and Elise exchanged bewildered glances. Elise looked at the sky. Except for a few small fair-weather clouds, it was a lucid, unblemished blue.

“I know how it looks,” the Stanton woman said, “but that doesn’t mean anything, does it, Henry?”

“No’m,” Eden said. He took one giant drag on his eroded cigarette and then pitched it over the porch rail.

“You can feel the humidity in the air,” the Stanton woman said. “That’s the key, isn’t it, Henry?”

“Well,” Eden allowed, “ayuh. But it is seven years. To the day.”

“The very day,” Laura Stanton agreed.

They both looked expectantly at the Grahams.

“Pardon me,” Elise said at last. “I don’t understand any of this. Is it some sort of local joke?”

This time Henry Eden and Laura Stanton exchanged the glances, then sighed at exactly the same moment, as if on cue.

“I hate this,” Laura Stanton said, although whether to the old man or to herself John Graham had no idea.

“Got to be done,” Eden replied.

She nodded, then sighed. It was the sigh of a woman who has set down a heavy burden and knows she must now pick it up again.

“This doesn’t come up very often,” she said, “because the rainy season only comes in Willow every seven years—”

“June seventeenth,” Eden put in. “Rainy season every seven years on June seventeenth. Never changes, not even in leap-year. It’s only one night, but rainy season’s what it’s always been called. Damned if I know why. Do you know why, Laura?”

“No,” she said, “and I wish you’d stop interrupting, Henry. I think you’re getting senile.”

“Well, pardon me for livin, I just fell off the hearse,” the old man said, clearly nettled.

Elise threw John a glance that was a little frightened. Are these people having us on? it asked. Or are they both crazy?

John didn't know, but he wished heartily that they had gone to Augusta for their supplies; they could have gotten a quick supper at one of the clam-stands along Route 17.

“Now listen,” the Stanton woman said kindly. “We reserved a room for you at the Wonderview Motel out on the Woolwich Road, if you want it. The place was full, but the manager's my cousin, and he was able to clear one room out for me. You could come back tomorrow and spend the rest of the summer with us. We'd be glad to have you.”

“If this is a joke, I'm not getting the point,” John said.

“No, it's not a joke,” she said. She glanced at Eden, who gave her a brisk little nod, as if to say Go on, don't quit now. The woman looked back at John and Elise, appeared to steel herself, and said, “You see, folks, it rains toads here in Willow every seven years. There. Now you know.”

“Toads,” Elise said in a distant, musing, Tell-me-I'm-dreaming-all-this voice.

“Toads, ayuh!” Henry Eden affirmed cheerfully.

John was looking cautiously around for help, if help should be needed. But Main Street was utterly deserted. Not only that, he saw, but shuttered. Not a car moved on the road. Not a single pedestrian was visible on either sidewalk.

We could be in trouble here, he thought. If these people are as nutty as they sound, we could be in real trouble. He suddenly found

himself thinking of Shirley Jackson's short story "The Lottery" for the first time since he'd read it in junior high school.

"Don't you get the idea that I'm standin here and soundin like a fool 'cause I want to," Laura Stanton said. "Fact is, I'm just doin my duty. Henry, too. You see, it doesn't just sprinkle toads. It pours."

"Come on," John said to Elise, taking her arm above the elbow. He gave them a smile that felt as genuine as a six-dollar bill. "Nice to meet you folks." He guided Elise down the porch steps, looking back over his shoulder at the old man and the slump-shouldered, pallid woman two or three times as he did. It didn't seem like a good idea to turn his back on them completely.

The woman took a step toward them, and John almost stumbled and fell off the last step.

"It is a little hard to believe," she agreed. "You probably think I am just as nutty as a fruitcake."

"Not at all," John said. The large, phony smile on his face now felt as if it were approaching the lobes of his ears. Dear Jesus, why had he ever left St. Louis? He had driven nearly fifteen hundred miles with a busted radio and air-conditioner to meet Farmer Jekyll and Missus Hyde.

"That's all right, though," Laura Stanton said, and the weird serenity in her face and voice made him stop by the ITALIAN SANDWICHES sign, still six feet from the Ford. "Even people who have heard of rains of frogs and toads and birds and such don't have a very clear idea of what happens in Willow every seven years. Take a little advice, though: if you are going to stay, you'd be well off to stay in the house. You'll most likely be all right in the house."

"Might want to close y'shutters, though," Eden added. The dog lifted his tail and articulated another long and groaning dog-fart, as if to emphasize the point.

“We’ll... we’ll do that,” Elise said faintly, and then John had the Ford’s passenger door open and was nearly shovelling her inside.

“You bet,” he said through his large frozen grin.

“And come back and see us tomorrow,” Eden called as John hurried around the front of the Ford to his side. “You’ll feel a mite safer around us tomorrow, I think.” He paused, then added: “If you’re still around at all, accourse.”

John waved, got behind the wheel, and pulled out.

*

There was silence on the porch for a moment as the old man and the woman with the pale, unhealthy skin watched the Ford head back up Main Street. It left at a considerably higher speed than that at which it had come.

“Well, we done it,” the old man said contentedly.

“Yes,” she agreed, “and I feel like a horse’s ass. I always feel like a horse’s ass when I see the way they look at us. At me.”

“Well,” he said, “it’s only once every seven years. And it has to be done just that way. Because—”

“Because it’s part of the ritual,” she said glumly.

“Ayuh. It’s the ritual.”

As if agreeing it was so, the dog flipped up his tail and farted once more.

The woman booted it and then turned to the old man with her hands clamped on her hips. “That is the stinkiest mutt in four towns, Henry Eden!”

The dog arose with a grunt and staggered down the porch stairs, pausing only long enough to favor Laura Stanton with a reproachful gaze.

“He can’t help it,” Eden said.

She sighed, looking up the road after the Ford. “It’s too bad,” she said. “They seem like such nice people.”

“Nor can we help that,” Henry Eden said, and began to roll another smoke.

*

So the Grahams ended up eating dinner at a clam-stand after all. They found one in the neighboring town of Woolwich (“Home of the scenic Wonderview Motel,” John pointed out to Elise in a vain effort to raise a smile) and sat at a picnic table under an old, overspreading blue spruce. The clam-stand was in sharp, almost jarring contrast to the buildings on Willow’s Main Street. The parking lot was nearly full (most of the cars, like theirs, had out-of-state licence plates), and yelling kids with ice cream on their faces chased after one another while their parents strolled about, slapped blackflies, and waited for their numbers to be announced over the loudspeaker. The stand had a fairly wide menu. In fact, John thought, you could have just about anything you wanted, as long as it wasn’t too big to fit in a deep-fat fryer.

“I don’t know if I can spend two days in that town, let alone two months,” Elise said. “The bloom is off the rose for this mother’s daughter, Johnny.”

“It was a joke, that’s all. The kind the natives like to play on the tourists. They just went too far with it. They’re probably kicking themselves for that right now.”

“They looked serious,” she said. “How am I supposed to go back there and face that old man after that?”

“I wouldn’t worry about it—judging from his cigarettes, he’s reached the stage of life where he’s meeting everyone for the first time. Even his oldest friends.”

Elise tried to control the twitching corners of her mouth, then gave up and burst out laughing. “You’re evil!”

“Honest, maybe, but not evil. I won’t say he had Alzheimer’s, but he did look as if he might need a roadmap to find his way to the bathroom.”

“Where do you suppose everyone else was? The town looked totally deserted.”

“Bean supper at the Grange or a card-party at the Eastern Star, probably,” John said, stretching. He peeked into her clam basket. “You didn’t eat much, love.”

“Love wasn’t very hungry.”

“I tell you it was just a joke,” he said, taking her hands. “Lighten up.”

“You’re really, really sure that’s all it was?”

“Really-really. I mean, hey—every seven years it rains toads in Willow, Maine? It sounds like an outtake from a Steven Wright monologue.”

She smiled wanly. “It doesn’t rain,” she said, “it pours.”

“They subscribe to the old fisherman’s credo, I guess—if you’re going to tell one, tell a whopper. When I was a kid at sleep-away camp, it used to be snipe hunts. This really isn’t much different. And when you stop to think about it, it really isn’t that surprising.”

“What isn’t?”

“That people who make most of their yearly income dealing with summer people should develop a summer-camp mentality.”

“That woman didn’t act like it was a joke. I’ll tell you the truth, Johnny—she sort of scared me.”

John Graham’s normally pleasant face grew stern and hard. The expression did not look at home on his face, but neither did it look faked or insincere.

“I know,” he said, picking up their wrappings and napkins and plastic baskets. “And there’s going to be an apology made for that. I find foolishness for the sake of foolishness agreeable enough, but when someone scares my wife—hell, they scared me a little, too—I draw the line. Ready to go back?”

“Can you find it again?”

He grinned, and immediately looked more like himself. “I left a trail of breadcrumbs.”

“How wise you are, my darling,” she said, and got up. She was smiling again, and John was glad to see it. She drew a deep breath—it did wonders for the front of the blue chambray work-shirt she was wearing—and let it out. “The humidity seems to have dropped.”

“Yeah.” John deposited their waste into a trash basket with a left-handed hook shot and then winked at her. “So much for rainy season.”

*

But by the time they turned onto the Hempstead Road, the humidity had returned, and with a vengeance. John felt as if his own tee-shirt had turned into a clammy mass of cobweb clinging to his chest and back. The sky, now turning a delicate shade of evening primrose, was still clear, but he felt that, if he’d had a straw, he could have drunk directly from the air.

There was only one other house on the road, at the foot of the long hill with the Hempstead Place at the top. As they drove past it, John

saw the silhouette of a woman standing motionless at one of the windows and looking out at them.

“Well, there’s your friend Milly’s great-aunt,” John said. “She sure was a sport to call the local crazies down at the general store and tell them we were coming. I wonder if they would have dragged out the whoopee cushions and joy-buzzers and chatter teeth if we’d stayed a little longer.”

“That dog had his own built-in joy-buzzer.”

John laughed and nodded.

Five minutes later they were turning into their own driveway. It was badly overgrown with weeds and dwarf bushes, and John intended to take care of that little situation before the summer got much older. The Hempstead Place itself was a rambling country farmhouse, added to by succeeding generations whenever the need—or maybe just the urge—to do some building happened to strike. A barn stood behind it, connected to the house by three rambling, zig-zag sheds. In this flush of early summer, two of the three sheds were almost buried in fragrant drifts of honeysuckle.

It commanded a gorgeous view of the town, especially on a clear night like this one. John wondered briefly just how it could be so clear when the humidity was so high. Elise joined him in front of the car and they stood there for a moment, arms around each other’s waists, looking at the hills which rolled gently off in the direction of Augusta, losing themselves in the shadows of evening.

“It’s beautiful,” she murmured.

“And listen,” he said.

There was a marshy area of reeds and high grass fifty yards or so behind the barn, and in it a chorus of frogs sang and thumped and snapped the elastics God had for some reason stretched in their throats.

“Well,” she said, “the frogs are all present and accounted for, anyway.”

“No toads, though.” He looked up at the clear sky, in which Venus had now opened her coldly burning eye. “There they are, Elise! Up there! Clouds of toads!”

She giggled.

” ‘Tonight in the small town of Willow,’ ” he intoned, ” ‘a cold front of toads met a warm front of newts, and the result was—’ “

She elbowed him. “You,” she said. “Let’s go in.”

They went in. And did not pass Go. And did not collect two hundred dollars.

They went directly to bed.

*

Elise was startled out of a satisfying drowse an hour or so later by a thump on the roof. She got up on her elbows. “What was that, Johnny?”

“Huzz,” John said, and turned over on his side.

Toads, she thought, and giggled ... but it was a nervous giggle. She got up and went to the window, and before she looked for anything which might have fallen on the ground, she found herself looking up at the sky.

It was still cloudless, and now shot with a trillion spangled stars. She looked at them, for a moment hypnotized by their simple silent beauty.

Thud.

She jerked back from the window and looked up at the ceiling. Whatever it was, it had hit the roof just overhead.

“John! Johnny! Wake up!”

“Huh? What?” He sat up, his hair all tangled tufts and clock-springs.

“It’s started,” she said, and giggled shrilly. “The rain of frogs.”

“Toads,” he corrected. “Ellie, what are you talking ab—”

Thud-thud.

He looked around, then swung his feet out of bed.

“This is ridiculous,” he said softly and angrily.

“What do you m—”

Thud-CRASH! There was a tinkle of glass downstairs.

“Oh, goddam,” he said, getting up and yanking on his blue-jeans. “Enough. This is just ... fucking ... enough.”

Several soft thuds hit the side of the house and the roof. She cringed against him, frightened now. “What do you mean?”

“I mean that crazy woman and probably the old man and some of their friends are out there throwing things at the house,” he said, “and I am going to put a stop to it right now. Maybe they’ve held onto the custom of shivareeing the new folks in this little town, but—”

THUD! SMASH! From the kitchen.

“God-DAMN!” John yelled, and ran out into the hall.

“Don’t leave me!” Elise cried, and ran after him.

He flicked up the hallway light-switch before plunging downstairs. Soft thumps and thuds struck the house in an increasing rhythm, and Elise had time to think, How many people from town are out there? How many does it take to do that? And what are they throwing? Rocks wrapped in pillow-cases?

John reached the foot of the stairs and went into the living room. There was a large window in there which gave on the same view which they had admired earlier. The window was broken. Shards and splinters of glass lay scattered across the rug. He started toward the window, meaning to yell something at them about how he was going to get his shotgun. Then he looked at the broken glass again, remembered that his feet were bare, and stopped. For a moment he didn't know what to do. Then he saw a dark shape lying in the broken glass—the rock one of the imbecilic, interbred bastards had used to break the window, he assumed—and saw red. He might have charged to the window anyway, bare feet or no bare feet, but just then the rock twitched.

That's no rock, he thought. That's a—

“John?” Elise asked. The house rang with those soft thuds now. It was as if they were being bombarded with large, rotten-soft hailstones. “John, what is it?”

“A toad,” he said stupidly. He was still looking at the twitching shape in the litter of broken glass, and spoke more to himself than to his wife.

He raised his eyes and looked out the window. What he saw out there struck him mute with horror and incredulity. He could no longer see the hills or the horizon—hell, he could barely see the barn, and that was less than forty feet away.

The air was stuffed with falling shapes.

Three more of them came in through the broken window. One landed on the floor, not far from its twitching mate. It came down on a sharp

sliver of window-glass and black fluid burst from its body in thick ropes.

Elise screamed.

The other two caught in the curtains, which began to twist and jerk as if in a fitful breeze. One of them managed to disentangle itself. It struck the floor and then hopped toward John.

He groped at the wall with a hand which felt as if it were no part of him at all. His fingers stumbled across the light-switch and flipped it up.

The thing hopping across the glass-littered floor toward him was a toad, but it was also not a toad. Its green-black body was too large, too lumpy. Its black-and-gold eyes bulged like freakish eggs. And bursting from its mouth, unhinging the jaw, was a bouquet of large, needle-sharp teeth.

It made a thick croaking noise and bounded at John as if on springs. Behind it, more toads were falling in through the window. The ones which struck the floor had either died outright or been crippled, but many others—too many others—used the curtains as a safety-net and tumbled to the floor unharmed.

“Get out of here!” John yelled to his wife, and kicked at the toad which—it was insane, but it was true—was attacking him. It did not flinch back from his foot but sank that mouthful of crooked needles first over and then into his toes. The pain was immediate, fiery, and immense. Without thinking, he made a half-turn and kicked the wall as hard as he could. He felt his toes break, but the toad broke as well, splattering its black blood onto the wainscoting in a half-circle, like a fan. His toes had become a crazy road-sign, pointing in all directions at once.

Elise was standing frozen in the hall doorway. She could now hear window-glass shattering all over the house. She had put on one of John’s tee-shirts after they had finished making love, and now she

was clutching the neck of it with both hands. The air was full of ugly croaking sounds.

“Get out, Elise!” John screamed. He turned, shaking his bloody foot. The toad which had bitten him was dead, but its huge and improbable teeth were still caught in his flesh like a tangle of fishhooks. This time he kicked at the air, like a man punting a football, and the toad finally flew free.

The faded living-room carpet was now covered with bloated, hopping bodies. And they were all hopping at them.

John ran to the doorway. His foot came down on one of the toads and burst it open. His heel skidded in the cold jelly which popped out of its body and he almost fell. Elise relinquished her death-grip on the neck of her tee-shirt and grabbed him. They stumbled into the hall together and John slammed the door, catching one of the toads in the act of hopping through. The door cut it in half. The top half twitched and juddered on the floor, its toothy, black-lipped mouth opening and closing, its black-and-golden pop-eyes goggling at them.

Elise clapped her hands to the sides of her face and began to wail hysterically. John reached out to her. She shook her head and cringed away from him, her hair falling over her face.

The sound of the toads hitting the roof was bad, but the croakings and chirrupings were worse, because these latter sounds were coming from inside the house ... and all over the house. He thought of the old man sitting on the porch of the General Mercantile in his rocker, calling after them: Might want to close y’shutters.

Christ, why didn’t I believe him?

And, on the heels of that: How was I supposed to believe him?
Nothing in my whole life prepared me to believe him!

And, below the sound of toads thudding onto the ground outside and toads squashing themselves to guts and goo on the roof, he heard a more ominous sound: the chewing, splintering sound of the toads in the living room starting to bite their way through the door. He could actually see it settling more firmly against its hinges as more and more toads crowded their weight against it.

He turned around and saw toads hopping down the main staircase by the dozens.

“Elise!” He grabbed at her. She kept shrieking and pulling away from him. A sleeve of the tee-shirt tore free. He looked at the ragged chunk of cloth in his hand with perfect stupidity for a moment and then let it flutter down to the floor.

“Elise, goddammit!”

She shrieked and drew back again.

Now the first toads had reached the hall floor and were hopping eagerly toward them. There was a brittle tinkle as the fanlight over the door shattered. A toad whizzed through it, struck the carpet, and lay on its back, mottled pink belly exposed, webbed feet twitching in the air.

He grabbed his wife, shook her. “We have to go down cellar! We’ll be safe in the cellar!”

“No!” Elise screamed at him. Her eyes were giant floating zeros, and he understood she was not refusing his idea of retreating to the cellar but refusing everything.

There was no time for gentle measures or soothing words. He bunched the front of the shirt she was wearing in his fist and yanked her down the hall like a cop dragging a recalcitrant prisoner to a squad-car. One of the toads which had been in the vanguard of those hurrying down the stairs leaped gigantically and snicked its

mouthful of darning-needles shut around a chunk of space occupied by Elise's bare heel a second before.

Halfway down the hall, she got the idea and began to come with him of her own accord. They reached the door. John turned the knob and yanked it, but the door wouldn't move.

"Goddam!" he cried, and yanked it again. No good. Nothing.

"John, hurry!"

She looked back over her shoulder and saw toads flooding down the hall toward them, taking huge crazy sproings over each other's back, falling on each other, striking the faded Rambler-rose wallpaper, landing on their backs and being overrun by their mates. They were all teeth and gold-black eyes and heaving, leathery bodies.

"JOHN, PLEASE! PL—"

Then one of them leaped and batted on her left thigh just above the knee. Elise screamed and seized it, her fingers punching through its skin and into its dark liquid workings. She tore it free and for a moment, as she raised her arms, the horrid thing was right in front of her eyes, its teeth gnashing like a piece of some small but homicidal factory machine. She threw it as hard as she could. It cartwheeled in the air and then splattered against the wall just opposite the kitchen door. It did not fall but stuck fast in the glue of its own guts.

"JOHN! OH JESUS, JOHN!"

John Graham suddenly realized what he was doing wrong. He reversed the direction of his effort, pushing the door instead of pulling it. It flew open, almost spilling him forward and down the stairs, and he wondered briefly if his mother had had any kids that lived. He flailed at the railing, caught hold of it, and then Elise almost knocked him down again, bolting past him and down the stairs, screaming like a firebell in the night.

Oh she's going to fall, she can't help but fall, she's going to fall and break her neck—

But somehow she did not. She reached the cellar's earth floor and collapsed in a sobbing heap, clutching at her torn thigh.

Toads were leaping and hopping in through the open cellar doorway.

John caught his balance, turned, and slapped the door shut. Several of the toads caught on their side of the door leaped right off the landing, struck the stairs, and fell through the spaces between the risers. Another took an almost vertical leap straight up, and John was suddenly shaken by wild laughter—a sudden bright image of Mr. Toad of Toad Hall on a pogo-stick instead of in a motor-car had come to him. Still laughing, he balled his right hand into a fist and punched the toad dead center in its pulsing, flabby chest at the top of its leap, while it hung in perfect equilibrium between gravity and its own expended energy. It zoomed off into the shadows, and John heard a soft bonk! as it struck the furnace.

He scrabbled at the wall in the dark, and his fingers found the raised cylinder which was the old-fashioned toggle light-switch. He flipped it, and that was when Elise began to scream again. A toad had gotten tangled in her hair. It croaked and twisted and turned and bit at her neck, rolling itself into something which resembled a large, misshapen curler.

Elise lurched to her feet and ran in a large circle, miraculously avoiding a tumble over the boxes which had been stacked and stored down here. She struck one of the cellar's support posts, rebounded, then turned and banged the back of her head twice, briskly, against it. There was a thick gushing sound, a squirt of black fluid, and then the toad fell out of her hair, tumbling down the back of her tee-shirt, leaving dribbles of ichor.

She screamed, and the lunacy in that sound chilled John's blood. He half-ran, half-stumbled down the cellar stairs and enfolded her in his

arms. She fought him at first and then surrendered. Her screams gradually dissolved into steady weeping.

Then, over the soft thunder of the toads striking the house and the grounds, they heard the croaking of the toads which had fallen down here. She drew away from him, her eyes shifting wildly from side to side in their shiny-white sockets.

“Where are they?” she panted. Her voice was hoarse, almost a bark, from all the screaming she had done. “Where are they, John?”

But they didn’t have to look; the toads had already seen them, and came hopping eagerly toward them.

The Grahams retreated, and John saw a rusty shovel leaning against the wall. He grabbed it and beat the toads to death with it as they came. Only one got past him. It leaped from the floor to a box and from the box it jumped at Elise, catching the cloth of her shirt in its teeth and dangling there between her breasts, legs kicking.

“Stand still!” John barked at her. He dropped the shovel, took two steps forward, grabbed the toad, and hauled it off her shirt. It took a chunk of cloth with it. The cotton strip hung from one of its fangs as it twisted and pulsed and wriggled in John’s hands. Its hide was warty, dry but horridly warm and somehow busy. He snapped his hands into fists, popping the toad. Blood and slime squirted out from between his fingers.

Less than a dozen of the little monsters had actually made it through the cellar door, and soon they were all dead. John and Elise clung to each other, listening to the steady rain of toads outside.

John looked over at the low cellar windows. They were packed and dark, and he suddenly saw the house as it must look from the outside, buried in a drift of squirming, lunging, leaping toads.

“We’ve got to block the windows,” he said hoarsely. “Their weight is going to break them, and if that happens, they’ll pour in.”

“With what?” Elise asked in her hoarse bark of a voice. “What can we use?”

He looked around and saw several sheets of plywood, elderly and dark, leaning against one wall. Not much, perhaps, but something.

“That,” he said. “Help me to break it up into smaller pieces.”

*

They worked quickly and frantically. There were only four windows in the cellar, and their very narrowness had caused the panes to hold longer than the larger windows upstairs had done. They were just finishing the last when they heard the glass of the first shatter behind the plywood ... but the plywood held.

They staggered into the middle of the cellar again, John limping on his broken foot.

From the top of the stairway came the sound of the toads eating their way through the cellar door.

“What do we do if they eat all the way through it?” Elise whispered.

“I don’t know,” he said ... and that was when the door of the coal-chute, unused for years but still intact, suddenly swung open under the weight of all the toads which had fallen or hopped into it, and hundreds of them poured out in a high-pressure jet.

This time Elise could not scream. She had damaged her vocal cords too badly for that.

It did not last long for the Grahams in the cellar after the coal-chute door gave way, but until it was over, John Graham screamed quite adequately for both of them.

*

By midnight, the downpour of toads in Willow had slackened off to a mild, croaking drizzle.

At one-thirty in the morning, the last toad fell out of the dark, starry sky, landed in a pine tree near the lake, hopped to the ground, and disappeared into the night. It was over for another seven years.

Around quarter past five, the first light began to creep into the sky and over the land. Willow was buried beneath a writhing, hopping, complaining carpet of toads. The buildings on Main Street had lost their angles and corners; everything was rounded and hunched and twitching. The sign on the highway which read WELCOME TO WILLOW, MAINE, THE FRIENDLY PLACE! looked as if someone had put about thirty shotgun shells through it. The holes, of course, had been made by flying toads. The sign in front of the General Mercantile which advertised ITALIAN SANDWICHES PIZZA GROCS * FISHING LICENCES had been knocked over. Toads played leapfrog on and around it. There was a small toad convention going on atop each of the gas-pumps at Donny's Sunoco. Two toads sat upon the slowly swinging iron arm of the weathervane atop the Willow Stove Shop like small misshapen children on a merry-go-round.

At the lake, the few floats which had been put out this early (only the hardiest swimmers dared the waters of Lake Willow before July 4th, however, toads or no toads) were piled high with toads, and the fish were going crazy with so much food almost within reach. Every now and then there was a plip! plip! sound as one or two of the toads jostling for place on the floats were knocked off and some hungry trout or salmon's breakfast was served. The roads in and out of town—there were a lot of them for such a small town, as Henry Eden had said—were paved with toads. The power was out for the time being; free-falling toads had broken the power-lines in any number of places. Most of the gardens were ruined, but Willow wasn't much of a farming community, anyway. Several people kept fairly large dairy herds, but they had all been safely tucked away for the night. Dairy farmers in Willow knew all about rainy season and had no wish to

lose their milkers to the hordes of leaping, carnivorous toads. What in the hell would you tell the insurance company?

As the light brightened over the Hempstead Place, it revealed drifts of dead toads on the roof, rain-gutters which had been splintered loose by dive-bombing toads, a dooryard that was alive with toads. They hopped in and out of the barn, they stuffed the chimneys, they hopped nonchalantly around the tires of John Graham's Ford and sat in croaking rows on the front seat like a church congregation waiting for the services to start. Heaps of toads, mostly dead, lay in drifts against the building. Some of these drifts were six feet deep.

At 6:05, the sun cleared the horizon, and as its rays struck them, the toads began to melt.

Their skins bleached, turned white, then appeared to become transparent. Soon a vapor which gave off a vaguely swampy smell began to trail up from the bodies and little bubbly rivulets of moisture began to course down them. Their eyes fell in or fell out, depending on their positions when the sun hit them. Their skins popped with an audible sound, and for perhaps ten minutes it sounded as if champagne corks were being drawn all over Willow.

They decomposed rapidly after that, melting into puddles of cloudy white shmeg that looked like human semen. This liquid ran down the pitches of the Hempstead Place's roof in little creeks and dripped from the eaves like pus.

The living toads died; the dead ones simply rotted to that white fluid. It bubbled briefly and then sank slowly into the ground. The earth sent up tiny ribands of steam, and for a little while every field in Willow looked like the site of a dying volcano.

By quarter of seven it was over, except for the repairs, and the residents were used to them.

It seemed a small price to pay for another seven years of quiet prosperity in this mostly forgotten Maine backwater.

*

At five past eight, Laura Stanton's beat-to-shit Volvo turned into the dooryard of the General Mercantile. When Laura got out, she looked paler and sicker than ever. She was sick, in fact; she still had the six-pack of Dawson's Ale in one hand, but now all the bottles were empty. She had a vicious hangover.

Henry Eden came out on the porch. His dog walked behind him.

"Get that mutt inside, or I'm gonna turn right around and go home," Laura said from the foot of the stairs.

"He can't help passing gas, Laura."

"That doesn't mean I have to be around when he lets rip," Laura said. "I mean it, now, Henry. My head hurts like a bastard, and the last thing I need this morning is listening to that dog play Hail Columbia out of its asshole."

"Go inside, Toby," Henry said, holding the door open.

Toby looked up at him with wet eyes, as if to say Do I have to? Things were just getting interesting out here.

"Go on, now," Henry said.

Toby walked back inside, and Henry shut the door. Laura waited until she heard the latch snick shut, and then she mounted the steps.

"Your sign fell over," she said, handing him the carton of empties.

"I got eyes, woman," Henry said. He was not in the best temper this morning, himself. Few people in Willow would be. Sleeping through a rain of toads was a goddam hard piece of work. Thank God it only came once every seven years, or a man would be apt to go shit out of his mind.

"You should have taken it in," she said.

Henry muttered something she didn't quite catch.

"What was that?"

"I said we should have tried harder," Henry said defiantly. "They was a nice young couple. We should have tried harder."

She felt a touch of compassion for the old man in spite of her thudding head, and laid a hand on his arm. "It's the ritual," she said.

"Well, sometimes I just feel like saying frig the ritual!"

"Henry!" She drew her hand back, shocked in spite of herself. But he wasn't getting any younger, she reminded herself. The wheels were getting a little rusty upstairs, no doubt.

"I don't care," he said stubbornly. "They seemed like a real nice young couple. You said so, too, and don't try to say you didn't."

"I did think they were nice," she said. "But we can't help that, Henry. Why, you said so yourself just last night."

"I know," he sighed.

"We don't make them stay," she said. "Just the opposite. We warn them out of town. They decide to stay themselves. They always decide to stay. They make their own decision. That's part of the ritual, too."

"I know," he repeated. He drew a deep breath and grimaced. "I hate the smell afterward. Whole goddam town smells like clabbered milk."

"It'll be gone by noon. You know that."

"Ayuh. But I just about hope I'm underground when it comes around again, Laura. And if I ain't, I hope somebody else gets the job of meetin whoever comes just before rainy season. I like bein able to pay m'bills when they come due just as well as anybody else, but I

tell you, a man gets tired of toads. Even if it is only once every seven years, a man can get damned tired of toads.”

“A woman, too,” she said softly.

“Well,” he said, looking around with a sigh, “I guess we might try puttin some of this damn mess right, don’t you?”

“Sure,” she said. “And, you know, Henry, we don’t make ritual, we only follow it.”

“I know, but—”

“And things could change. There’s no telling when or why, but they could. This might be the last time we have rainy season. Or next time no one from out of town might come—”

“Don’t say that,” he said fearfully. “If no one comes, the toads might not go away like they do when the sun hits em.”

“There, you see?” she asked. “You have come around to my side of it, after all.”

“Well,” he said, “it’s a long time. Ain’t it. Seven years is a long time.”

“Yes.”

“They was a nice young couple, weren’t they?”

“Yes,” she said again.

“Awful way to go,” Henry Eden said with a slight hitch in his voice, and this time she said nothing. After a moment, Henry asked her if she would help him set his sign up again. In spite of her nasty headache, Laura said she would—she didn’t like to see Henry so low, especially when he was feeling low over something he could control no more than he could control the tides or the phases of the moon.

By the time they'd finished, he seemed to feel a little better.

"Ayuh," he said. "Seven years is a hell of a long time."

It is, she thought, but it always passes, and rainy season always comes around again, and the outsiders come with it, always two of them, always a man and a woman, and we always tell them exactly what is going to happen, and they don't believe it, and what happens ... happens."

"Come on, you old crock," she said, "offer me a cup of coffee before my head splits wide open."

He offered her a cup, and before they had finished, the sounds of hammers and saws had begun in town. Outside the window they could look down Main Street and see people folding back their shutters, talking and laughing.

The air was warm and dry, the sky overhead was a pale and hazy blue, and in Willow, rainy season was over.

THE REACH
Stephen King

“The Reach was wider in those days,” Stella Flanders told her great-grandchildren in the last summer of her life, the summer before she began to see ghosts. The children looked at her with wide, silent eyes, and her son, Alden, turned from his seat on the porch where he was whittling. It was Sunday, and Alden wouldn’t take his boat out on Sundays no matter how high the price of lobster was.

“What do you mean, Gram?” Tommy asked, but the old woman did not answer. She only sat in her rocker by the cold stove, her slippers bumping placidly on the floor.

Tommy asked his mother: “What does she mean?”

Lois only shook her head, smiled, and sent them out with pots to pick berries.

Stella thought: She’s forgot. Or did she ever know?

The Reach had been wider in those days. If anyone knew it was so, that person was Stella Flanders. She had been born in 1884, she was the oldest resident of Goat Island, and she had never once in her life been to the mainland.

Do you love? This question had begun to plague her, and she did not even know what it meant.

Fall set in, a cold fall without the necessary rain to bring a really fine color to the trees, either on Goat or on Raccoon Head across the Reach. The wind blew long, cold notes that fall, and Stella felt each note resonate in her heart.

On November 19, when the first flurries came swirling down out of a sky the color of white chrome, Stella celebrated her birthday. Most of the village turned out. Hattie Stoddard came, whose mother had died of pleurisy in 1954 and whose father had been lost with the Dancer in 1941. Richard and Mary Dodge came, Richard moving slowly up the path on his cane, his arthritis riding him like an invisible

passenger. Sarah Havelock came, of course; Sarah's mother Annabelle had been Stella's best friend. They had gone to the island school together, grades one to eight, and Annabelle had married Tommy Frane, who had pulled her hair in the fifth grade and made her cry, just as Stella had married Bill Flanders, who had once knocked all of her schoolbooks out of her arms and into the mud (but she had managed not to cry). Now both Annabelle and Tommy were gone and Sarah was the only one of their seven children still on the island. Her husband, George Havelock, who had been known to everyone as Big George, had died a nasty death over on the mainland in 1967, the year there was no fishing. An ax had slipped in Big George's hand, there had been blood—too much of it! —and an island funeral three days later. And when Sarah came in to Stella's party and cried, "Happy birthday, Gram!" Stella hugged her tight and closed her eyes

(do you do you love?)

but she did not cry.

There was a tremendous birthday cake. Hattie had made it with her best friend, Vera Spruce. The assembled company bellowed out "Happy Birthday to You" in a combined voice that was loud enough to drown out the wind ... for a little while, anyway. Even Alden sang, who in the normal course of events would sing only "Onward, Christian Soldiers" and the doxology in church and would mouth the words of all the rest with his head hunched and his big old jug ears just as red as tomatoes. There were ninety-five candles on Stella's cake, and even over the singing she heard the wind, although her hearing was not what it once had been.

She thought the wind was calling her name.

"I was not the only one," she would have told Lois's children if she could. "In my day there were many that lived and died on the island. There was no mail boat in those days; Bull Symes used to bring the mail when there was mail. There was no ferry, either. If you had business on the Head, your man took you in the lobster boat. So far

as I know, there wasn't a flushing toilet on the island until 1946. 'Twas Bull's boy Harold that put in the first one the year after the heart attack carried Bull off while he was out dragging traps. I remember seeing them bring Bull home. I remember that they brought him up wrapped in a tarpaulin, and how one of his green boots poked out. I remember ... "

And they would say: "What, Gram? What do you remember?"

How would she answer them? Was there more?

On the first day of winter, a month or so after the birthday party, Stella opened the back door to get stovewood and discovered a dead sparrow on the back stoop. She bent down carefully, picked it up by one foot, and looked at it.

"Frozen," she announced, and something inside her spoke another word. It had been forty years since she had seen a frozen bird—1938. The year the Reach had frozen.

Shuddering, pulling her coat closer, she threw the dead sparrow in the old rusty incinerator as she went by it. The day was cold. The sky was a clear, deep blue. On the night of her birthday four inches of snow had fallen, had melted, and no more had come since then. "Got to come soon," Larry McKeen down at the Goat Island Store said sagely, as if daring winter to stay away.

Stella got to the woodpile, picked herself an armload and carried it back to the house. Her shadow, crisp and clean, followed her.

As she reached the back door, where the sparrow had fallen, Bill spoke to her—but the cancer had taken Bill twelve years before. "Stella," Bill said, and she saw his shadow fall beside her, longer but just as clear-cut, the shadow-bill of his shadow-cap twisted jauntily off to one side just as he had always worn it. Stella felt a scream lodged in her throat. It was too large to touch her lips.

“Stella,” he said again, “when you comin cross to the mainland? We’ll get Norm Jolley’s old Ford and go down to Bean’s in Freeport just for a lark. What do you say?”

She wheeled, almost dropping her wood, and there was no one there. Just the dooryard sloping down to the hill, then the wild white grass, and beyond all, at the edge of everything, clear-cut and somehow magnified, the Reach ... and the mainland beyond it.

“Gram, what’s the Reach?” Lona might have asked ... although she never had. And she would have given them the answer any fisherman knew by rote: a Reach is a body of water between two bodies of land, a body of water which is open at either end. The old lobsterman’s joke went like this: know how to read y’compass when the fog comes, boys; between Jonesport and London there’s a mighty long Reach.

“Reach is the water between the island and the mainland,” she might have amplified, giving them molasses cookies and hot tea laced with sugar. “I know that much. I know it as well as my husband’s name ... and how he used to wear his hat.”

“Gram?” Lona would say. “How come you never been across the Reach?”

“Honey,” she would say, “I never saw any reason to go.”

In January, two months after the birthday party, the Reach froze for the first time since 1938. The radio warned islanders and mainlanders alike not to trust the ice, but Stewie McClelland and Russell Bowie took Stewie’s Bombardier Skiddoo out anyway after a long afternoon spent drinking Apple Zapple wine, and sure enough, the skiddoo went into the Reach. Stewie managed to crawl out (although he lost one foot to frostbite). The Reach took Russell Bowie and carried him away.

That January 25 there was a memorial service for Russell. Stella went on her son Alden’s arm, and he mouthed the words to the

hymns and boomed out the doxology in his great tuneless voice before the benediction. Stella sat afterward with Sarah Havelock and Hattie Stoddard and Vera Spruce in the glow of the wood fire in the town-hall basement. A going-away party for Russell was being held, complete with Za-Rex punch and nice little cream-cheese sandwiches cut into triangles. The men, of course, kept wandering out back for a nip of something a bit stronger than Za-Rex. Russell Bowie's new widow sat red-eyed and stunned beside Ewell McCracken, the minister. She was seven months big with child—it would be her fifth—and Stella, half-dozing in the heat of the woodstove, thought: She'll be crossing the Reach soon enough, I guess. She'll move to Freeport or Lewiston and go for a waitress, I guess.

She looked around at Vera and Hattie, to see what the discussion was.

“No, I didn't hear,” Hattie said. “What did Freddy say?”

They were talking about Freddy Dinsmore, the oldest man on the island (two years younger'n me, though, Stella thought with some satisfaction), who had sold out his store to Larry McKeen in 1960 and now lived on his retirement.

“Said he'd never seen such a winter,” Vera said, taking out her knitting. “He says it is going to make people sick.”

Sarah Havelock looked at Stella, and asked if Stella had ever seen such a winter. There had been no snow since that first little bit; the ground lay crisp and bare and brown. The day before, Stella had walked thirty paces into the back field, holding her right hand level at the height of her thigh, and the grass there had snapped in a neat row with a sound like breaking glass.

“No,” Stella said. “The Reach froze in '38, but there was snow that year. Do you remember Bull Symes, Hattie?”

Hattie laughed. "I think I still have the black-and-blue he gave me on my sit-upon at the New Year's party in '53. He pinched me that hard. What about him?"

"Bull and my own man walked across to the mainland that year," Stella said. "That February of 1938. Strapped on snowshoes, walked across to Dorrit's Tavern on the Head, had them each a shot of whiskey, and walked back. They asked me to come along. They were like two little boys off to the sliding with a toboggan between them."

They were looking at her, touched by the wonder of it. Even Vera was looking at her wide-eyed, and Vera had surely heard the tale before. If you believed the stories, Bull and Vera had once played some house together, although it was hard, looking at Vera now, to believe she had ever been so young.

"And you didn't go?" Sarah asked, perhaps seeing the reach of the Reach in her mind's eye, so white it was almost blue in the heatless winter sunshine, the sparkle of the snow crystals, the mainland drawing closer, walking across, yes, walking across the ocean just like Jesus-out-of-the-boat, leaving the island for the one and only time in your life on foot—

"No," Stella said. Suddenly she wished she had brought her own knitting. "I didn't go with them."

"Why not?" Hattie asked, almost indignantly.

"It was washday," Stella almost snapped, and then Missy Bowie, Russell's widow, broke into loud, braying sobs. Stella looked over and there sat Bill Flanders in his red-and-black-checked jacket, hat cocked to one side, smoking a Herbert Tareyton with another tucked behind his ear for later. She felt her heart leap into her chest and choke between beats.

She made a noise, but just then a knot popped like a rifle shot in the stove, and neither of the other ladies heard.

“Poor thing,” Sarah nearly cooed.

“Well shut of that good-for-nothing,” Hattie grunted. She searched for the grim depth of the truth concerning the departed Russell Bowie and found it: “Little more than a tramp for pay, that man. She’s well out of that two-hoss trace.”

Stella barely heard these things. There sat Bill, close enough to the Reverend McCracken to have tweaked his nose if he so had a mind; he looked no more than forty, his eyes barely marked by the crow’s-feet that had later sunk so deep, wearing his flannel pants and his gum-rubber boots with the gray wool socks folded neatly down over the tops.

“We’re waitin on you, Stel,” he said. “You come on across and see the mainland. You won’t need no snowshoes this year.”

There he sat in the town-hall basement, big as Billy-be-damned, and then another knot exploded in the stove and he was gone. And the Reverend McCracken went on comforting Missy Bowie as if nothing had happened.

That night Vera called up Annie Phillips on the phone, and in the course of the conversation mentioned to Annie that Stella Flanders didn’t look well, not at all well.

“Alden would have a scratch of a job getting her off-island if she took sick,” Annie said. Annie liked Alden because her own son Toby had told her Alden would take nothing stronger than beer. Annie was strictly temperance, herself.

“Wouldn’t get her off ‘tall unless she was in a coma,” Vera said, pronouncing the word in the downeast fashion: corner. “When Stella says ‘Frog,’ Alden jumps. Alden ain’t but half-bright, you know. Stella pretty much runs him.”

“Oh, ayuh?” Annie said.

Just then there was a metallic crackling sound on the line. Vera could hear Annie Phillips for a moment longer—not the words, just the sound of her voice going on behind the crackling—and then there was nothing. The wind had gusted up high and the phone lines had gone down, maybe into Godlin’s Pond or maybe down by Borrow’s Cove, where they went into the Reach sheathed in rubber. It was possible that they had gone down on the other side, on the Head ... and some might even have said (only half-joking) that Russell Bowie had reached up a cold hand to snap the cable, just for the hell of it.

Not 700 feet away Stella Flanders lay under her puzzle-quilt and listened to the dubious music of Alden’s snores in the other room. She listened to Alden so she wouldn’t have to listen to the wind ... but she heard the wind anyway, oh yes, coming across the frozen expanse of the Reach, a mile and a half of water that was now overplated with ice, ice with lobsters down below, and groupers, and perhaps the twisting, dancing body of Russell Bowie, who used to come each April with his old Rogers rototiller and turn her garden.

Who’ll turn the earth this April? she wondered as she lay cold and curled under her puzzle-quilt. And as a dream in a dream, her voice answered her voice: Do you love? The wind gusted, rattling the storm window. It seemed that the storm window was talking to her, but she turned her face away from its words. And did not cry.

“But Gram,” Lona would press (she never gave up, not that one, she was like her mom, and her grandmother before her), “you still haven’t told why you never went across.”

“Why, child, I have always had everything I wanted right here on Goat.”

“But it’s so small. We live in Portland. There’s buses, Gram!”

“I see enough of what goes on in cities on the TV. I guess I’ll stay where I am.”

Hal was younger, but somehow more intuitive; he would not press her as his sister might, but his question would go closer to the heart of things: “You never wanted to go across, Gram? Never?”

And she would lean toward him, and take his small hands, and tell him how her mother and father had come to the island shortly after they were married, and how Bull Symes’s grandfather had taken Stella’s father as a ‘prentice on his boat. She would tell him how her mother had conceived four times but one of her babies had miscarried and another had died a week after birth—she would have left the island if they could have saved it at the mainland hospital, but of course it was over before that was even thought of.

She would tell them that Bill had delivered Jane, their grandmother, but not that when it was over he had gone into the bathroom and first puked and then wept like a hysterical woman who had her monthlies p’ticularly bad. Jane, of course, had left the island at fourteen to go to high school; girls didn’t get married at fourteen anymore, and when Stella saw her go off in the boat with Bradley Maxwell, whose job it had been to ferry the kids back and forth that month, she knew in her heart that Jane was gone for good, although she would come back for a while. She would tell them that Alden had come along ten years later, after they had given up, and as if. to make up for his tardiness, here was Alden still, a lifelong bachelor, and in some ways Stella was grateful for that because Alden was not terribly bright and there are plenty of women willing to take advantage of a man with a slow brain and a good heart (although she would not tell the children that last, either).

She would say: “Louis and Margaret Godlin begat Stella Godlin, who became Stella Flanders; Bill and Stella Flanders begat Jane and Alden Flanders and Jane Flanders became Jane Wakefield; Richard and Jane Wakefield begat Lois Wakefield, who became Lois Perrault; David and Lois Perrault begat Lona and Hal. Those are your names, children: you are Godlin-Flanders-Wakefield-Perrault. Your blood is in the stones of this island, and I stay here because the mainland is too far to reach. Yes, I love; I have loved, anyway, or at

least tried to love, but memory is so wide and so deep, and I cannot cross. Godlin-Flanders-Wakefield-Perrault ...”

That was the coldest February since the National Weather Service began keeping records, and by the middle of the month the ice covering the Reach was safe. Snowmobiles buzzed and whined and sometimes turned over when they climbed the ice-heaves wrong. Children tried to skate, found the ice too bumpy to be any fun, and went back to Godlin’s Pond on the far side of the hill, but not before little Justin McCracken, the minister’s son, caught his skate in a fissure and broke his ankle. They took him over to the hospital on the mainland where a doctor who owned a Corvette told him, “Son, it’s going to be as good as new.”

Freddy Dinsmore died very suddenly just three days after Justin McCracken broke his ankle. He caught the flu late in January, would not have the doctor, told everyone it was “Just a cold from goin out to get the mail without m’scarf,” took to his bed, and died before anyone could take him across to the mainland and hook him up to all those machines they have waiting for guys like Freddy. His son George, a tosspot of the first water even at the advanced age (for tosspots, anyway) of sixty-eight, found Freddy with a copy of the Bangor Daily News in one hand and his Remington, unloaded, near the other. Apparently he had been thinking of cleaning it just before he died. George Dinsmore went on a three-week toot, said toot financed by someone who knew that George would have his old dad’s insurance money coming. Hattie Stoddard went around telling anyone who would listen that old George Dinsmore was a sin and a disgrace, no better than a tramp for pay.

There was a lot of flu around. The school closed for two weeks that February instead of the usual one because so many pupils were out sick. “No snow breeds germs,” Sarah Havelock said.

Near the end of the month, just as people were beginning to look forward to the false comfort of March, Alden Flanders caught the flu himself. He walked around with it for nearly a week and then took to his bed with a fever of a hundred and one. Like Freddy, he refused to

have the doctor, and Stella stewed and fretted and worried. Alden was not as old as Freddy, but that May he would turn sixty.

The snow came at last. Six inches on Valentine's Day, another six on the twentieth, and a foot in a good old norther on the leap, February 29. The snow lay white and strange between the cove and the mainland, like a sheep's meadow where there had been only gray and surging water at this time of year since time out of mind. Several people walked across to the mainland and back. No snowshoes were necessary this year because the snow had frozen to a firm, glittery crust. They might take a knock of whiskey, too, Stella thought, but they would not take it at Dorrit's. Dorrit's had burned down in 1958.

And she saw Bill all four times. Once he told her: "Y'ought to come soon, Stella. We'll go steppin. What do you say?"

She could say nothing. Her fist was crammed deep into her mouth.

"Everything I ever wanted or needed was here," she would tell them. "We had the radio and now we have the television, and that's all I want of the world beyond the Reach. I had my garden year in and year out. And lobster? Why, we always used to have a pot of lobster stew on the back of the stove and we used to take it off and put it behind the door in the pantry when the minister came calling so he wouldn't see we were eating 'poor man's soup.'

"I have seen good weather and bad, and if there were times when I wondered what it might be like to actually be in the Sears store instead of ordering from the catalogue, or to go into one of those Shaw's markets I see on TV instead of buying at the store here or sending Alden across for something special like a Christmas capon or an Easter ham ... or if I ever wanted, just once, to stand on Congress Street in Portland and watch all the people in their cars and on the sidewalks, more people in a single look than there are on the whole island these days ... if I ever wanted those things, then I wanted this more. I am not strange. I am not peculiar, or even very eccentric for a woman of my years. My mother sometimes used to

say, 'All the difference in the world is between work and want,' and I believe that to my very soul. I believe it is better to plow deep than wide.

"This is my place, and I love it."

One day in middle March, with the sky as white and lowering as a loss of memory, Stella Flanders sat in her kitchen for the last time, laced up her boots over her skinny calves for the last time, and wrapped her bright red woolen scarf (a Christmas present from Hattie three Christmases past) around her neck for the last time. She wore a suit of Alden's long underwear under her dress. The waist of the drawers came up to just below the limp vestiges of her breasts, the shirt almost down to her knees.

Outside, the wind was picking up again, and the radio said there would be snow by afternoon. She put on her coat and her gloves. After a moment of debate, she put a pair of Alden's gloves on over her own. Alden had recovered from the flu, and this morning he and Harley Blood were over rehanging a storm door for Missy Bowie, who had had a girl. Stella had seen it, and the unfortunate little mite looked just like her father.

She stood at the window for a moment, looking out at the Reach, and Bill was there as she had suspected he might be, standing about halfway between the island and the Head, standing on the Reach just like Jesus-out-of-the-boat, beckoning to her, seeming to tell her by gesture that the time was late if she ever intended to step a foot on the mainland in this life.

"If it's what you want, Bill," she fretted in the silence. "God knows I don't."

But the wind spoke other words. She did want to. She wanted to have this adventure. It had been a painful winter for her—the arthritis which came and went irregularly was back with a vengeance, flaring the joints of her fingers and knees with red fire and blue ice. One of her eyes had gotten dim and blurry (and just the other day Sarah

had mentioned—with some unease—that the firespot that had been there since Stella was sixty or so now seemed to be growing by leaps and bounds). Worst of all, the deep, griping pain in her stomach had returned, and two mornings before she had gotten up at five o'clock, worked her way along the exquisitely cold floor into the bathroom, and had spat a great wad of bright red blood into the toilet bowl. This morning there had been some more of it, foul-tasting stuff, coppery and shuddersome.

The stomach pain had come and gone over the last five years, sometimes better, sometimes worse, and she had known almost from the beginning that it must be cancer. It had taken her mother and father and her mother's father as well. None of them had lived past seventy, and so she supposed she had beat the tables those insurance fellows kept by a carpenter's yard.

"You eat like a horse," Alden told her, grinning, not long after the pains had begun and she had first observed the blood in her morning stool. "Don't you know that old fogies like you are supposed to be peckish?"

"Get on or I'll swat ye!" Stella had answered, raising a hand to her gray-haired son, who ducked, mock-criinged, and cried: "Don't, Ma! I take it back!"

Yes, she had eaten hearty, not because she wanted to, but because she believed (as many of her generation did), that if you fed the cancer it would leave you alone. And perhaps it worked, at least for a while; the blood in her stools came and went, and there were long periods when it wasn't there at all. Alden got used to her taking second helpings (and thirds, when the pain was particularly bad), but she never gained a pound.

Now it seemed the cancer had finally gotten around to what the froggies called the piece de resistance.

She started out the door and saw Alden's hat, the one with the fur-lined ear flaps, hanging on one of the pegs in the entry. She put it on

—the bill came all the way down to her shaggy salt-and-pepper eyebrows—and then looked around one last time to see if she had forgotten anything. The stove was low, and Alden had left the draw open too much again—she told him and told him, but that was one thing he was just never going to get straight.

“Alden, you’ll burn an extra quarter-cord a winter when I’m gone,” she muttered, and opened the stove. She looked in and a tight, dismayed gasp escaped her. She slammed the door shut and adjusted the draw with trembling fingers. For a moment—just a moment—she had seen her old friend Annabelle Frane in the coals. It was her face to the life, even down to the mole on her cheek.

And had Annabelle winked at her?

She thought of leaving Alden a note to explain where she had gone, but she thought perhaps Alden would understand, in his own slow way.

Still writing notes in her head—Since the first day of winter I have been seeing your father and he says dying isn’t so bad; at least I think that’s it—Stella stepped out into the white day.

The wind shook her and she had to reset Alden’s cap on her head before the wind could steal it for a joke and cartwheel it away. The cold seemed to find every chink in her clothing and twist into her; damp March cold with wet snow on its mind.

She set off down the hill toward the cove, being careful to walk on the cinders and clinkers that George Dinsmore had spread. Once George had gotten a job driving plow for the town of Raccoon Head, but during the big blow of ‘77 he had gotten smashed on rye whiskey and had driven the plow smack through not one, not two, but three power poles. There had been no lights over the Head for five days. Stella remembered now how strange it had been, looking across the Reach and seeing only blackness. A body got used to seeing that brave little nestle of lights. Now George worked on the island, and since there was no plow, he didn’t get into much hurt.

As she passed Russell Bowie's house, she saw Missy, pale as milk, looking out at her. Stella waved. Missy waved back.

She would tell them this:

"On the island we always watched out for our own. When Gerd Henreid broke the blood vessel in his chest that time, we had covered-dish suppers one whole summer to pay for his operation in Boston—and Gerd came back alive, thank God. When George Dinsmore ran down those power poles and the Hydro slapped a lien on his home, it was seen to that the Hydro had their money and George had enough of a job to keep him in cigarettes and booze ... why not? He was good for nothing else when his workday was done, although when he was on the clock he would work like a dray-horse. That one time he got into trouble was because it was at night, and night was always George's drinking time. His father kept him fed, at least. Now Missy Bowie's alone with another baby. Maybe she'll stay here and take her welfare and ADC money here, and most likely it won't be enough, but she'll get the help she needs. Probably she'll go, but if she stays she'll not starve ... and listen, Lona and Hal: if she stays, she may be able to keep something of this small world with the little Reach on one side and the big Reach on the other, something it would be too easy to lose hustling hash in Lewiston or donuts in Portland or drinks at the Nashville North in Bangor. And I am old enough not to beat around the bush about what that something might be: a way of being and a way of living—a feeling."

They had watched out for their own in other ways as well, but she would not tell them that. The children would not understand, nor would Lois and David, although Jane had known the truth. There was Norman and Ettie Wilson's baby that was born a mongoloid, its poor dear little feet turned in, its bald skull lumpy and cratered, its fingers webbed together as if it had dreamed too long and too deep while swimming that interior Reach; Reverend McCracken had come and baptized the baby, and a day later Mary Dodge came, who even at that time had midwived over a hundred babies, and Norman took Ettie down the hill to see Frank Child's new boat and although she

could barely walk, Ettie went with no complaint, although she had stopped in the door to look back at Mary Dodge, who was sitting calmly by the idiot baby's crib and knitting. Mary had looked up at her and when their eyes met, Ettie burst into tears. "Come on," Norman had said, upset. "Come on, Ettie, come on." And when they came back an hour later the baby was dead, one of those crib-deaths, wasn't it merciful he didn't suffer. And many years before that, before the war, during the Depression, three little girls had been molested coming home from school, not badly molested, at least not where you could see the scar of the hurt, and they all told about a man who offered to show them a deck of cards he had with a different kind of dog on each one. He would show them this wonderful deck of cards, the man said, if the little girls would come into the bushes with him, and once in the bushes this man said, "But you have to touch this first." One of the little girls was Gert Symes, who would go on to be voted Maine's Teacher of the Year in 1978, for her work at Brunswick High. And Gert, then only five years old, told her father that the man had some fingers gone on one hand. One of the other little girls agreed that this was so. The third remembered nothing. Stella remembered Alden going out one thundery day that summer without telling her where he was going, although she asked. Watching from the window, she had seen Alden meet Bull Symes at the bottom of the path, and then Freddy Dinsmore had joined them and down at the cove she saw her own husband, whom she had sent out that morning just as usual. with his dinner pail under his arm. More men joined them, and when they finally moved off she counted just one under a dozen. The Reverend McCracken's predecessor had been among them. And that evening a fellow named Daniels was found at the foot of Slyder's Point, where the rocks poke out of the surf like the fangs of a dragon that drowned with its mouth open. This Daniels was a fellow Big George Havelock had hired to help him put new sills under his house and a new engine in his Model A truck. From New Hampshire he was, and he was a sweet-talker who had found other odd jobs to do when the work at the Havelocks' was done ... and in church, he could carry a tune! Apparently, they said, Daniels had been walking up on top of Slyder's Point and had slipped, tumbling all the way to the bottom.

His neck was broken and his head was bashed in. As he had no people that anyone knew of, he was buried on the island, and the Reverend McCracken's predecessor gave the graveyard eulogy, saying as how this Daniels had been a hard worker and a good help even though he was two fingers shy on his right hand. Then he read the benediction and the graveside group had gone back to the town-hall basement where they drank Za-Rex punch and ate cream-cheese sandwiches, and Stella never asked her men where they had gone on the day Daniels fell from the top of Slyder's Point.

"Children," she would tell them, "we always watched out for our own. We had to, for the Reach was wider in those days and when the wind roared and the surf pounded and the dark came early, why, we felt very small—no more than dust motes in the mind of God. So it was natural for us to join hands, one with the other.

"We joined hands, children, and if there were times when we wondered what it was all for, or if there was any such a thing as love at all, it was only because we had heard the wind and the waters on long winter nights, and we were afraid.

"No, I've never felt I needed to leave the island. My life was here. The Reach was wider in those days."

Stella reached the cove. She looked right and left, the wind blowing her dress out behind her like a flag. If anyone had been there she would have walked further down and taken her chance on the tumbled rocks, although they were glazed with ice. But no one was there and she walked out along the pier, past the old Symes boathouse. She reached the end and stood there for a moment, head held up, the wind blowing past the padded flaps of Alden's hat in a muffled flood.

Bill was out there, beckoning. Beyond him, beyond the Reach, she could see the Congo Church over there on the Head, its spire almost invisible against the white sky.

Grunting, she sat down on the end of the pier and then stepped onto the snow crust below. Her boots sank a little; not much. She set Alden's cap again—how the wind wanted to tear it off!—and began to walk toward Bill. She thought once that she would look back, but she did not. She didn't believe her heart could stand that.

She walked, her boots crunching into the crust, and listened to the faint thud and give of the ice. There was Bill, further back now but still beckoning. She coughed, spat blood onto the white snow that covered the ice. Now the Reach spread wide on either side and she could, for the first time in her life, read the "Stanton's Bait and Boat" sign over there without Alden's binoculars. She could see the cars passing to and fro on the Head's main street and thought with real wonder: They can go as far as they want ... Portland ... Boston ... New York City. Imagine! And she could almost do it, could almost imagine a road that simply rolled on and on, the boundaries of the world knocked wide.

A snowflake skirled past her eyes. Another. A third. Soon it was snowing lightly and she walked through a pleasant world of shifting bright white; she saw Raccoon Head through a gauzy curtain that sometimes almost cleared. She reached up to set Alden's cap again and snow puffed off the bill into her eyes. The wind twisted fresh snow up in filmy shapes, and in one of them she saw Carl Abersham, who had gone down with Hattie Stoddard's husband on the Dancer.

Soon, however, the brightness began to dull as the snow came harder. The Head's main street dimmed, dimmed, and at last was gone. For a time longer she could make out the cross atop the church, and then that faded out too, like a false dream. Last to go was that bright yellow-and-black sign reading "Stanton's Bait and Boat," where you could also get engine oil, flypaper, Italian sandwiches, and Budweiser to go.

Then Stella walked in a world that was totally without color, a gray-white dream of snow. Just like Jesus-out-of-the-boat, she thought, and at last she looked back but now the island was gone, too. She

could see her tracks going back, losing definition until only the faint half-circles of her heels could be seen ... and then nothing. Nothing at all.

She thought: It's a whiteout. You got to be careful, Stella, or you'll never get to the mainland. You'll just walk around in a big circle until you're worn out and then you'll freeze to death out here.

She remembered Bill telling her once that when you were lost in the woods, you had to pretend that the leg which was on the same side of your body as your smart hand was lame. Otherwise that smart leg would begin to lead you and you'd walk in a circle and not even realize it until you came around to your backtrail again. Stella didn't believe she could afford to have that happen to her. Snow today, tonight, and tomorrow, the radio had said, and in a whiteout such as this, she would not even know if she came around to her backtrail, for the wind and the fresh snow would erase it long before she could return to it.

Her hands were leaving her in spite of the two pairs of gloves she wore, and her feet had been gone for some time. In a way, this was almost a relief. The numbness at least shut the mouth of her clamoring arthritis.

Stella began to limp now, making her left leg work harder. The arthritis in her knees had not gone to sleep, and soon they were screaming at her. Her white hair flew out behind her. Her lips had drawn back from her teeth (she still had her own, all save four) and she looked straight ahead, waiting for that yellow-and-black sign to materialize out of the flying whiteness.

It did not happen.

Sometime later, she noticed that the day's bright whiteness had begun to dull to a more uniform gray. The snow fell heavier and thicker than ever. Her feet were still planted on the crust but now she was walking through five inches of fresh snow. She looked at her watch, but it had stopped. Stella realized she must have forgotten to

wind it that morning for the first time in twenty or thirty years. Or had it just stopped for good? It had been her mother's and she had sent it with Alden twice to the Head, where Mr. Dostie had first marveled over it and then cleaned it. Her watch, at least, had been to the mainland.

She fell down for the first time some fifteen minutes after she began to notice the day's growing grayness. For a moment she remained on her hands and knees, thinking it would be so easy just to stay here, to curl up and listen to the wind, and then the determination that had brought her through so much reasserted itself and she got up, grimacing. She stood in the wind, looking straight ahead, willing her eyes to see ... but they saw nothing.

Be dark soon.

Well, she had gone wrong. She had slipped off to one side or the other. Otherwise she would have reached the mainland by now. Yet she didn't believe she had gone so far wrong that she was walking parallel to the mainland or even back in the direction of Goat. An interior navigator in her head whispered that she had overcompensated and slipped off to the left. She believed she was still approaching the mainland but was now on a costly diagonal.

That navigator wanted her to turn right, but she would not do that. Instead, she moved straight on again, but stopped the artificial limp. A spasm of coughing shook her, and she spat bright red into the snow.

Ten minutes later (the gray was now deep indeed, and she found herself in the weird twilight of a heavy snowstorm) she fell again, tried to get up, failed at first, and finally managed to gain her feet. She stood swaying in the snow, barely able to remain upright in the wind, waves of faintness rushing through her head, making her feel alternately heavy and light.

Perhaps not all the roaring she heard in her ears was the wind, but it surely was the wind that finally succeeded in prying Alden's hat from

her head. She made a grab for it, but the wind danced it easily out of her reach and she saw it only for a moment, flipping gaily over and over into the darkening gray, a bright spot of orange. It struck the snow, rolled, rose again, was gone. Now her hair flew around her head freely.

“It’s all right, Stella,” Bill said. “You can wear mine.”

She gasped and looked around in the white. Her gloved hands had gone instinctively to her bosom, and she felt sharp fingernails scratch at her heart.

She saw nothing but shifting membranes of snow—and then, moving out of that evening’s gray throat, the wind screaming through it like the voice of a devil in a snowy tunnel, came her husband. He was at first only moving colors in the snow: red, black, dark green, lighter green; then these colors resolved themselves into a flannel jacket with a flapping collar, flannel pants, and green boots. He was holding his hat out to her in a gesture that appeared almost absurdly courtly, and his face was Bill’s face, unmarked by the cancer that had taken him (had that been all she was afraid of? that a wasted shadow of her husband would come to her, a scrawny concentration-camp figure with the skin pulled taut and shiny over the cheekbones and the eyes sunken deep in the sockets?) and she felt a surge of relief.

“Bill? Is that really you?”

“Course.”

“Bill,” she said again, and took a glad step toward him. Her legs betrayed her and she thought she would fall, fall right through him—he was, after all, a ghost—but he caught her in arms as strong and as competent as those that had carried her over the threshold of the house that she had shared only with Alden in these latter years. He supported her, and a moment later she felt the cap pulled firmly onto her head.

“Is it really you?” she asked again, looking up into his face, at the crow’s-feet around his eyes which hadn’t sunk deep yet, at the spill of snow on the shoulders of his checked hunting jacket, at his lively brown hair.

“It’s me,” he said. “It’s all of us.”

He half-turned with her and she saw the others coming out of the snow that the wind drove across the Reach in the gathering darkness. A cry, half joy, half fear, came from her mouth as she saw Madeline Stoddard, Hattie’s mother, in a blue dress that swung in the wind like a bell, and holding her hand was Hattie’s dad, not a mouldering skeleton somewhere on the bottom with the Dancer, but whole and young. And there, behind those two—

“Annabelle!” she cried. “Annabelle Frane, is it you?”

It was Annabelle; even in this snowy gloom Stella recognized the yellow dress Annabelle had worn to Stella’s own wedding, and as she struggled toward her dead friend, holding Bill’s arm, she thought that she could smell roses.

“Annabelle!”

“We’re almost there now, dear,” Annabelle said, taking her other arm. The yellow dress, which had been considered Daring in its day (but, to Annabelle’s credit and to everyone else’s relief, not quite a Scandal), left her shoulders bare, but Annabelle did not seem to feel the cold. Her hair, a soft, dark auburn, blew long in the wind. “Only a little further.”

She took Stella’s other arm and they moved forward again. Other figures came out of the snowy night (for it was night now). Stella recognized many of them, but not all. Tommy Frane had joined Annabelle; Big George Havelock, who had died a dog’s death in the woods, walked behind Bill; there was the fellow who had kept the lighthouse on the Head for most of twenty years and who used to come over to the island during the cribbage tournament Freddy

Dinsmore held every February—Stella could almost but not quite remember his name. And there was Freddy himself! Walking off to one side of Freddy, by himself and looking bewildered, was Russell Bowie.

“Look, Stella,” Bill said, and she saw black rising out of the gloom like the splintered prows of many ships. It was not ships, it was split and fissured rock. They had reached the Head. They had crossed the Reach.

She heard voices, but was not sure they actually spoke:

Take my hand, Stella—

(do you)

Take my hand, Bill—

(oh do you do you)

Annabelle ... Freddy ... Russell ... John ... Ettie

... Frank ... take my hand, take my hand ... my hand ...

(do you love)

“Will you take my hand, Stella?” a new voice asked.

She looked around and there was Bull Symes. He was smiling kindly at her and yet she felt a kind of terror in her at what was in his eyes and for a moment she drew away, clutching Bill’s hand on her other side the tighter.

“Is it—”

“Time?” Bull asked. “Oh, ayuh, Stella, I guess so. But it don’t hurt. At least, I never heard so. All that’s before.”

She burst into tears suddenly—all the tears she had never wept—and put her hand in Bull’s hand. “Yes,” she said, “yes I will, yes I did, yes I do.”

They stood in a circle in the storm, the dead of Goat Island, and the wind screamed around them, driving its packet of snow, and some kind of song burst from her. It went up into the wind and the wind carried it away. They all sang then, as children will sing in their high, sweet voices as a summer evening draws down to summer night. They sang, and Stella felt herself going to them and with them, finally across the Reach. There was a bit of pain, but not much; losing her maidenhead had been worse. They stood in a circle in the night. The snow blew around them and they sang. They sang, and—

—and Alden could not tell David and Lois, but in the summer after Stella died, when the children came out for their annual two weeks, he told Lona and Hal. He told them that during the great storms of winter the wind seems to sing with almost human voices, and that sometimes it seemed to him he could almost make out the words: “Praise God from whom all blessings flow/Praise Him, ye creatures here below ...”

But he did not tell them (imagine slow, unimaginative Alden Flanders saying such things aloud, even to the children!) that sometimes he would hear that sound and feel cold even by the stove; that he would put his whittling aside, or the trap he had meant to mend, thinking that the wind sang in all the voices of those who were dead and gone ... that they stood somewhere out on the Reach and sang as children do. He seemed to hear their voices and on these nights he sometimes slept and dreamed that he was singing the doxology, unseen and unheard, at his own funeral.

found Stella frozen to death on the mainland a day after the storm had blown itself out. She was sitting on a natural chair of rock about one hundred yards south of the Raccoon Head town limits, frozen just as neat as you please. The doctor who owned the Corvette said that he was frankly amazed. It would have been a walk of over four miles, and the autopsy required by law in the case of an unattended,

unusual death had shown an advanced cancerous condition—in truth, the old woman had been riddled with it. Was Alden to tell David and Lois that the cap on her head had not been his? Larry McKeen had recognized that cap. So had John Bensohn. He had seen it in their eyes, and he supposed they had seen it in his. He had not lived long enough to forget his dead father's cap, the look of its bill or the places where the visor had been broken.

“These are things made for thinking on slowly,” he would have told the children if he had known how. “Things to be thought on at length, while the hands do their work and the coffee sits in a solid china mug nearby. They are questions of Reach, maybe: do the dead sing? And do they love the living?”

On the nights after Lona and Hal had gone back with their parents to the mainland in Al Curry's boat, the children standing astern and waving good-bye, Alden considered that question, and others, and the matter of his father's cap.

Do the dead sing? Do they love?

On those long nights alone, with his mother Stella Flanders at long last in her grave, it often seemed to Alden that they did both.

*

“The Reach”—Tabby's youngest brother, Tommy, used to be in the Coast Guard. He was stationed downeast, in the Jonesport-Beals area of the long and knotty Maine coast, where the Guard's main chores are changing the batteries in the big buoys and saving idiot drug smugglers who get lost in the fog or run on the rocks.

There are lots of islands out there, and lots of tightly knit island communities. He told me of a real-life counterpart of Stella Flanders, who lived and died on her island. Was it Pig Island? Cow Island? I can't remember. Some animal, anyway.

I could hardly believe it. “She didn’t ever want to come across to the mainland?” I asked.

“No, she said she didn’t want to cross the Reach until she died,” Tommy said.

The term Reach was unfamiliar to me, and Tommy explained it. He also told me the lobstermen’s joke about how it’s a mighty long Reach between Jonesport and London, and I put it in the story. It was originally published in Yankee as “Do the Dead Sing?”, a nice enough title, but after some thought I have gone back to the original title here.

STEPHEN KING
THE
REAPER'S
IMAGE



THE REAPER'S IMAGE

Stephen King

“We moved it last year, and quite an operation it was, too,” Mr. Carlin said as they mounted the stairs. “Had to move it by hand, of course. No other way. We insured it against accident with Lloyd’s before we even took it out of the case in the drawing room. Only firm that would insure for the sum we had in mind.”

Spangler said nothing. The man was a fool. Johnson Spangler had learned a long time ago that the only way to talk to a fool was to ignore him.

“Insured it for a quarter of a million dollars,” Mr. Carlin resumed when they reached the second-floor landing. His mouth quirked in a half-bitter, half-humorous line. “And a pretty penny it cost, too.” He was a little man, not quite fat, with rimless glasses and a tanned bald head that shone like a varnished volleyball. A suit of armor, guarding the mahogany shadows of the second-floor corridor, stared at them impassively.

It was a long corridor, and Spangler eyed the walls and hangings with a cool professional eye. Samuel Claggert had bought in copious quantities, but he had not bought well. Like so many of the self-made industry emperors of the late 1800’s, he had been little more than a pawnshop rooter masquerading in collector’s clothing, a connoisseur of canvas monstrosities, trashy novels and poetry collections in expensive cowhide bindings, and atrocious pieces of sculpture, all of which he considered Art.

Up here the walls were hung—festooned was perhaps a better word—with imitation Moroccan drapes, numberless (and, no doubt, anonymous) madonnas holding numberless haloed babes while numberless angels flitted hither and thither in the background, grotesque scrolled candelabra, and one monstrous and obscenely ornate chandelier surmounted by a salaciously grinning nymphet.

Of course the old pirate had come up with a few interesting items; the law of averages demanded it. And if the Samuel Claggert Memorial Private Museum (Guided Tours on the Hour—Admission

\$1.00 Adults, \$.50 Children—nauseating) was 98 percent blatant junk, there was always that other two percent, things like the Coombs long rifle over the hearth in the kitchen, the strange little camera obscura in the parlor, and of course the—

“The Delver looking-glass was removed from downstairs after a rather unfortunate ... incident,” Mr. Carlin said abruptly, motivated apparently by a ghastly glaring portrait of no one in particular at the base of the next staircase. “There had been others—harsh words, wild statements—but this was an attempt to actually destroy the mirror. The woman, a Miss Sandra Bates, came in with a rock in her pocket. Fortunately her aim was bad and she only cracked a corner of the case. The mirror was unharmed. The Bates girl had a brother —”

“No need to give me the dollar tour,” Spangler said quietly. “I’m conversant with the history of the Delver glass.”

“Fascinating, isn’t it?” Carlin cast him an odd, oblique look. “There was that English duchess in 1709 ... and the Pennsylvania rug merchant in 1746 ... not to mention—”

“I’m conversant with the history,” Spangler repeated quietly. “It’s the workmanship I’m interested in. And then, of course, there’s the question of authenticity—”

“Authenticity!” Mr. Carlin chuckled, a dry sound, as if bones had stirred in a cupboard below the stairs. “It’s been examined by experts, Mr. Spangler.”

“So was the Lemlier Stradivarius.”

“So true,” Mr. Carlin said with a sigh. “But no Stradivarius ever had quite the ... the unsettling effect of the Delver glass.”

“Yes, quite,” Spangler said in his softly contemptuous voice. He understood now that there would be no stopping Carlin; he had a mind which was perfectly in tune with the age. “Quite.”

They climbed the third and fourth flights in silence. As they drew closer to the roof of the rambling structure, it became oppressively hot in the dark upper galleries. With the heat came a creeping stench that Spangler knew well, for he had spent all his adult life working in it—a smell of long-dead flies in shadowy corners, of wet rot and creeping wood lice behind the plaster. The smell of age. It was a smell common only to museums and mausoleums. He imagined much the same smell might arise from the grave of a virginal young girl, forty years dead.

Up here the relics were piled helter-skelter in true junk-shop profusion; Mr. Carlin led Spangler through a maze of statuary, frame-splintered portraits, pompous gold-plated birdcages, the dismembered skeleton of an ancient tandem bicycle. He led him to the far wall where a stepladder had been set up beneath a trapdoor in the ceiling. A dusty padlock hung from the trap.

Off to the left, an imitation Adonis stared at them pitilessly with blank pupilless eyes. One arm was outstretched, and a yellow sign hung on the wrist which read: ABSOLUTELY NO ADMITTANCE.

Mr. Carlin produced a key ring from his jacket pocket, selected a key, and mounted the stepladder. He paused on the third rung, his bald head gleaming faintly in the shadows. "I don't like that mirror," he said. "I never did. I'm afraid to look into it. I'm afraid I might look into it one day and see

... what the rest of them saw."

"They saw nothing but themselves," Spangler said.

Mr. Carlin began to speak, stopped, shook his head, and fumbled above him, craning his neck to fit the key properly into the lock. "Should be replaced," he muttered. "It's—damn!" The lock sprung suddenly and swung out of the hasp. Mr. Carlin made a fumbling grab for it and almost fell off the ladder. Spangler caught it deftly and looked up at him. He was clinging shakily to the top of the stepladder, face white in the brown semidarkness.

“You are nervous about it, aren’t you?” Spangler said in a mildly wondering tone.

Mr. Carlin said nothing. He seemed paralyzed.

“Come down,” Spangler said. “Please. Before you fall.” Carlin descended the ladder slowly, clinging to each rung like a man tottering over a bottomless chasm. When his feet touched the floor he began to babble, as if the floor contained some current that had turned him on, like an electric light.

“A quarter of a million,” he said. “A quarter of a million dollars’ worth of insurance to take that ... thing from down there to up here. That goddam thing. They had to rig a special block and tackle to get it into the gable storeroom up there. And I was hoping—almost praying—that someone’s fingers would be slippery ... that the rope would be the wrong test

... that the thing would fall and be shattered into a million pieces—”

“Facts,” Spangler said. “Facts, Carlin. Not cheap paperback novels, not cheap tabloid stories or equally cheap horror movies. Facts. Number one: John Delver was an English craftsman of Norman descent who made mirrors in what we call the Elizabethan period of England’s history. He lived and died uneventfully. No pentacles scrawled on the floor for the housekeeper to rub out, no sulfur-smelling documents with a splotch of blood on the dotted line. Number two: His mirrors have become collector’s items due principally to fine craftsmanship and to the fact that a form of crystal was used that has a mildly magnifying and distorting effect upon the eye of the beholder—a rather distinctive trademark. Number three: Only five Delvers remain in existence to our present knowledge—two of them in America. They are priceless. Number four: This Delver and one other that was destroyed in the London Blitz have gained a rather spurious reputation due largely to falsehood, exaggeration, and coincidence—” “Fact number five,” Mr. Carlin said. “You’re a supercilious bastard, aren’t you?”

Spangler looked with mild detestation at the blind-eyed Adonis.

“I was guiding the tour that Sandra Bates’s brother was a part of when he got his look into your precious Delver mirror, Spangler. He was perhaps sixteen, part of a high-school group. I was going through the history of the glass and had just got to the part you would appreciate—extolling the flawless craftsmanship, the perfection of the glass itself—when the boy raised his hand. ‘But what about that black splotch in the upper left-hand corner?’ he asked. ‘That looks like a mistake.’

“And one of his friends asked him what he meant, so the Bates boy started to tell him, then stopped. He looked at the mirror very closely, pushing right up to the red velvet guardrope around the case—then he looked behind him as if what he had seen had been the reflection of someone—of someone in black—standing at his shoulder. ‘It looked like a man,’ he said. ‘But I couldn’t see the face. It’s gone now.’ And that was all.”

“Go on,” Spangler said. “You’re itching to tell me it was the Reaper—I believe that is the common explanation, isn’t it? That occasional chosen people see the Reaper’s image in the glass? Get it out of your system, man. The National Enquirer would love it! Tell me about the horrific consequences and defy me to explain it. Was he later hit by a car? Did he jump out of a window? What?”

Mr. Carlin chuckled a forlorn little chuckle. “You should know better, Spangler. Haven’t you told me twice that you are ... ah ... conversant with the history of the Delver glass. There were no horrific consequences. There never have been. That’s why the Delver glass isn’t Sunday-supplementized like the Koh-i-noor Diamond or the curse on King Tut’s tomb. It’s mundane compared to those. You think I’m a fool, don’t you?”

“Yes,” Spangler said. “Can we go up now?”

“Certainly,” Mr. Carlin said passionately. He climbed the ladder and pushed the trapdoor. There was a clickety-clackety-bump as it was

drawn up into the shadows by a counterweight, and then Mr. Carlin disappeared into the shadows. Spangler followed. The blind Adonis stared unknowingly after them.

The gable room was explosively hot, lit only by one cobwebby, many-angled window that filtered the hard outside light into a dirty milky glow. The looking-glass was propped at an angle to the light, catching most of it and reflecting a pearly patch onto the far wall. It had been bolted securely into a wooden frame. Mr. Carlin was not looking at it. Quite studiously not looking at it.

“You haven’t even put a dustcloth over it,” Spangler said, visibly angered for the first time.

“I think of it as an eye,” Mr. Carlin said. His voice was still drained, perfectly empty. “If it’s left open, always open, perhaps it will go blind.”

Spangler paid no attention. He took off his jacket, folded the buttons carefully in, and with infinite gentleness he wiped the dust from the convex surface of the glass itself. Then he stood back and looked at it.

It was genuine. There was no doubt about it, never had been, really. It was a perfect example of Delver’s particular genius. The cluttered room behind him, his own reflection, Carlin’s half-turned figure—they were all clear, sharp, almost three-dimensional. The faint magnifying effect of the glass gave everything a slightly curved effect that added an almost fourth-dimensional distortion. It was—

His thought broke off, and he felt another wave of anger.

“Carlin.”

Carlin said nothing.

“Carlin, you damned fool, I thought you said that girl didn’t harm the mirror!”

No answer.

Spangler stared at him icily in the glass. “There is a piece of friction tape in the upper left-hand corner. Did she crack it? For God’s sake, man, speak up!”

“You’re seeing the Reaper,” Carlin said. His voice was deadly and without passion. “There’s no friction tape on the mirror. Put your hand over it ... dear God.”

Spangler wrapped the upper sleeve of his coat carefully around his hand, reached out, and pressed it gently against the mirror. “You see? Nothing supernatural. It’s gone. My hand covers it.”

“Covers it? Can you feel the tape? Why don’t you pull it off?”

Spangler took his hand away carefully and looked into the glass. Everything in it seemed a little more distorted; the room’s odd angles seemed to yaw crazily as if on the verge of sliding off into some unseen eternity. There was no dark spot in the mirror. It was flawless. He felt a sudden unhealthy dread rise in him and despised himself for feeling it.

“It looked like him, didn’t it?” Mr. Carlin asked. His face was very pale, and he was looking directly at the floor. A muscle twitched spasmodically in his neck. “Admit it, Spangler. It looked like a hooded figure standing behind you, didn’t it?”

“It looked like friction tape masking a short crack,” Spangler said very firmly. “Nothing more, nothing less—”

“The Bates boy was very husky,” Carlin said rapidly. His words seemed to drop into the hot, still atmosphere like stones into dark water. “Like a football player. He was wearing a letter sweater and dark green chinos. We were halfway to the upper-half exhibits when —”

“The heat is making me feel ill,” Spangler said a little unsteadily. He had taken out a handkerchief and was wiping his neck. His eyes searched the convex surface of the mirror in small, jerky movements.

“When he said he wanted a drink of water ... a drink of water, for God’s sake!”

Carlin turned and stared wildly at Spangler. “How was I to know? How was I to know?”

“Is there a lavatory? I think I’m going to—”

“His sweater ... I just caught a glimpse of his sweater going down the stairs ... then ...”

“—be sick.”

Carlin shook his head, as if to clear it, and looked at the floor again. “Of course. Third door on your left, second floor, as you go toward the stairs.” He looked up appealingly. “How was I to know?”

But Spangler had already stepped down onto the ladder. It rocked under his weight and for a moment Carlin thought—hoped—that he would fall. He didn’t. Through the open square in the floor Carlin watched him descend, holding his mouth lightly with one hand.

“Spangler—?”

But he was gone.

Carlin listened to his footfalls fade to echoes, then die away. When they were gone, he shivered violently. He tried to move his own feet to the trapdoor, but they were frozen. Just that last, hurried glimpse of the boy’s sweater ... God! ...

It was as if huge invisible hands were pulling his head, forcing it up. Not wanting to look, Carlin stared into the glimmering depths of the Delver looking-glass.

There was nothing there.

The room was reflected back to him faithfully, its dusty confines transmuted into glimmering infinity. A snatch of a half-remembered Tennyson poem occurred to him, and he muttered it aloud: " 'I am half-sick of shadows,' said the Lady of Shalott ...' "

And still he could not look away, and the breathing stillness held him. From around one corner of the mirror a moth-eaten buffalo head peered at him with flat obsidian eyes.

The boy had wanted a drink of water and the fountain was in the first-floor lobby. He had gone downstairs and—

And had never come back.

Ever.

Anywhere.

Like the duchess who had paused after primping before her glass for a soiree and decided to go back into the sitting room for her pearls. Like the rug-merchant who had gone for a carriage ride and had left behind him only an empty carriage and two closemouthed horses.

And the Delver glass had been in New York from 1897 until 1920, had been there when Judge Crater—

Carlin stared as if hypnotized into the shallow depths of the mirror. Below, the blind-eyed Adonis kept watch.

He waited for Spangler much like the Bates family must have waited for their son, much like the duchess's husband must have waited for his wife to return from the sitting room. He stared into the mirror and waited.

And waited.

And waited.

THE REPLOIDS

Stephen King

No one knew exactly how long it had been going on. Not long. Two days, two weeks; it couldn't have been much longer than that, Cheyney reasoned. Not that it mattered. It was just that people got to watch a little more of the show with the added thrill of knowing the show was real. When the United States - the whole world - found out about the Reploids, it was pretty spectacular. just as well, maybe. These days, unless it's spectacular, a thing can go on damned near forever. It is neither believed nor disbelieved. It is simply part of the weird Godhead mantra that made up the accelerating flow of events and experience as the century neared its end. It's harder to get peoples' attention. It takes machine-guns in a crowded airport or a live grenade rolled up the aisle of a bus load of nuns stopped at a roadblock in some Central American country overgrown with guns and greenery. The Reploids became national - and international - news on the morning of November 30, 1989, after what happened during the first two chaotic minutes of the Tonight Show taping in Beautiful Downtown Burbank, California, the night before.

The floor manager watched intently as the red sweep secondhand moved upward toward the twelve. The studio audience clockwatched as intently as the floor manager. When the red sweep secondhand crossed the twelve, it would be five o'clock and taping of the umpty-umptyth Tonight Show would commence.

As the red secondhand passed the eight, the audience stirred and muttered with its own peculiar sort of stage fright. After all, they represented America, didn't they? Yes!

"Let's have it quiet, people, please," the floor manager said pleasantly, and the audience quieted like obedient children. Doc Severinsen's drummer ran off a fast little riff on his snare and then held his sticks easily between thumbs and fingers, wrists loose, watching the floor manager instead of the clock, as the show - people always did. For crew and performers, the floor manager was the clock. When the secondhand passed the ten, the floor manager counted down aloud to four, and then held up three fingers, two fingers, one finger ... and then a clenched fist from which one finger

pointed dramatically at the audience. An APPLAUSE sign lit up, but the studio audience was primed to whoop it up; it would have made no difference if it had been written in Sanskrit.

So things started off just as they were supposed to start off: dead on time. This was not so surprising; there were crewmembers on the Tonight Show who, had they been LAPD officers, could have retired with full benefits. The Doc Severinsen band, one of the best showbands in the world, launched into the familiar theme: Ta-da-da-Da-da ... and the large, rolling voice of Ed

McMahon cried enthusiastically: "From Los Angeles, entertainment capital of the world, it's The Tonight Show, live, with Johnny Carson! Tonight, Johnny's guests are actress Cybill Shepherd of Moonlighting!" Excited applause from the audience. "Magician Doug Henning!" Even louder applause from the audience. "Pee Wee Herman!" A fresh wave of applause, this time including hoots of joy from Pee Wee's rooting section. "From Germany, the Flying Schnauzers, the world's only canine acrobats!" Increased applause, with a mixture of laughter from the audience. "Not to mention Doc Severinsen, the world's only Flying Bandleader, and his canine band!"

The band members not playing horns obediently barked. The audience laughed harder, applauded harder.

In the control room of Studio C, no one was laughing.

A man in a loud sport-coat with a shock of curly black hair was standing in the wings, idly snapping his fingers and looking across the stage at Ed, but that was all.

The director signaled for Number Two Cam's medium shot on Ed for the umpty-umptyeth time, and there was Ed on the ON SCREEN monitors. He barely heard someone mutter, "Where the hell is he?" before Ed's rolling tones announced, also for the umpty-umptyeth time: "And now heeere's JOHNNY!"

Wild applause from the audience.

“Camera Three,” the director snapped.

“But there’s only that-”

“Camera Three, goddammit!”

Camera Three came up on the ON SCREEN monitor, showing every TV director’s private nightmare, a dimly empty stage ... and then someone, some stranger, was striding confidently into that empty space, just as if he had every right in the world to be there, filling it with unquestionable presence, charm, and authority. But, whoever he was, he was most definitely not Johnny Carson. Nor was it any of the other familiar faces TV and studio audiences had grown used to during Johnny’s absences. This man was taller than Johnny, and instead of the familiar silver hair, there was a luxuriant cap of almost Pan-like black curls. The stranger’s hair was so black that in places it seemed to glow almost blue, like Superman’s hair in the comic-books. The sport-coat he wore was not quite loud enough to put him in the Pleesda-Meetcha-Is-This-The-Missus? car salesman category, but Carson would not have touched it with a twelve-foot pole.

The audience applause continued, but it first seemed to grow slightly bewildered, and then clearly began to thin.

“What the fuck’s going on?” someone in the control room asked. The director simply watched, mesmerized.

Instead of the familiar swing of the invisible golf-club, punctuated by a drum-riff and high-spirited hoots of approval from the studio audience, this dark-haired, broad-shouldered, loud-jacketed, unknown gentleman began to move his hands up and down, eyes flicking rhythmically from his moving palms to a spot just above his head - he was miming a juggler with a lot of fragile items in the air, and doing it with the easy grace of the long-time showman. It was only something in his face, something as subtle as a shadow, that told you the objects were eggs or something, and would break if

dropped. It was, in fact, very like the way Johnny's eyes followed the invisible ball down the invisible fairway, registering one that had been righteously stroked ... unless, of course, he chose to vary the act, which he could and did do from time to time, and without even breathing hard.

He made a business of dropping the last egg, or whatever the fragile object was, and his eyes followed it to the floor with exaggerated dismay. Then, for a moment, he froze. Then he glanced toward Cam Three Left ... toward Doc and the orchestra, in other words.

After repeated viewings of the videotape, Dave Cheyney came to what seemed to him to be an irrefutable conclusion, although many of his colleagues - including his partner - questioned it.

"He was waiting for a sting," Cheyney said. "Look, you can see it on his face. It's as old as burlesque."

His partner, Pete Jacoby, said, "I thought burlesque was where the girl with the heroin habit took off her clothes while the guy with the heroin habit played the trumpet."

Cheyney gestured at him impatiently. "Think of the lady that used to play the piano in the silent movies, then. Or the one that used to do schmaltz on the organ during the radio soaps."

Jacoby looked at him, wide-eyed. 'Mid they have those things when you were a kid, daddy?" he asked in a falsetto voice.

"Will you for once be serious?" Cheyney asked him. "Because this is a serious thing we got here, I think."

"What we got here is very simple. We got a nut."

"No," Cheyney said, and hit rewind on the VCR again with one hand while he lit a fresh cigarette with the other. "What we got is a seasoned performer who's mad as hell because the guy on the snare dropped his cue." He paused thoughtfully and added: "Christ,

Johnny does it all the time. And if the guy who was supposed to lay in the sting dropped his cue, I think he'd look the same way.

By then it didn't matter. The stranger who wasn't Johnny Carson had time to recover, to look at a flabbergasted Ed McMahon and say, "The moon must be full tonight, Ed - do you think - " And that was when the NBC security guards came out and grabbed him.

"Hey! What the fuck do you think you're - "

But by then they had dragged him away.

In the control room of Studio C, there was total silence. The audience monitors picked up the same silence. Camera Four was swung toward the audience, and showed a picture of one hundred and fifty stunned, silent faces. Camera Two, the one medium-close on Ed McMahon, showed a man who looked almost cosmically befuddled.

The director took a package of Winstons from his breast pocket, took one out, put it in his mouth, took it out again and reversed it so the filter was facing away from him, and abruptly bit the cigarette in two. He threw the filtered half in one direction and spat the unfiltered half in another.

"Get up a show from the library with Rickles," he said. "No Joan Rivers. And if I see Totie Fields, someone's going to get fired." Then he strode away, head down. He shoved a chair with such violence on his way out of the control room that it struck the wall, rebounded, nearly fractured the skull of a white-faced intern from USC, and fell on its side.

One of the PA's told the intern in a low voice, "Don't worry; that's just Fred's way of committing honorable seppuku."

The man who was not Johnny Carson was taken, bellowing loudly not about his lawyer but his team of lawyers, to the Burbank Police Station. In Burbank, as in Beverly Hills and Hollywood Heights, there

is a wing of the police station which is known simply as “special security functions.” This may cover many aspects of the sometimes crazed world of Tinsel-Town law enforcement. The cops don’t like it, the cops don’t respect it ... but they ride with it. You don’t shit where you eat. Rule One.

“Special security functions” might be the place to which a coke-snorting movie-star whose last picture grossed seventy million dollars might be conveyed; the place to which the battered wife of an extremely powerful film producer might be taken; it was the place to which the man with the dark crop of curls was taken.

The man who showed up in Johnny Carson’s place on the stage of Studio C on the afternoon of November 29th identified himself as Ed Paladin, speaking the name with the air of one who expects everyone who hears it to fall on his or her knees and, perhaps, genuflect. His California driver’s license, Blue Cross - Blue Shield card, Amex and Diners’ Club cards, also identified him as Edward Paladin.

His trip from Studio C ended, at least temporarily, in a room in the Burbank PD’s “special security” area. The room was panelled with tough plastic that almost did look like mahogany and furnished with a low, round couch and tasteful chairs. There was a cigarette box on the glass-topped coffee table filled with Dunhills, and the magazines included Fortune and Variety and Vogue and Billboard and GQ. The wall-to-wall carpet wasn’t really ankle-deep but looked it, and there was a CableView guide on top of the large-screen TV. There was a bar (now locked), and a very nice neo-Jackson Pollock painting on one of the walls. The walls, however, were of drilled cork, and the mirror above the bar was a little bit too large and a little bit too shiny to be anything but a piece of one-way glass.

The man who called himself Ed Paladin stuck his hands in his just-too-loud sport-coat pockets, looked around disgustedly, and said: “An interrogation room by any other name is still an interrogation room.”

Detective 1st Grade Richard Cheyney looked at him calmly for a moment. When he spoke, it was in the soft and polite voice that had earned him the only halfkidding nickname "Detective to the Stars." Part of the reason he spoke this way was because he genuinely liked and respected show people. Part of the reason was because he didn't trust them. Half the time they were lying they didn't know it.

"Could you tell us, please, Mr Paladin, how you got on the set of The Tonight Show, and where Johnny Carson is?"

"Who's Johnny Carson?"

Pete Jacoby - who wanted to be Henny Youngman when he grew up, Cheyney often thought - gave Cheyney a momentary dry look every bit as good as a Jack Benny deadpan. Then he looked back at Edward Paladin and said, "Johnny Carson's the guy who used to be Mr Ed. You know, the talking horse? I mean, a lot of people know about Mr Ed, the famous talking horse, but an awful lot of people don't know that he went to Geneva to have a species-change operation and when he came back he was-"

Cheyney often allowed Jacoby his routines (there was really no other word for them, and Cheyney remembered one occasion when Jacoby had gotten a man charged with beating his wife and infant son to death laughing so hard that tears of mirth rather than remorse were rolling down his cheeks as he signed the confession that was going to put the bastard in jail for the rest of his life), but he wasn't going to tonight. He didn't have to see the flame under his ass; he could feel it, and it was being turned up. Pete was maybe a little slow on the uptake about some things, and maybe that was why he wasn't going to make Detective 1st for another two or three years ... if he ever did.

Some ten years ago a really awful thing had happened in a little nothing town called Chowchilla. Two people (they had walked on two legs, anyway, if you could believe the newsfilm) had hijacked a busload of kids, buried them alive, and then had demanded a huge sum of money. Otherwise, they said, those kiddies could just stay

where they were and swap baseball trading cards until their air ran out. That one had ended happily, but it could have been a nightmare. And God knew Johnny Carson was no busload of schoolkids, but the case had the same kind of fruitcake appeal: here was that rare event about which both the Los Angeles Times-Mirror and The National Enquirer would hobnob on their front pages. What Pete didn't understand was that something extremely rare had happened to them: in the world of day-to-day police work, a world where almost everything came in shades of gray, they had suddenly been placed in a situation of stark and simple contrasts: produce within twenty-four hours, thirty-six at the outside, or watch the Feds come in ... and kiss your ass goodbye.

Things happened so rapidly that even later he wasn't completely sure, but he believed both of them had been going on the unspoken presumption, even then, that Carson had been kidnapped and this guy was part of it.

"We're going to do it by the numbers, Mr Paladin," Cheyney said, and although he was speaking to the man glaring up at him from one of the chairs (he had refused the sofa at once), his eyes flicked briefly to Pete. They had been partners for nearly twelve years, and a glance was all it took.

No more Comedy Store routines, Pete.

Message received.

"First comes the Miranda Warning," Cheyney said pleasantly. "I am required to inform you that you are in the custody of the Burbank City Police. Although not required to do so immediately, I'll add that a preliminary charge of trespassing-

"Trespassing!" An angry flush burst over Paladin's face.

"-on property both owned and leased by the National Broadcasting Company has been lodged against you. I am Detective 1st Grade

Richard Cheyney. This man with me is my partner, Detective 2nd Grade Peter Jacoby. We'd like to interview you."

"Fucking interrogate me is what you mean."

"I only have one question, as far as interrogation goes," Cheyney said. "Otherwise, I only want to interview you at this time. In other words, I have one question relevant to the charge which has been lodged; the rest deal with other matters."

"Well, what's the fucking question?"

"That wouldn't be going by the numbers," Jacoby said.

Cheyney said: "I am required to tell you that you have the right-

"To have my lawyer here, you bet," Paladin said. "And I just decided that before I answer a single fucking question, and that includes where I went to lunch today and what I had, he's going to be in here. Albert K. Dellums."

He spoke this name as if it should rock both detectives back on their heels, but Cheyney had never heard of it and could tell by Pete's expression that he hadn't either.

Whatever sort of crazy this Ed Paladin might turn out to be, he was no dullard. He saw the quick glances which passed between the two detectives and read them easily. You know him? Cheyney's eyes asked Jacoby's, and Jacoby's replied, Never heard of him in my life.

For the first time an expression of perplexity - it was not fear, not yet - crossed Mr Edward Paladin's face.

"Al Dellums," he said, raising his voice like some Americans overseas who seem to believe they can make the waiter understand if they only speak loudly enough and slowly enough. "Al Dellums of Dellums, Carthage, Stoneham, and Tayloe. I guess I shouldn't be all that surprised that you haven't heard of him. He's only one of the

most important, well-known lawyers in the country.” Paladin shot the left cuff of his just-slightly-too-loud sport-coat and glanced at his watch. “If you reach him at home, gentlemen, he’ll be pissed. If you have to call his club - and I think this is his club-night - he’s going to be pissed like a bear.”

Cheyney was not impressed by bluster. If you could sell it at a quarter a pound, he never would have had to turn his hand at another day’s work. But even a quick peck had been enough to show him that the watch Paladin was wearing was not just a Rolex but a Rolex Midnight Star. It might be an imitation, of course, but his gut told him it was genuine. Part of it was his clear impression that Paladin wasn’t trying to make an impression - he’d wanted to see what time it was, no more or less than that. And if the watch was the McCoy ... well, there were cabin-cruisers you could buy for less. What was a man who could afford a Rolex Midnight Star doing mixed up in something weird like this?

Now he was the one who must have been showing perplexity clear enough for Paladin to read it, because the man smiled - a humorless skinning-back of the lips from the capped teeth. “The air-conditioning in here’s pretty nice,” he said, crossing his legs and flicking the crease absently. “You guys want to enjoy it while you can. It’s pretty muggy walking a beat out in Watts, even this time of year.”

In a harsh and abrupt tone utterly unlike his bright pitter-patter Comedy Store voice, Jacoby said: “Shut your mouth, jag-off.”

Paladin jerked around and stared at him, eyes wide. And again Cheyney would have sworn it had been years since anyone had spoken to this man in that way. Years since anyone would have dared.

“What did you say?”

“I said shut your mouth when Detective Cheyney is talking to you. Give me your lawyer’s number. I’ll see that he is called. In the meantime, I think you need to take a few seconds to pull your head

out of your ass and look around and see exactly where you are and exactly how serious the trouble is that you are in. I think you need to reflect on the fact that, while only one charge has been lodged against you, you could be facing enough to put you in the slam well into the next century ... and you could be facing them before the sun comes up tomorrow morning.”

Jacoby smiled. It wasn't his howaya-folks-anyone-here-from-Duluth Comedy Store smile, either. Like Paladin's, it was a brief pull of the lips, no more.

“You're right - the air-conditioning in here isn't halfbad. Also, the TV works and for a wonder the people on it don't look like they're seasick. The coffee's good - perked, not instant. Now, if you want to make another two or three wisecracks, you can wait for your legal talent in a holding cell on the fifth floor. On Five, the only entertainment consists of kids crying for their mommies and winos puking on their sneakers. I don't know who you think you are and I don't care, because as far as I'm concerned, you're nobody. I never saw you before in my life, never heard of you before in my life, and if you push me enough I'll widen the crack in your ass for you.”

“That's enough,” Cheyney said quietly.

“I'll retool it so you could drive a Ryder van up there, Mister Paladin - you understand me? Can you grok that?”

Now Paladin's eyes were all but hanging from their sockets on stalks. His mouth was open. Then, without speaking, he removed his wallet from his coat pocket (some kind of lizard-skin, Cheyney thought, two months' salary ... maybe three). He found his lawyer's card (the home number was jotted on the back, Cheyney noted it was most definitely not part of the printed matter on the front) and handed it to Jacoby. His fingers now showed the first observable tremor.

“Pete?”

Jacoby looked at him and Cheyney saw it was no act; Paladin had actually succeeded in pissing his easy-going partner off. No mean feat.

“Make the call yourself.”

“Okay.” Jacoby left.

Cheyney looked at Paladin and was suddenly amazed to find himself feeling sorry for the man. Before he had looked perplexed; now he looked both stunned and frightened, like a man who wakes from a nightmare only to discover the nightmare is still going on.

“Watch closely,” Cheyney said after the door had closed, “and I’ll show you one of the mysteries of the West. West LA, that is.”

He moved the neo-Pollock and revealed not a safe but a toggle switch. He flicked it, then let the painting slide back into place.

“That’s one-way glass,” Cheyney said, cocking a thumb at the too-large mirror over the bar.

“I am not terribly surprised to hear that,” Paladin said, and Cheyney reflected that, while the man might have some of the shitty egocentric habits of the Veddy Rich and Well-Known in LA, he was also a near-superb actor: only a man as experienced as he was himself could have told how really close Paladin was to the ragged edge of tears.

But not of guilt, that was what was so puzzling, so goddamn-maddening.

Of perplexity.

He felt that absurd sense of sorrow again, absurd because it presupposed the man’s innocence: he did not want to be Edward Paladin’s nightmare, did not want to be the heavy in a Kafka novel

where suddenly nobody knows where they are, or why they are there.

“I can’t do anything about the glass,” Cheyney said. He came back and sat down across the coffee table from Paladin, “but I’ve just killed the sound. So it’s you talking to me and vice-versa.” He took a pack of Kents from his breast pocket, stuck one in the corner of his mouth, then offered the pack to Paladin. “Smoke?”

Paladin picked up the pack, looked it over, and smiled. “Even my old brand. I haven’t smoked one since night Yul Brynner died, Mr Cheyney. I don’t think ant to start again now.”

Cheyney put the pack back into his pocket. “Can we talk?” he asked.

Paladin rolled his eyes. “Oh my God, it’s Joan Raiford.”

“Who?”

“Joan Raiford. You know, “I took Elizabeth Taylor to Marine World and when she saw Shamu the Whale she asked me if it came with vegetables?” I repeat, Detective Cheyney: grow up. I have no reason in the world to believe that switch is anything but a dummy. My God, how innocent do you think I am?”

Joan Raiford? Is that what he really said?, Joan Raiford?

“What’s the matter?” Paladin asked pleasantly. He crossed his legs the other way. “Did you perhaps think you saw a clear path? Me breaking down, maybe saying I’d tell everything, everything, just don’t let ‘em fry me, copper?”

With all the force of personality he could muster, Cheyney said: “I believe things are very wrong here, Mr Paladin. You’ve got them wrong and I’ve got them wrong. When your lawyer gets here, maybe we can sort them out and maybe we can’t. Most likely we can’t. So listen to me, and for God’s sake use your brain. I gave you the Miranda Warning. You said you wanted your lawyer present. If there

was a tape turning, I've buggered my own case. Your lawyer would have to say just one word - enticement - and you'd walk free, whatever has happened to Carson. And I could go to work as a security guard in one of those flea-bitten little towns down by the border."

"You say that," Paladin said, "but I'm no lawyer.

But ... Convince me, his eyes said. Yeah, let's talk about this, lees see if we can't get together, because you're right, something is weird. So ... convince me.

"Is your mother alive?" Cheyney asked abruptly.

"What - yes, but what does that have to-

"You talk to me or I'm going to personally take two CHP motorcycle cops and the three of us are going to rape your mother tomorrow!" Cheyney screamed. "I'm personally going to take her up the ass! Then we're going to cut off her tits and leave them on the front lawn! So you better talk!"

Paladin's face was as white as milk: a white so white it is nearly blue.

"Now are you convinced?" Cheyney asked softly. "I'm not crazy. I'm not going to rape your mother. But with a statement like that on a reel of tape, you could say you were the guy on the grassy knoll in Dallas and the Burbank police wouldn't produce the tape. I want to talk to you, man. What's going on here?"

Paladin shook his head dully and said, "I don't know."

In the room behind the one-way glass, Jacoby joined Lieutenant McEachern, Ed McMahan (still looking stunned), and a cluster of technical people at a bank of high-tech equipment. The LAPD chief of police and the mayor were rumored to be racing each other to Burbank.

“He’s talking?” Jacoby asked.

“I think he’s going to,” McEachern said. His eyes had moved toward Jacoby once, quickly, when he came in. Now they were centered only on the window. The men seated on the other side, Cheyney smoking, relaxed, Paladin tense but trying to control it, looked slightly lowish through the one-way glass. The sound of their voices was clear and undistorted through the overhead speakers - a top-of-the-line Bose in each corner.

Without taking his eyes off the men, McEachern said: “You get his lawyer?”

Jacoby said: “The home number on the card belongs to a cleaning woman named Howlanda Moore.”

McEachern flicked him another fast glance.

“Black, from the sound, delta Mississippi at a guess. Kids yelling and fighting in the background. She didn’t quite say I’se gwine whup you if you don’t quit!, but it was close. She’s had the number three years. I re-dialed twice.

“Jesus,” McEachern, said. “Try the office number?”

“Yeah,” Jacoby replied. “Got a recording. You think ConTel’s a good buy, Loot?”

McEachern flicked his gray eyes in Jacoby’s direction again.

“The number on the front of the card is that of a fairly large stock brokerage,” Jacoby said quietly. “I looked under lawyers in the Yellow Pages. Found no Albert K. Dellums. Closest is an Albert Dillon, no middle initial. No law firm like the one on the card.”

“Jesus please us,” McEachern said, and then the door banged open and a little man with the face of a monkey barged in. The mayor had apparently won the race to Burbank.

“What’s going on here?” he said to McEachern.

“I don’t know,” McEachern said.

“All right,” Paladin said wearily. “Let’s talk about it. I feel, Detective Cheyney, like a man who had just spent two hours or so on some disorienting amusement park ride. Or like someone slipped some LSD into my drink. Since we’re not on the record, what was your one interrogatory? Let’s start with that.”

“All right,” Cheyney said. “How did you get into the broadcast complex, and how did you get into Studio C?”

“Those are two questions.”

“I apologize.”

Paladin smiled faintly.

“I got on the property and into the studio,” he said, “the same way I’ve been getting on the property and into the studio for over twenty years. My pass. Plus the fact that I know every security guard in the place. Shit, I’ve been there longer than most of them.”

“May I see that pass?” Cheyney asked. His voice was quiet, but a large pulse beat in his throat.

Paladin looked at him warily for a moment, then pulled out the lizard-skin wallet again. After a moment of rifling, he tossed a perfectly correct NBC Performer’s Pass onto the coffee table.

Correct, that was, in every way but one.

Cheyney crushed out his smoke, picked it up, and looked at it. The pass was laminated. In the corner was the NBC peacock, something only long-timers had on their cards. The face in the photo was the face of Edward Paladin. Height and weight were correct. No space for eye-color, hair-color, or age, of course; when you were dealing with ego. Walk softly, stranger, for here there be tygers.

The only problem with the pass was that it was salmon pink.

NBC Performer's Passes were bright red.

Cheyney had seen something else while Paladin was looking for his pass. "Could you put a one-dollar bill from your wallet on the coffee table there?" he asked softly.

"Why?"

"I'll show you in a moment," Cheyney said. "A five or a ten would do as well."

Paladin studied him, then opened his wallet again. He took back his pass, replaced it, and carefully took out a one-dollar bill. He turned it so it faced Cheyney. Cheyney took his own wallet (a scuffed old Lord Buxton with its seams unravelling; he should replace it but found it easier to think of than to do) from his jacket pocket, and removed a dollar bill of his own. He put it next to Paladin's, and then turned them both around so Paladin could see them right-side-up-so Paladin could study them.

Which Paladin did, silently, for almost a full minute. His face slowly flushed dark red ... and then the color slipped from it a little at a time. He'd probably meant to bellow **WHAT THE FUCK IS GOING ON HERE?** Cheyney thought later, but what came out was a breathless little gasp: -what-

"I don't know," Cheyney said.

On the right was Cheyney's one, gray-green, not brand-new by any means, but new enough so that it did not yet have that ruffled, limp, shopworn look of a bill which has changed hands many times. Big number 1's at the top corners, smaller 1's at the bottom corners. **FEDERAL RESERVE NOTE** in small caps between the top 1's and **THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA** in larger ones. The letter A in a seal to the left of Washington, along with the assurance that **THIS NOTE IS LEGAL TENDER, FOR ALL DEBTS, PUBLIC AND**

PRIVATE. It was a series 1985 bill, the signature that of James A. Baker III.

Paladin's one was not the same at all.

The 1's in the four corners were the same; THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA was the same; the assurance that the bill could be used to pay all public and private debts was the same.

But Paladin's one was a bright blue.

Instead of FEDERAL RESERVE NOTE it said CURRENCY OF GOVERNMENT.

Instead of the letter A was the letter F.

But most of all it was the picture of the man on the bill that drew Cheyney's attention, just as the picture of the man on Cheyney's bill drew Paladin's.

Cheyney's gray-green one showed George Washington.

Paladin's blue one showed James Madison.

IHF FILMS AND BLACK FOREST FILMS PRESENT:

WHAT WOULD YOU DO?

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SCREENPLAY
BY GRADY
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STARRING
JONATHAN
FOUST
AS
JOHN DYKSTRA

ORIGINAL SCORE
BY
DUSTIN PAINTER

REST STOP

BASED UPON A SHORT STORY BY STEPHEN KING

REST STOP

Stephen King

He supposed that at some point between Jacksonville and Sarasota he did a literary version of the old Clark-Kent-in-the-phone-booth routine, but he wasn't sure just where or how. Which suggested it wasn't very dramatic. So did it even matter?

Sometimes he told himself the answer to that was no, the whole Rick Hardin/John Dykstra thing was nothing but an artificial construct, pure press agency, no different from Archibald Bloggert (or whatever his real name might have been) performing as Cary Grant, or Evan Hunter (whose actual birth name had been Salvatore something-or-other) writing as Ed McBain. And those guys had been his inspiration ... along with Donald E. Westlake, who wrote hard-boiled "caper" novels as Richard Stark, and K. C. Constantine, who was actually ... well, no one really knew, did they? As was the case with the mysterious Mr. B. Traven, who had written *Treasure of the Sierra Madre*. No one really knew, and that was a large part of the fun.

Name, name, what's in a name?

Who, for instance, was he on his biweekly ride back to Sarasota? He was Hardin when he left the Pot o' Gold in Jax, for sure, no doubt. And Dykstra when he let himself into his canal-side house on Macintosh Road, certainly. But who was he on Route 75, as he flowed from one town to the other beneath the bright turnpike lights? Hardin? Dykstra? No one at all? Was there maybe a magic moment when the literary werewolf who earned the big bucks turned back into the inoffensive English professor whose specialty was twentieth-century American poets and novelists? And did it matter as long as he was right with God, the IRS, and the occasional football players who took one of his two survey courses?

None of that mattered just south of Ocala. What did was that he had to piss like a racehorse, whoever he was. He'd gone two beers over his usual limit at the Pot o' Gold (maybe three) and had set the Jag's cruise control at sixty-five, not wanting to see any strobing red lights in his rearview mirror tonight. He might have paid for the Jag with books written under the Hardin name, but it was as John Andrew

Dykstra that he lived the majority of his life, and that was the name the flashlight would shine on if he was asked for his operator's license. And Hardin might have drunk the beers in the Pot o' Gold, but if a Florida state trooper produced the dreaded Breathalyzer kit in its little blue plastic case, it was Dykstra's intoxicated molecules that would wind up inside the gadget's educated guts. And on a Thursday night in June, he would be easy pickings no matter who he was, because all the snowbirds had gone back to Michigan and he had I-75 pretty much to himself.

Yet there was a fundamental problem with beer any undergraduate understood: You couldn't buy it, only rent it. Luckily, there was a rest stop just six or seven miles south of Ocala, and there he would make a little room.

Meanwhile, though, who was he?

Certainly he had come to Sarasota sixteen years before as John Dykstra, and it was under that name that he had taught English at the Sarasota branch of FSU since 1990. Then, in 1994, he'd decided to skip teaching summer classes and have a fling at writing a suspense novel instead. This had not been his idea. He had an agent in New York, not one of the superstuds, but an honest enough guy with a reasonable track record, who had been able to sell four of his new client's short stories (under the Dykstra name) to various literary magazines that paid in the low hundreds. The agent's name was Jack Golden, and while he had nothing but praise for the stories, he dismissed the resulting checks as "grocery money." It had been Jack who'd pointed out that all John Dykstra's published stories had "a high narrative line" (which was agentese for a plot, as far as Johnny could tell) and suggested his new client might be able to make \$40,000 or \$50,000 a whack writing suspense novels of a hundred thousand words.

"You could do that in a summer if you found a hook to hang your hat on and then stuck to it," he'd told Dykstra in a letter. (They hadn't progressed to using the phone and the fax at that point.) "And it would be twice as much as you'd make teaching classes in the June

and August sessions down there at Mangrove U. If you're going to try it, my friend, now is the time—before you find yourself with a wife and two-point-five children.”

There had been no potential wife on the horizon (nor was there now), but Dykstra had taken Jack's point; rolling the dice did not get easier as one grew older. And a wife and kids weren't the only responsibilities one took on as time slipped quietly by. There was always the lure of the credit cards, for instance. Credit cards put barnacles on your hull and slowed you down. Credit cards were agents of the norm and worked in favor of the sure thing.

When the summer-teaching contract came in January of '94, he had returned it unsigned to the department head with a brief explanatory note: I thought this summer I'd try to write a novel instead.

Eddie Wasserman's reply had been friendly but firm: That's fine, Johnny, but I can't guarantee the position will be there next summer. The man in the chair always gets right of first refusal.

Dykstra had considered this, but only briefly; by then he had an idea. Better still, he had a character: The Dog, literary father of Jaguars and houses on Macintosh Road, was waiting to be born, and God bless the Dog's homicidal heart.

*

Ahead of him was the white arrow on the blue sign twinkling in his headlights, and the ramp curving off to the left, and the high-intensity arc-sodium lights illuminating the pavement so brightly that the ramp looked like part of a stage set. He put on his blinker, slowed to forty, and left the interstate.

Halfway up, the ramp branched: trucks and Winnebagos to the right, folks in Jaguars straight ahead. Fifty yards beyond the split was the rest stop, a low building of beige cinder block that also looked like a stage set under the brilliant lights. What would it be in a movie? A missile-command center, maybe? Sure, why not. A missile-

command center way out in the boonies, and the guy in charge is suffering from some sort of carefully concealed (but progressive) mental illness. He's seeing Russians everywhere, Russians coming out of the damn woodwork ... or make it Al Qaeda terrorists, that was probably more au courant. The Russians were sort of out as potential villains these days unless they were pushing dope or teenage hookers. And the villain doesn't matter anyway, it's all a fantasy, but the guy's finger is nevertheless itching to push the red button, and ...

And he needed to pee, so put the imagination on the back burner for a while, please and thank you. Besides, there was no place for the Dog in a story like that. The Dog was more of an urban warrior, as he'd said at the Pot o' Gold earlier tonight. (Nice phrase, too.) Still, the idea of that crazy missile-silo commander had some power, didn't it? A handsome guy ... the men love him ... looks perfectly normal on the outside ...

There was only one other car in the sprawling parking area at this hour, one of those PT Cruisers that never failed to amuse him—they looked like toy gangster cars out of the 1930s.

He parked four or five slots down from it, turned off the engine, then paused to give the deserted parking lot a quick scan before getting out. This wasn't the first time he'd stopped at this particular rest area on his way back from the Pot, and once he'd been both amused and horrified to see an alligator lumbering across the deserted pavement toward the sugar pines beyond the rest area, looking somehow like an elderly, overweight businessman on his way to a meeting. There was no gator tonight, and he got out, cocking his key-pak over his shoulder and pushing the padlock icon. Tonight there was only him and Mr. PT Cruiser. The Jag gave an obedient twitter, and for a moment he saw his shadow in the brief flash of its headlights ... only whose shadow was it? Dykstra's or Hardin's?

Johnny Dykstra's, he decided. Hardin was gone now, left behind thirty or forty miles back. But this had been his night to give the brief (and mostly humorous) after-dinner presentation to the rest of the

Florida Thieves, and he thought Mr. Hardin had done a fairly good job, ending with a promise to send the Dog after anyone who didn't contribute generously to this year's charity, which happened to be Sunshine Readers, a non-profit that provided audiotape texts and articles for blind scholars.

He walked across the parking lot to the building, the heels of his cowboy boots clocking. John Dykstra never would have worn faded jeans and cowboy boots to a public function, especially one where he was the featured speaker, but Hardin was a different breed of hot rod. Unlike Dykstra (who could be fussy), Hardin didn't care much what people thought of his appearance.

The rest-area building was divided into three parts: the women's room on the left, the men's room on the right, and a big porchlike portico in the middle where you could pick up pamphlets on various central-and south-Florida attractions. There were also snack machines, two soft-drink machines, and a coin-op map dispenser that took a ridiculous number of quarters. Both sides of the short cinder-block entryway were papered with missing-child posters that always gave Dykstra a chill. How many of the kids in the photos, he always wondered, were buried in the damp, sandy soil or feeding the gators in the Glades? How many of them were growing up in the belief that the drifters who had snatched them (and from time to time sexually molested them or rented them out) were their mothers or fathers? Dykstra did not like to look at their open, innocent faces or consider the desperation underlying the absurd reward numbers—\$10,000, \$20,000, \$50,000, in one case \$100,000 (that last one for a smiling towheaded girl from Fort Myers who had disappeared in 1980 and would now be a woman in young middle age, if she was still alive at all ... which she almost certainly was not). There was also a sign informing the public that barrel-picking was prohibited, and another stating that loitering longer than an hour in this rest area was prohibited—POLICE TAKE NOTICE.

Who'd want to loiter here? Dykstra thought, and listened to the night wind rustle through the palms. A crazy person, that was who. A

person to whom a red button would start to look good as the months and years snored past with the sound of sixteen-wheelers in the passing lane at one in the morning.

He turned toward the men's room and then froze in midstep as a woman's voice, slightly distorted by echo but dismayingly close, spoke unexpectedly from behind him.

"No, Lee," she said. "No, honey, don't."

There was a slap, followed by a thump, a muffled meat thump. Dykstra realized he was listening to the unremarkable sounds of abuse. He could actually see the red hand shape on the woman's cheek and her head, only slightly cushioned by her hair (blond? dark?), bouncing off the wall of beige tile. She began to cry. The arc sodiums were bright enough for Dykstra to see that his arms had broken out in gooseflesh. He began to bite his lower lip.

"Fuckin' hoor."

Lee's voice was flat, declamatory. Hard to tell how you could know immediately that he was drunk, because each word was perfectly articulated. But you did know, because you had heard men speak that way before—at ballparks, at carnivals, sometimes through a thin motel-room wall (or drifting down through the ceiling) late at night, after the moon was down and the bars were closed. The female half of the conversation—could you call it a conversation?—might be drunk, too, but mostly she sounded scared.

Dykstra stood there in the little notch of an entryway, facing the men's room, his back turned toward the couple in the women's room. He was in shadow, surrounded on both sides by pictures of missing children that rustled faintly, like the fronds of the palm trees, in the night breeze. He stood there waiting, hoping there would be no more. But of course there was. The words of some country-music singer came to him, nonsensical and portentous: "By the time I found out I was no good, I was too rich to quit."

There was another meaty smack and another cry from the woman. There was a beat of silence, and then the man's voice came again, and you knew he was uneducated as well as drunk; it was the way he said hoor when he meant whore. You knew all sorts of things about him actually: that he'd sat at the back of the room in his high school English classes, that he drank milk straight out of the carton when he got home from school, that he'd dropped out in his sophomore or junior year, that he did the sort of job for which he needed to wear gloves and carry an X-Acto knife in his back pocket. You weren't supposed to make such generalizations—it was like saying all African-Americans had natural rhythm, that all Italians cried at the opera—but here in the dark at eleven o'clock, surrounded by posters of missing children, for some reason always printed on pink paper, as if that were the color of the missing, you knew it was true.

“Fuckin’ little hoor.”

He has freckles, Dykstra thought. And he sunburns easily. The sunburn makes him look like he's always mad, and usually he is mad. He drinks Kahlua when he's in funds, as we say, but mostly he drinks b—

“Lee, don't,” came the voice of the woman. She was crying now, pleading, and Dykstra thought: Don't do that, lady. Don't you know that only makes it worse? Don't you know he sees that runner of snot hanging out of your nose, and it makes him madder than ever? “Don't hit me no more, I'm s—”

Whap!

It was followed by another thump and a sharp cry, almost a dog's yelp, of pain. Old Mr. PT Cruiser had once more smoked her hard enough to bounce the back of her head off the tiled bathroom wall, and what was that old joke? Why are there three hundred thousand cases of spousal abuse in America each year? Because they won't ... fuckin' ... listen.

“Fuckin’ hoor.” That was Lee’s scripture tonight, right out of Second Drunkalonians, and what was scary in that voice—what Dykstra found utterly terrifying—was the lack of emotion. Anger would have been better. Anger would have been safer for the woman. Anger was like a flammable vapor—a spark could ignite it and burn it off in a single quick and gaudy burst—but this guy was just ... dedicated. He wasn’t going to hit her again and then apologize, perhaps starting to cry as he did so. Maybe he had on other nights, but not tonight. Tonight he was going for the long bomb. Hail Mary fulla grace, help me win this stock-car race.

So what do I do? What’s my place in it? Do I have one?

He certainly wasn’t going to go into the men’s room and take the long, leisurely piss he had planned and looked forward to; his nuts were drawn up like a couple of hard little stones, and the pressure in his kidneys had spread both up his back and down his legs. His heart was hurrying in his chest, thudding along at a rapid jog-trot that would probably become a sprint at the sound of the next blow. It would be an hour or more before he’d be able to piss again, no matter how badly he had to, and then it would come in a series of unsatisfying little squirts. And God, how he wished that hour had already gone by, that he was sixty or seventy miles down the road from here!

What do you do if he hits her again?

Another question occurred: What would he do if the woman took to her heels and Mr. PT Cruiser followed her? There was only one way out of the women’s room, and John Dykstra was standing in the middle of it. John Dykstra in the cowboy boots Rick Hardin had worn to Jacksonville, where once every two weeks a group of mystery writers—many of them plump women in pastel pantsuits—met to discuss techniques, agents, and sales, and to gossip about one another.

“Lee-Lee, don’t hurt me, okay? Please don’t hurt me. Please don’t hurt the baby.”

Lee-Lee. Jesus wept.

Oh, and another one; score one more. The baby. Please don't hurt the baby. Welcome to the fucking Lifetime Channel.

Dykstra's rapidly beating heart seemed to sink an inch in his chest. It felt as if he had been standing here in this little cinder-block notch between the men's room and the women's for at least twenty minutes, but when he looked at his watch, he wasn't surprised to see that not even forty seconds had passed since the first slap. It was the subjective nature of time and the eerie speed of thought when the mind was suddenly put under pressure. He had written about both many times. He supposed most quote-unquote suspense novelists had. It was a goddam staple. The next time it was his turn to address the Florida Thieves, perhaps he would take that as his subject and begin by telling them about this incident. About how he'd had time to think, Second Drunkalonnians. Although he supposed it might be a little heavy for their biweekly get-togethers, a little—

A perfect flurry of blows interrupted this train of thought. Lee-Lee had snapped. Dykstra listened to the particular sound of these blows with the dismay of a man who understands he's hearing sounds he will never forget, not movie-soundtrack Foleys but a fists-hitting-a-feather-pillow sound, surprisingly light, actually almost delicate. The woman screamed once in surprise and once in pain. After that she was reduced to puffing little cries of pain and fear. Outside in the dark, Dykstra thought of all the public-service spots he'd seen about preventing domestic violence. They did not hint at this, how you could hear the wind in the palm trees in one ear (and the rustle of the missing-child posters, don't forget that) and those little groaning sounds of pain and fear in the other.

He heard shuffling feet on the tiles and knew Lee (Lee-Lee, the woman had called him, as if a pet name might defuse his rage) was closing in. Like Rick Hardin, Lee was boots. The Lee-Lees of the world tended to be Georgia Giant guys. They were Dingo men. The woman was in sneakers, white low-tops. He knew it.

“Bitch, you fuckin’ bitch, I seen you talkin’ to him, tossin’ your tits at him, you fuckin’ hoor—”

“No, Lee-Lee, I never—”

The sound of another blow, and then a hoarse expectoration that was neither male nor female. Retching. Tomorrow, whoever cleaned these restrooms would find vomit drying on the floor and one of the tiled walls in the women’s, but Lee and his wife or girlfriend would be long departed, and to the cleaner it would be just another mess to clean up, the story of the puke both unclear and uninteresting, and what was Dykstra supposed to do? Jesus, did he have the sack to go in there? If he didn’t, Lee might finish beating her up and call it good, but if a stranger interfered—

He could kill both of us.

But ...

The baby. Please don’t hurt the baby.

Dykstra clenched his fists and thought, Fucking Lifetime Channel!

The woman was still retching.

“Stop that, Ellen.”

“I can’t!”

“No? Okay, good. I’ll stop it for you. Fuckin’ ... hoor.”

Another whap! punctuated hoor. Dykstra’s heart sank even lower. He would not have thought it possible. Soon it would be beating in his belly. If only he could channel the Dog! In a story it would work—he’d even been thinking about identity before making the evening’s great mistake of turning into this rest area, and if that wasn’t what the writing manuals called foreshadowing, then what was?

Yes, he would turn into his hit man, stride into the women's room, beat the living shit out of Lee, then go on his way. Like Shane in that old movie with Alan Ladd.

The woman retched again, the sound of a machine turning stones into gravel, and Dykstra knew he wasn't going to channel the Dog. The Dog was make-believe. This was reality, rolling out right here in front of him like a drunk's tongue.

"Do it again and see what it gets you," Lee invited, and now there was something deadly in his voice. He was getting ready to go all the way. Dykstra was sure of it.

I'll testify in court. And when they ask me what I did to stop it, I'll say nothing. I'll say that I listened. That I remembered. That I was a witness. And then I will explain that that is what writers do when they're not actually writing.

Dykstra thought of running back to his Jag—quietly!—and using the phone in the console to call the state police. *99 was all it took. The signs saying so were posted every ten miles or so: IN CASE OF ACCIDENT DIAL *99 ON CELLULAR. Except there was never a cop around when you needed one. The closest tonight would turn out to be in Bradenton or maybe Ybor City, and by the time the trooper got here, this little red rodeo would be over.

From the women's room there now came a series of thick hiccuping sounds, interspersed with low gagging noises. One of the stall doors banged. The woman knew that Lee meant it just as surely as Dykstra knew it. Just vomiting again would likely be enough to set him off. He would go crazy on her and finish the job. And if they caught him? Second degree. No premeditation. He could be out in fifteen months and dating this one's kid sister.

Go back to your car, John. Go back to your car, get in behind the wheel, and drive away from here. Start working on the idea that this never happened. And make sure you don't read the paper or watch the TV news for the next couple of days. That'll help. Do it. Do it now.

You're a writer, not a fighter. You stand five-nine, you weigh 162 pounds, you've got a bad shoulder, and the only thing you can do here is make things worse. So get back in your car and send up a little prayer to whatever God looks out for women like Ellen.

And he actually turned away before an idea occurred to him.

The Dog wasn't real, but Rick Hardin was.

*

Ellen Whitlow of Nokomis had fallen into one of the toilets and landed on the hopper with her legs spread and her skirt up, just like the hoor she was, and Lee started in there after her, meaning to grab her by the ears and start slamming her dumb head against the tiles. He'd had enough. He was going to teach her a lesson she'd never forget.

Not that these thoughts went through his mind in any coherent fashion. What was in his mind now was mostly red. Under it, over it, seeping through it was a chanting voice that sounded like Steven Tyler of Aerosmith: Ain't my baby anyway, ain't mine, ain't mine, you ain't pinning it on me, you fuckin' hoor.

He took three steps, and that was when a car horn began to blat rhythmically somewhere close by, spoiling his own rhythm, spoiling his concentration, taking him out of his head, making him look around: Bamp! Bamp! Bamp! Bamp!

Car alarm, he thought, and looked from the entrance to the women's room back to the woman sitting in the stall. From the door to the hoor. His fists began to clench in indecision. Suddenly he pointed at her with his right index finger, the nail long and dirty.

"Move and you're dead, bitch," he told her, and started for the door.

It was brightly lit in the shithouse and almost as brightly lit in the rest-area parking lot, but in the notch between the two wings it was dark.

For a moment he was blind, and that was when something hit him high up on the back, driving him forward in a stumbling run that took him only two steps forward before he tripped over something else—a leg—and went sprawling on the concrete.

There was no pause, no hesitation. A boot kicked him in the thigh, freezing the big muscle there, and then high up on his blue-jeaned ass, almost to the small of his back. He started to scramble—

A voice above him said, “Don’t roll over, Lee. I’ve got a tire iron in my hand. Stay on your stomach or I’ll beat your head in.”

Lee lay where he was with his hands out in front of him, almost touching.

“Come out of there, Ellen,” said the man who had hit him. “We have no time to fool around. Come out right now.”

There was a pause. Then the hoo’s voice, trembling and thick: “Did you hurt him? Don’t you hurt him!”

“He’s okay, but if you don’t come out right now, I’m going to hurt him bad. I’ll have to.” A pause, then: “And it’ll be your fault.”

Meanwhile, the car horn, beating monotonously into the night—
Bamp! Bamp! Bamp! Bamp!

Lee started to turn his head on the pavement. It hurt. What had the fucker hit him with? Had he said a tire iron? He couldn’t remember.

The boot slammed into his ass again. Lee yelled and turned his face back to the pavement.

“Come out, lady, or I’m going to open up his head! I have no choice here!”

When she spoke again, she was closer. Her voice was unsteady, but now tending toward outrage: “Why did you do that? You didn’t have to do that!”

“I called the police on my cell,” the man standing above him said. “There was a trooper at mile 140. So we’ve got ten minutes, maybe a little less. Mr. Lee-Lee, do you have the car keys or does she?”

Lee had to think about it.

“She does,” he said at last. “She said I was too drunk to drive.”

“All right. Ellen, you go down there and get in that PT Cruiser, and you drive away. You keep going until you get to Lake City, and if you’ve got the brains God gave a duck, you won’t turn around there, either.”

“I ain’t leaving him with you!” She sounded very angry now. “Not when you got that thing!”

“Yes, you are. You do it right now or I’ll fuck him up royally.”

“You bully!”

The man laughed, and the sound frightened Lee more than the fellow’s speaking voice. “I’ll count to thirty. If you’re not driving southbound out of the rest area by then, I’ll take his head right off his shoulders. I’ll drive it like a golf ball.”

“You can’t—”

“Do it, Ellie. Do it, honey.”

“You heard him,” the man said. “Your big old teddy bear wants you to go. If you want to let him finish beating the shit out of you tomorrow night—and the baby—that’s fine with me. I won’t be around tomorrow night. But right now I’m done fucking with you; so you put your dumb ass in gear.”

This was a command she understood, delivered in language familiar to her, and Lee saw her bare legs and sandals moving past his lowered line of vision. The man who’d sandbagged him started counting loudly: “One, two, three, four ...”

“Hurry the hell up!” Lee shouted, and the boot was on his ass, but more gently now, rocking him rather than whacking him. But it still hurt. Meanwhile, Bamp! Bamp! Bamp! into the night. “Get your ass in gear!”

At that her sandals began to run. Her shadow ran beside them. The man had reached twenty when the PT Cruiser’s little sewing-machine engine started up, had reached thirty when Lee saw its taillights backing into the parking area. Lee waited for the man to start whacking and was relieved when he didn’t.

Then the PT Cruiser started down the exit lane and the engine sound began to fade, and then the man standing over him spoke with a kind of perplexity.

“Now,” the man who’d sandbagged him said, “what am I going to do with you?”

“Don’t hurt me,” Lee said. “Don’t hurt me, mister.”

*

Once the PT Cruiser’s taillights were out of sight, Hardin shifted the tire iron from one hand to the other. His palms were sweaty and he almost dropped it. That would have been bad. The tire iron would have clanged loudly on the concrete if he’d dropped it, and Lee would have been up in a flash. He wasn’t as big as Dykstra had imagined, but he was dangerous. He’d already proved that.

Sure, dangerous to pregnant women.

But that was no way to think. If he let old Lee-Lee get up on his feet, this would be a whole new ball game. He could feel Dykstra trying to come back, wanting to discuss this and perhaps a few other points. Hardin pushed him away. This was not the time or place for a college English instructor.

“Now, what am I going to do with you?” he asked, the question one of honest perplexity.

“Don’t hurt me,” the man on the ground said. He was wearing glasses. That had been a major surprise. No way had either Hardin or Dykstra seen this man wearing glasses. “Don’t hurt me, mister.”

“I got an idea.” Dykstra would have said I have an idea. “Take your glasses off and put them beside you.”

“Why—”

“Save the lip, just do it.”

Lee, who was wearing faded Levi’s and a Western-style shirt (now pulled out in the back and hanging over his butt), started to take off his wire-rimmed glasses with his right hand.

“No, do it with your other one.”

“Why?”

“Don’t ask me questions. Just do it. Take ‘em off with your left hand.”

Lee took off the queerly delicate spectacles and put them on the pavement. Hardin immediately stepped on them with the heel of one boot. There was a little snapping sound and the delicious grind of glass.

“Why’d you do that?” Lee cried.

“Why do you think? Have you got a gun or anything?”

“No! Jesus, no!”

And Hardin believed him. If there’d been one, it would have been a gator gun in the PT Cruiser’s trunk. But he didn’t think even that was likely. Standing outside the women’s room, Dykstra had been imagining some big hulk of a construction worker. This guy looked

like an accountant who worked out three times a week at Gold's Gym.

"I think I'll walk back to my car now," Hardin said. "Turn off the alarm and drive away."

"Yeah. Yeah, why don't you do th—"

Hardin put a warning foot on the man's butt again, this time rocking it back and forth a little more roughly.

"Why don't you just shut up? What did you think you were doing in there anyway?"

"Teaching her a fucking les—"

Hardin kicked him in the hip almost as hard as he could, pulling the blow a little bit at the last second. But only a little. Lee cried out in pain and fear. Hardin was dismayed at what he'd just done and how he'd done it, absolutely without thought. What dismayed him even more was that he wanted to do it again, and harder. He liked that cry of pain and fear, could do with hearing it again.

So how far was he from Shithouse Lee, lying out here with the shadow of the entryway running up his back on a crisp black diagonal? Not very, it seemed. But so what? It was a tiresome question, a movie-of-the-week question. A much more interesting one occurred to him. This question was how hard he could kick old Lee-Lee in the left ear without sacrificing accuracy for force. Square in the ear, ka-pow. He also wondered what kind of a sound it would make. A satisfying one, would be his guess. Of course he might kill the man doing that, but how much loss to the world would that be? And who would ever know? Ellen? Fuck her.

"You better shut up, my friend," Hardin said. "That would be your best course of action right about now. Just shut up. And when the state trooper gets here, you tell him whatever the fuck you want."

“Why don’t you go? Just go and leave me alone. You broke my glasses, isn’t that enough?”

“No,” Hardin said truthfully. He thought a second. “You know what?”

Lee didn’t ask him what.

“I’m going to walk slow to my car. You come on and come after me if you want. We’ll do it face-to-face.”

“Yeah, right!” Lee laughed tearfully. “I can’t see shit without my glasses!”

Hardin pushed his own up on his nose. He didn’t have to pee anymore. What a weird thing! “Look at you,” he said. “Just look at you.”

Lee must have heard something in his voice, because Hardin saw him start to tremble by the light of the silvery moon. But he didn’t say anything, which was probably wise under the circumstances. And the man standing over him, who had never been in a fight in his whole life before this, not in high school, not even in grammar school, understood that this was really all over. If Lee had had a gun, he might have tried to shoot him in the back as he walked away. But otherwise, no. Lee was ... what was the word?

Buffaloed.

Old Lee-Lee was buffaloed.

Hardin was struck by an inspiration. “I got your license number,” he said. “And I know your name. Yours and hers. I’ll be watching the papers, asshole.”

Nothing from Lee. He just lay on his stomach with his broken glasses twinkling in the moonlight.

“Goodnight, asshole,” Hardin said. He walked down to the parking lot and drove away. Shane in a Jaguar.

*

He was okay for ten minutes, maybe fifteen. Long enough to try the radio and then decide on the Lucinda Williams disc in the CD player instead. Then, all at once, his stomach was in his throat, still full of the chicken and potatoes he had eaten at the Pot o' Gold.

He pulled over into the breakdown lane, threw the Jag's transmission into park, started to get out, and realized there wasn't time for that. So he just leaned out instead with the seat belt still fastened and vomited onto the pavement beside the driver's-side door. He was shaking all over. His teeth were chattering.

Headlights appeared and swept toward him. They slowed down. Dykstra's first thought was that it was a state cop, finally a state cop. They always showed up when you didn't need them, didn't want them. His second one—a cold certainty—was that it was the PT Cruiser, Ellen at the wheel, Lee-Lee in the passenger seat, now with a tire iron of his own in his lap.

But it was just an old Dodge full of kids. One of them—a moronic-looking boy with what was probably red hair—poked his bepimpled moon of a face out the window and shouted, "Throw it to your heeeels!" This was followed by laughter, and the car accelerated away.

Dykstra closed the driver's-side door, put his head back, closed his eyes, and waited for the shakes to abate. After a while they did, and his stomach settled along the way. He realized he needed to pee again and took it as a good sign.

He thought of wanting to kick Lee-Lee in the ear—how hard? what sound?—and tried to force his mind away from it. Thinking about wanting to do that made him feel sick all over again.

Where his mind (his mostly obedient mind) went was to that missile-silo commander stationed out in Lonesome Crow, North Dakota (or maybe it was Dead Wolf, Montana). The one who was going quietly

crazy. Seeing terrorists under every bush. Piling up badly written pamphlets in his locker, spending many a late night in front of the computer screen, exploring the paranoid back alleys of the Internet.

And maybe the Dog's on his way to California to do a job ... driving instead of flying because he's got a couple of special guns in the trunk of his Plymouth Road Runner ... and he has car trouble ...

Sure. Sure, that was good. Or it could be, with a little more thought. Had he thought there was no place for the Dog out in the big empty of the American heartland? That was narrow thinking, wasn't it? Because under the right circumstances, anyone could end up anywhere, doing anything.

The shakes were gone. Dykstra put the Jag back in gear and got rolling. At Lake City he found an all-night gas station and convenience store, and there he stopped to empty his bladder and fill his gas tank (after checking the lot and the four pump islands for the PT Cruiser and not seeing it). Then he drove the rest of the way home, thinking his Rick Hardin thoughts, and let himself into his John Dykstra house by the canal. He always set the burglar alarm before leaving—it was the prudent thing to do—and he turned it off before setting it again for the rest of the night.

THE RETURN OF TIMMY BATERMAN

Stephen King

“IN THOSE DAYS-back during the war, I mean-the train still stopped in Orrington, and Bill Baterman had a funeral hack there at the loading depot to meet the freight carrying the body of his son Timmy. The coffin was unloaded by four railroad men. I was one of them. There was an army fellow on board from Graves and Registration-that was the army’s wartime version of undertakers, Louis-but he never got off the train. He was sitting drunk in a boxcar that still had twelve coffins in it.“We put Timmy into the back of a Cadillac-in those days it still wasn’t uncommon to hear such things called ‘hurry-up wagons’ because the old days, the major concern was to get them into the ground before they rotted. Bill Baterman stood his face stony and kinda...I dunno...kinda dry, guess you’d say. He wept no tears. Huey Garber was driving the train that day, and he said that army fella had really had a tour for himself. Huey said they’d flown in a whole shitload of those coffins to Limestone in Presque Isle, at which point both the coffins and their keeper entrained for points south.

“The army fella comes walking up to Huey, and he takes a fifth of rye whiskey out of his uniform blouse, and he says in this soft, drawly Dixie voice, ‘Well, Mr. Engineer, you’re driving a mystery train today, did know that?’

“Huey shakes his head.

” ‘Well, you are. At least, that’s what they call funeral train down in Alabama.’ Huey says the fella took a list out of his pocket and squinted at it. ‘We’re going to start by dropping two of those coffins off in Houlton, and then I’ve got one for Passadumkeag, two for Bangor, one for Derry, one for Ludlow, and so on. I feel like a fugging milkman. You want a drink?’

“Well, Huey declines the drink on the grounds the Bangor and Aroostook is pretty fussy on the subject of train drivers with rye on their breaths, and the fella from Graves and Registration don’t hold it against Huey, any more than Huey holds the fact of the army fella’s drunkenness against him. They even shook on her, Huey said.

“So off they go, dropping those flag-covered coffins every other stop or two. Eighteen or twenty of ’em in all. Huey said it went on all the way to Boston, and there was weeping and wailing relatives at every stop except Ludlow...and at Ludlow he was treated to the sight of Bill Baterman, who, he said, looked like he was dead inside and just waiting for his soul to stink. When he got off that train, he said he woke up that army fella, and they hit some spots-fifteen or twenty-and Huey got drunker than he had ever been and went to a whore, which he’d never done in his whole life, and woke up with a set of crabs so big and mean they gave him the shivers, and he said that if this was what they called a mystery train, he never wanted to drive no mystery train again.

“Timmy’s body was taken up to the Greenspan Home on Fern Street-it used to be across from where the New Franklin Laundry stands now-and two days later he was buried in Pleasantview Cemetery with full military honors.

“Well, I tell you, Louis: Missus Baterman was dead ten years then, along with the second child she tried to bring into the world, and that had a lot to do with happened. A second child might have helped to ease the pain, don’t you think? A second child might have reminded old Bill that there’s others that feel the pain and have to be helped through. I guess in that way, you’re luckier-having another child and all, I mean. A child and a wife who are both alive and well.

“According to the letter Bill got from the lieutenant in charge of his boy’s platoon, Timmy was shot down on the road to Rome on July 15, 1943. His body was shipped home two days later, and it got to Limestone on the nineteenth. It was put aboard Huey Garber’s mystery train the very next day. Most of the GIs who got killed in Europe were buried in Europe, but all of the boys who went home on that train were special-Timmy had died charging a machine-gun nest, and he had won the Silver Star posthumously.

“Timmy was buried-don’t hold me to this, but I think it was on July 22. It was four or five days later that Marjorie Washburn, who was the mailwoman in those days, saw Timmy walking up the road toward

York's Livery Stable. Well, Margie damn near drove right off the road, and you can understand why. She went back to the post office, tossed her leather bag with all her undelivered mail still in it on George Anderson's desk, and told him she was going home and to bed right then.

" 'Margie, are you sick?' George asks. 'You are just as white as a gull's wing.'

" 'I've had the fright of my life, and I don't want to talk to you about it,' Margie Washburn says. 'I ain't going to talk to Brian about it, or my mom, or anybody. When I get up to heaven, if Jesus asks me to talk to Him about it, maybe I will. But I don't believe it.' And out she goes.

"Everybody knew Timmy was dead; there was his obituary in the Bangor Daily News and the Ellsworth American just the week before, picture and all, and half the town turned out for his funeral up to the city. And here Margie seen him, walking up the road-lurching up the road, she finally told old George Anderson-only this was twenty years later, and she was dying, and George told me it seemed to him like she wanted to tell somebody what shed seen. George said it seemed to him like it preyed on her mind, you know.

"Pale he was, she said, and dressed in an old pair of chino pants and a faded flannel hunting shirt, although it must have been ninety degrees in the shade that day. Margie said all his hair was sticking up in the back. 'His eyes were like raisins stuck in bread dough. I saw a ghost that day, George. That's what scared me so. I never thought I'd see such a thing, but there it was.'

"Well, word got around. Pretty soon some other people saw Timmy, too. Missus Stratton-well, we called her 'missus,' but so far as anyone knew she could have been single or divorced or grass-widowed; she had a little two-room house down where the Pedersen Road joins the Hancock Road, and she had a lot of jazz records, and sometimes she'd be wilting to throw you a little party if you had a ten-dollar bill that wasn't working too hard. Well, she saw him from her

porch, and she said he walked right up to the edge of the road and stopped there.

“He just stood there, she said, his hands dangling at his sides and his head pushed forward, lookin’ like a boxer who’s ready to eat him some canvas. She said she stood there on her porch, heart goin’ like sixty, too scared to move. Then she said he turned around, and it was like watching a drunk man try to do an about-face. One leg went way out and the other foot turned, and he just about fell over. She said he looked right at her and all the strength just run out of her hands and she dropped the basket of washing she had, and the clothes fell out and got smutty all over again.

“She said his eyes...she said they looked as dead and dusty as marbles, Louis. But he saw her...and he grinned...and she said he talked to her. Asked her if she still had those records because he wouldn’t mind cutting a rug with her. Maybe that very night. And Missus Stratton went back inside, and she wouldn’t come out for most of a week, and by then it was over anyway.

“Lot of people saw Timmy Baterman. Many of them are dead now-Missus Stratton is, for one, and others have moved on, but there are a few old crocks like me left around who’ll tell you...if you ask em right.

“We saw him, I tell you, walking back and forth along the Pedersen Road, a mile east of his daddy’s house and a mile west. Back and forth he went, back and forth all day, and for all anyone knew, all night. Shirt untucked, pale face, hair all stuck up in spikes, fly unzipped sometimes, and this look on his face... this look...”

Jud paused to light a cigarette, then shook the match out, and looked at Louis through the haze of drifting blue smoke. And although the story was, of course, utterly mad, there was no lie in Jud’s eyes.

“You know, they have these stories and these movies-I don’t know if they’re true-about zombies down in Haiti. In the movies they just sort

of shamble along, with their dead eyes starin' straight ahead, real slow and sort of clumsy. Timmy Baterman was like that, Louis, like a zombie in a movie, but he wasn't. There was something more. There was something goin' on behind his eyes, and sometimes you could see it and sometimes you couldn't see it. Somethin' behind his eyes, Louis. I don't think that thinking is what I want to call it. I don't know what in the hell I want to call it.

"It was sly, that was one thing. Like him telling Missus Stratton he wanted to cut a rug with her. There was something goin' on in there, Louis, but I don't think it was thinking and I don't think it had much-maybe nothing at all-to do with Timmy Baterman. It was more like a...radio signal that was comin' from somewhere else. You looked at him and you thought, 'If he touches me, I'm gonna scream.' Like that.

"Back and forth he went, up and down the road, and one day after I got home from work-this must have been, oh, I'm going to say it was July 30 or so-here is George Anderson, the postmaster, don't you know, sitting on my back porch, drinking iced tea with Hannibal Benson, who was then our second selectman, and Alan Purinton, who was fire chief. Norma sat there too, but never said a thing.

"George kept rubbing the stump at the top of his right leg. Lost most of that leg working on the railroad, he did, and the stump used to bother him something fierce on those hot and muggy days. But here he was, misery or not.

" 'This has gone far enough,' George says to me. 'I got a mailwoman who won't deliver out on the Pedersen Road-that's one thing. It's starting to raise Cain with the government, and that's something else.'

" 'What do you mean, it's raising Cain with the government?' I asked.

"Hannibal said he'd had a call from the War Department. Some lieutenant named Kinsman whose job it was to sort out malicious mischief from plain old tomfoolery. 'Four or five people have written

anonymous letters to the War Department,' Hannibal says, 'and this Lieutenant Kinsman is starting to get a little bit concerned. If it was just one fellow who had written one letter, they'd laugh it off. If it was just one fellow writing a whole bunch of letters, Kinsman says he'd call the state police up in Derry Barracks and tell 'em they might have a psychopath with a hate on against the Baterman family in Ludlow. But these letters all came from different people. He said you could tell that by the handwriting, name or no name, and they all say the same crazy thing-that if Timothy Baterman is dead, he makes one hell of a lively corpse walking up and down Pederson Road with his bare face hanging out.

" 'This Kinsman is going to send a fellow out or come himself if this don't settle down,' Hannibal finishes up. 'They want to know if Timmy's dead, or AWOL, or what because they don't like to think their records are all at sixes and sevens. Also they're gonna want to know who was buried in Timmy Baterman's box, if he wasn't.'

"Well, you can see what kind of a mess it was, Louis. We sat there most of an hour, drinking iced tea and talking it over. Norma asked us if we wanted sandwiches, but no one did.

"We talked it around and talked it around, and finally we decided we had to go out there to the Baterman place. I'll never forget that night, not if I live to be twice as old's I am now. It was hot, hotter than the hinges of hell, with the sun going down like a bucket of guts behind the clouds. There was none of us wanted to go, but we had to. Norma knew it before any of us. She got me inside on some pretext or other and said, 'Don't you let them dither around and put this off, Judson. You got to get this taken care of. It's an abomination.'"

Jud measured Louis evenly with his eyes.

"That was what she called it, Louis. It was her word. Abomination. And she kind of whispers in my ear, 'If anything happens, Jud, you just run. Never mind these others; they'll have to look out for themselves. You remember me and bust your hump right out of there if anything happens.'

“We drove over in Hannibal Benson’s car-that son of a bitch got all the A-coupons he wanted, I don’t know how. Nobody said much, but all four of us was smoking like chimblies. We was scared, Louis, just as scared as we could be. But the only one who really said anything was Alan Purinton. He says to George, ‘Bill Baterman has been up to dickens in that woods north of Route 15, and I’ll put my warrant to that.’ Nobody answered, but I remember George noddin’ his head.

“Well, we got there, and Alan knocked, but nobody answered, so we went around to the back and there the two of them were. Bill Baterman was sitting there on his back stoop with a pitcher of beer, and Timmy was at the back of the yard, just staring up at that red, bloody sun as it went down. His whole face was orange with it, like he’d been flayed alive. And Bill...he looked like the devil had gotten him after his seven years of highfalutin. He was floatin’ in his clothes, and I judged he’d lost forty pounds. His eyes had gone back in their sockets until they were like little animals in a pair of caves... and his mouth kept goin tick-tick-tick on the left side.”

Jud paused, seemed to consider, and then nodded imperceptibly.
“Louis, he looked damned.

“Timmy looked around at us and grinned. Just seeing him grin made you want to scream. Then he turned and went back to looking at the sun go down. Bill says, ‘I didn’t hear you boys knock,’ which was a bald-faced lie, of course, since Alan laid on that door loud enough to wake the...to wake up a deaf man.

“No one seemed like they was going to say anything, so I says, ‘Bill, I heard your boy was killed over in Italy’

“‘That was a mistake,’ he says, looking right at me.

” ‘Was it?’ I says.

” ‘You see him standin right there, don’t you?’ he says.

” ‘So who do you reckon was in that coffin you had out at Pleasantview?’ Alan Purinton asks him.

” ‘Be damned if I know,’ Bill says, and be damned if I care.’ He goes to get a cigarette and spills them all over the back porch, then breaks two or three trying to pick them up.

” ‘Probably have to be an exhumation,’ Hannibal says. ‘You know that, don’t you? I had a call from the goddam War Department, Bill. They are going to want to know if they buried some other mother’s son under Timmy’s name.’

” ‘Well, what in the hell of it?’ Bill says in a loud voice. ‘That’s nothing to me, is it? I got my boy. Timmy come home the other day. He’s been shell-shocked or something. He’s a little strange now, but he’ll come around.’

” ‘Let’s quit this, Bill,’ I says, and all at once I was pretty mad at him. ‘If and when they dig up that army coffin, they’re gonna find it dead empty, unless you went to the trouble of filling it up with rocks after you took your boy out of it, and I don’t think you did. I know what happened, Hannibal and George and Alan here know what happened, and you know what happened too. You been foolin’ around up in the woods, Bill, and you have caused yourself and this town a lot of trouble.’

” ‘You fellas know your way out, I guess,’ he says. ‘I don’t have to explain myself to you, or justify myself to you, or nothing. When I got that telegram, the life ran right out of me. I felt her go, just like piss down the inside of my leg. Well, I got my boy back. They had no right to take my boy. He was only seventeen. He was all I had left of his dear mother, and it was ill-fuckin’- legal. So fuck the army, and fuck the War Department, and fuck the United States of America, and fuck you boys too. I got him back. He’ll come around. And that’s all I got to say. Now you all just march your boots back where you came from.’

“And his mouth is tick-tick-tickin’, and there’s sweat, all over his forehead in big drops, and that was when I saw he was crazy. It would have driven me crazy too. Living with that...that thing.”

Louis was feeling sick to his stomach. He had drunk too much beer too fast. Pretty soon it was all going to come up on him. The heavy, loaded feeling in his stomach told him it would be coming up soon.

“Well, there wasn’t much else we could do. We got ready to go. Hannibal says, ‘Bill, God help you.’

“Bill says, ‘God never helped me. I helped myself’

“That was when Timmy walked over to us. He even walked wrong, Louis. He walked like an old, old man. He’d put one foot high up and then bring it down and, then kind of shuffle and then lift the other one. It was like watchin’ a crab walk. His hands dangled down by his legs. And when he got close enough, you could see red marks across his face on the slant, like pimples or little burns. I reckon that’s where the Kraut machine gun got him. Must have damn near blowed his head off.

“And he stank of the grave. It was a black smell, like everything inside him was just lying there, spoiled. I saw Alan Purinton put a hand up to cover his nose and mouth. The stench was just awful. You almost expected to see grave maggots squirming around in his hair-”

“Stop,” Louis said hoarsely. “I’ve heard enough.”

“You ain’t,” Jud said. He spoke with haggard earnestness. “That’s it, you ain’t. And I can’t even make it as bad as it was. Nobody could understand how bad it was unless they was there. He was dead, Louis. But he was alive too. And he...he...he knew things.”

“Knew things?” Louis sat forward.

“Ayuh. He looked at Alan for a long time, kind of grinning-you could see his teeth, anyway-and then he spoke in this low voice; you felt like you had to strain forward to hear it. It sounded like he had gravel down in his tubes. ‘Your wife is fucking that man she works with down at the drugstore, Purinton. What do you think of that? She screams when she comes. What do you think of that?’

“Alan, he kind of gasped, and you could see it had hit him. Alan’s in a nursing home up in Gardener now, or was the last I heard-he must be pushing ninety. Back when all this happened, he was forty or so, and there had been some talk around about his second wife. She was his second cousin, and she had come to live with Alan and Alan’s first wife, Lucy, just before the war. Well, Lucy died, and a year and a half later Alan up and married this girl. Laurine, her name was. She was no more than twenty-four when they married. And there had been some talk about her, you know, if you were a man, you might have called her ways sort of free and easy and let it go at that. But the women thought she might be loose. And maybe Alan had had a few thoughts in that direction too because he says, ‘Shut up! Shut up or I’ll knock you down, whatever you are!’

” ‘Shush now, Timmy,’ Bill says, and he looks worse than ever, you know, like maybe he’s going to puke or faint dead away, or do both. ‘You shush, Timmy’

“But Timmy didn’t take no notice. He looks around at George Anderson and he says, ‘That grandson you set such a store by is just waiting for you to die, old man. The money is all he wants, the money he thinks you got socked away in your lockbox at the Bangor Eastern Bank. That’s why he makes up to you, but behind your back he makes fun of you, him and his sister. Old wooden-leg, that’s what they call you,’ Timmy says, and Louis, his voice-it changed. It got mean. It sounded like the way that grandson of George’s would have sounded if...you know, if the things Timmy was saying was true.

” ‘Old wooden-leg,’ Timmy says, ‘and won’t they shit when they find out you’re poor as a church mouse because you lost it all in 1938? Won’t they shit, George? Won’t they just shit?’

“George, he backed away then, and his wooden leg buckled under him, and he fell back on Bill’s porch and upsat his pitcher of beer, and he was as white as your undershirt, Louis.

“Bill, he gets him back on his feet somehow, and he’s roarin’ at his boy, ‘Timmy, you stop it! You stop it!’ But Timmy wouldn’t. He said somethin’ bad about Hannibal, and then he said something bad about me too, and by then he was...ravin’, I’d say. Yeah, he was ravin’, all right. Screamin’. And we started to back away, and then we started to run, draggin’ George along the best we could by the arms because he’d gotten the straps and harnesses on the fake leg twisted somehow, and it was all off to one side with the shoe turned around backward and draggin’ on the grass.

“The last I seen of Timmy Baterman, he was on the back lawn by the clothesline, his face all red in the settin’ sun, those marks standin’ out on his face, his hair all crazy and dusty somehow...and he was laughin’ and screechin’ over and over again ‘Old wooden-leg! Old wooden leg! And the cuckold! And the whoremaster! Goodbye, gentlemen! Goodbye! Goodbye!’ and then he laughed, but it was screaming, really...something inside him...screaming... and screaming...and screaming.”

Jud stopped. His chest moved up and down rapidly.

“Jud,” Louis said. “The thing this Timmy Baterman told you...was it true?”

“It was true,” Jud muttered. “Christ! It was true. I used go to a whorehouse in Bangor betimes. Nothing many a man hasn’t done, although I s’pose there are plenty that walk the straight and narrow. I just would get the urge-the compulsion, maybe-to sink it into strange flesh now and then. Or pay some woman to do the things a man can’t bring himself to ask his wife to do. Men keep their gardens too, Louis. It wasn’t a terrible thing, what I done, and all of that has been behind me for the last eight or nine years, and Norma would not have left me if she had known.

“But something in her would have died forever. Something dear and sweet.”

Jud’s eyes were red and swollen and bleary. The tears of the old are singularly unlovely, Louis thought. But when Jud groped across the table for Louis’s hand, Louis took it firmly.

“He told us only the bad,” he said after a moment. “Only the bad. God knows there is enough of that in any human being’s life, isn’t there? Two or three days later, Laurine Purinton left Ludlow for good, and folks in town who saw her before she got on the train said she was sprouting two shiners and had cotton stuffed up both bores of her pump. Alan, he would never talk about it. George died in 1950, and if he left anything to that grandson and granddaughter of his, I never heard about it. Hannibal got kicked out of office because of something that was just like what Timmy Baterman accused him of. I won’t tell you exactly what it was—you don’t need to know—but misappropriation of town funds for his own use conies close enough to cover it, I reckon. There was even talk of trying him on embezzlement charges, but it never came to much. Losing the post was enough punishment for him anyway; his whole life was playing the big cheese.

“But there was good in those men too. That’s what I mean; that’s what folks always find it so hard to remember. It was Hannibal got the fund started for the Eastern General Hospital, right before the war. Alan Puritan was one of the most generous, open-handed men I ever knew. And old George Anderson only wanted to go on running the post office forever.

“It was only the bad it wanted to talk about though. It was only the bad it wanted us to remember because it was bad...and because it knew we meant danger for it. The Timmy Baterman that went off to fight the war was a nice, ordinary kid, Louis, maybe a little dull but goodhearted. The thing we saw that night, lookin’ up into that red sun...that was a monster. Maybe it was a zombie or a dybbuk or a demon. Maybe there’s no name for such a thing as that, but the Micmacs would have known what it was, name or no.”

“What?” Louis said numbly.

“Something that had been touched by the Wendigo,” Jud said evenly. He took a deep breath, held it for a moment, let it out, and looked at his watch.

“Welladay The hour’s late, Louis. I’ve talked nine times as much as I meant to.”

“I doubt that,” Louis said. “You’ve been very eloquent. Tell me how it came out.”

“There was a fire at the Baterman place two nights later,” Jud said. “The house burned flat. Alan Purinton said there was no doubt about the fire being set. Range oil had been splashed from one end of that little house to the other. You could smell the reek of it for three days after the fire was out.”

“So they both burned up.”

“Oh, ayuh, they burned. But they was dead beforehand. Timmy was shot twice in the chest with a pistol Bill Baterman kept handy, an old Colt’s. They found it in Bill’s hand. What he’d done, or so it looked like, was to kill his boy, lay him on the bed, and then spill out that range oil. Then he sat down on his easy chair by the radio, flicked a match, and ate the barrel of that Colt.45.”

“Jesus,” Louis said.

“They were pretty well charred, but the county medical examiner said it looked to him like Timmy Baterman had been dead two or three weeks.”

THE REVELATIONS OF 'BECKA PAULSON

Stephen King

What happened was simple enough — at least, at the start. What happened was that Rebecca Paulson shot herself in the head with her husband Joe's .22-caliber pistol. This occurred during her annual spring cleaning, which took place this year (as it did most years) around the middle of June. 'Becka had a way of falling behind in such things.

She was standing on a short stepladder and rummaging through the accumulated junk on the high shelf in the downstairs hall closet while the Paulson cat, a big brindle tom named Ozzie Nelson, sat in the living-room doorway, watching her. From behind Ozzie came the anxious voices of *Another World*, blaring out of the Paulsons' big old Zenith TV — which would later become something much more than a TV.

'Becka pulled stuff down and examined it, hoping for something that was still good, but not really expecting to find such a thing. There were four or five knitted winter caps, all moth-eaten and unraveling. She tossed them behind her onto the hall floor. Here was a *Reader's Digest Condensed Book* from the summer of 1954, featuring *Run Silent, Run Deep* and *Here's Goggle*. Water damage had swelled it to the size of a Manhattan telephone book. She tossed it behind her. Ah! Here was an umbrella that looked salvageable ... and a box with something in it.

It was a shoebox. Whatever was inside was heavy. When she tilted the box, it shifted. She took the lid off, also tossing this behind her (it almost hit Ozzie Nelson, who decided to split the scene). Inside the box was a gun with a long barrel and imitation wood-grip handles.

"Oh," she said. "That." She took it out of the box, not noticing that it was cocked, and turned it around to look into the small beady eye of the muzzle, believing that if there was a bullet in there she would see it.

She remembered the gun. Until five years ago, Joe had been a member of Derry Elks. Some ten years ago (or maybe it had been

fifteen), Joe had bought fifteen Elks raffle tickets while drunk. 'Becka had been so mad she had refused to let him put his manthing in her for two weeks. The first prize had been a Bombardier Skidoo, second prize an Evinrude motor. This .22 target pistol had been the third prize.

He had shot it for a while in the backyard, she remembered plinking away at cans and bottles until 'Becka complained about the noise. Then he had taken it up to the gravel pit at the dead end of their road, although she had sensed he was losing interest, even then — he'd just gone on shooting for a while to make sure she didn't think she had gotten the better of him. Then it had disappeared. She had thought he had swapped it for something — a set of snow tires, maybe, or a battery — but here it was.

She held the muzzle of the gun up to her eye, peering into the darkness, looking for the bullet. She could see nothing but darkness. Must be unloaded, then.

I'll make him get rid of it just the same, she thought, backing down the stepladder. Tonight. When he gets back from the post office. I'll stand right up to him. "Joe" I'll say, "it's no good having a gun sitting around the house even if there's no kids around and it's unloaded. You don't even use it to shoot bottles anymore." That's what I'll say.

This was a satisfying thing to think, but her undermind knew that she would of course say no such thing. In the Paulson house, it was Joe who mostly picked the roads and drove the horses. She supposed that it would be best to just dispose of it herself — put it in a plastic garbage bag under the other rickrack from the closet shelf. The gun would go to the dump with everything else the next time Vinnie Margolies stopped by to pick up their throw-out. Joe would not miss what he had already forgotten — the lid of the box had been thick with undisturbed dust. Would not miss it, that was, unless she was stupid enough to bring it to his attention.

'Becka reached the bottom of the ladder. Then she stepped backward onto the Reader's Digest Condensed Book with her left

foot. The front board of the book slid backward as the rotted binding gave way. She tottered, holding the gun with one hand and flailing with the other. Her right foot came down on the pile of knitted caps, which also slid backward. As she fell she realised that she looked more like a woman bent on suicide than on cleaning.

Well, it ain't loaded, she had time to think, but the gun was loaded, and it had been cocked; cocked for years, as if waiting for her to come along. She sat down hard in the hallway and when she did the hammer of the pistol snapped forward. There was a flat, unimportant bang not much louder than a baby firecracker in a tin cup, and a .22 Winchester short entered 'Becka Paulson's brain just above the left eye. It made a small black hole what was the faint blue of just-bloomed irises around the edges.

Her head thumped back against the wall, and a trickle of blood ran from the hole into her left eyebrow. The gun, with a tiny thread of white smoke rising from its muzzle, fell into her lap. Her hands drummed lightly up and down on the floor for a period of about five seconds, her right leg flexed, then shot straight out. Her loafer flew across the hall and hit the far wall. Her eyes remained open for the next thirty minutes, the pupils dilating and constricting, dilating and constricting.

Ozzie Nelson came to the living-room door, miaowed at her, and then began washing himself.

She was putting supper on the table that night before Joe noticed the Band-Aid over her eye. He had been home for an hour and a half, but just lately he didn't notice much at all around the house — he seemed preoccupied with something, far away from her a lot of the time. This didn't bother her as much as it might have once — at least he wasn't always after her to let him put his manthing into her ladyplace.

"What'd you do to your head?" he asked as she put a bowl of beans and a plate of red hot dogs on the table.

She touched the Band-Aid vaguely. Yes — what exactly had she done to her head? She couldn't really remember. The whole middle of the day had a funny dark place in it, like an inkstain. She remembered feeding Joe his breakfast and standing on the porch as he headed off to the post office in his Wagoneer — that much was crystal clear. She remembered doing the white load in the new Sears washer while Wheel of Fortune blared from the TV. That was also clear. Then the inkstain began. She remembered putting in the colors and starting the cold cycle. She had the faintest, vaguest recollection of putting a couple of Swanson's Hungary man frozen dinners in the oven for herself — 'Becka Paulson was a hefty eater — but after that there was nothing. Not until she had awakened sitting on the living-room couch. She had changed from slacks and her flowed smock into a dress and high heel; she had put her hair in braids. There was something heavy in her lap and on her shoulders and her forehead tickled. It was Ozzie Nelson. Ozzie was standing with his hind legs in her crotch and his forepaws on her shoulders. He was busily licking blood off her forehead and out of her eyebrow. She swatted Ozzie away from her lap and then looked at the clock. Joe would be home in an hour and she hadn't even started dinner. Then she had touched her head, which throbbed vaguely.

“Becka?”

“What?” She sat down at her place and began to spoon beans onto her plate.

“I asked you what you did to your head?”

“Bumped it,” she said although, when she went down to the bathroom and looked at herself in the mirror, it hadn't looked like a bump; it had looked like a hole. “I just bumped it.”

“Oh,” he said, losing interest. He opened the new issue of Sports Illustrated which had come that day and immediately fell into a daydream. In it he was running his hands slowly over the body of Nancy Voss — an activity he had been indulging in the last six weeks or so. God bless the United States Postal Authority for

sending Nancy Voss from Falmouth to Haven, that was all he could say. Falmouth's loss was Joe Paulson's gain. He had whole days when he was quite sure he had died and gone to heaven, and his pecker hadn't been so frisky since he was nineteen and touring West Germany with the U.S. Army. It would have taken more than a Band-Aid on his wife's forehead to engage his full attention.

'Becka helped herself to three hot dogs, paused to debate a moment, and then added a fourth. She doused the dogs and the beans with ketchup and then stirred everything together. The result looked a bit like the aftermath of a bad motorcycle accident. She poured herself a glass of grape Kool-Aid from the pitcher on the table (Joe had a beer) and then touched the Band-Aid with the tips of her fingers — she had been doing that ever since she put it on. Nothing but a cool plastic strip. That was okay but she could feel the circular indentation beneath. The hole. That wasn't so okay.

"Just bumped it," she murmured again, as if saying would make it so. Joe didn't look up and 'Becka began to eat.

Hasn't hurt my appetite any, whatever it was, she thought. Not that much ever does — probably nothing ever will. When they say on the radio that all those missiles are flying and it's the end of the world. I'll probably go right on eating until one of those rockets lands on Haven.

She cut herself a piece of bread from the homemade loaf and began mopping up bean juice with it.

Seeing that that mark on her forehead had unnerved her at the time, unnerved her plenty. No sense kidding about that, just as there was no sense kidding that it was just a mark, like a bruise. And in case anyone ever wanted to know, 'Becka thought, she would tell them that looking into the mirror and seeing that you had an extra hole in your head wasn't one of life's cheeriest experiences. Your head, after all, was where your brains were. And as for what she had done next

She tried to shy away from that, but it was too late.

Too late, 'Becka, a voice tolled in her mind — it sounded like her dead father's voice.

She had stared at the hole, stared at it and stared at it, and then she had pulled open the drawer to the left of the sink and had pawed through her few meager items of makeup with hands that didn't seem to belong to her. She took out her eyebrow pencil and then looked into the mirror again.

She raised the hand holding the eyebrow pencil with the blunt end towards her, and slowly began to push it into the hole in her forehead. No, she moaned to herself, stop it, 'Becka, you don't want to do this

But apparently part of her did, because she went right on doing it. There was no pain and the eyebrow pencil was a perfect fit. She pushed it in an inch, then two, then three. She looked at herself in the mirror, a woman in a flowered dress who had a pencil sticking out of her head. She pushed it in a fourth inch.

Not much left, 'Becka, be careful, wouldn't want to lose it in there, I'd rattle when you turned over in the night, wake up Joe

She tittered hysterically.

Five inches in and the blunt end of the eyebrow pencil had finally encountered resistance. It was hard, but a gentle push also communicated a feeling of sponginess. At the same moment the whole world turned a brilliant, momentary green and an interlacing of memories jiggled through her mind — sledding at four in her older brother's snowsuit, washing high school blackboards, a '59 Impala her Uncle Bill had owned, the smell of cut hay.

She pulled the eyebrow pencil out of her head, shocked back to herself, terrified that blood would come gushing out of the hole. But no blood came, nor was there any blood on the shiny surface of the eyebrow pencil. Blood or or

But she would not think of that. She threw the pencil back into the drawer and slammed the draw shut. Her first impulse, to cover the hole, came back, stronger than ever.

She swung the mirror away from the medicine cabinet and grabbed the tin box of Band-Aids. It fell from her trembling fingers and cluttered into the basin. 'Becka had cried out at the sound and then told herself to stop it, just stop it. Cover it up, make it gone. That was the thing to do; that was the ticket. Never mind the eyebrow pencil, just forget that — she had none of the signs of brain injury she had seen on the afternoon stories and Marcus Welby, M.D., that was the important thing. She was all right. As for the eyebrow pencil, she would just forget that part.

And so she had, at least until now. She looked at her half-eaten dinner and realized with a sort of dull humor that she had been wrong about her appetite — she couldn't eat another bite.

She took her plate over to the garbage and scrapped what was left into the can, while Ozzie wound restlessly around her ankles. Joe didn't look up from his magazine. In his mind, Nancy Voss was asking him again if that tongue of his was as long as it looked.

She woke up in the middle of the night from some confusing dream in which all the clocks in the house had been talking in her father's voice. Joe lay beside her, flat on his back in his boxer shorts, snoring.

Her hand went to the Band-Aid. The hole didn't hurt, didn't exactly throb, but it itched. She rubbed at it gently, afraid of another of those dazzling green flashes. None came.

She rolled over on her side and thought: You got to go to the doctor, 'Becka. You got to get that seen to. I don't know what you did, but

No, she answered herself. No doctor. She rolled to her other side, thinking she would be awake for hours now, wondering, asking

herself frightened questions. Instead, she was asleep again in moments.

In the morning the hole under the Band-Aid hardly itched at all, and that made it easier not to think about. She made Joe his breakfast and saw him off to work. She finished washing the dishes and took out the garbage. They kept it in a little shed beside the house that Joe had built, a structure not much bigger than a doghouse. You had to lock it up or the coons came out of the woods and made a mess.

She stepped in, wrinkling her nose at the smell, and put the green bag down with the others. Vinnie would be by in Friday or Saturday and then she would give the shed a good airing. As she was backing out, she saw a bag that hadn't been tied up like the others. A curved handle, like the handle of a cane protruded from the top.

Curious, she pulled it out and saw it was an umbrella. A number of moth-eaten, unraveling hats came out with the umbrella.

A dull warning sound in her head. For a moment she could almost see through the inkstain to what was behind it, to what had happened to her

(bottom it's in the bottom something heavy something in a box what Joe don't remember won't)

yesterday. But did she want to know?

No.

She didn't.

She wanted to forget.

She backed out of the little shed and rebolted the door with hands that trembled the slightest bit.

A week later (she still changed the band-Aid each morning, but the wound was closing up — she could see the pink new tissue filling it

when she shone Joe's flashlight into it and peered into the bathroom mirror) 'Becka found out what half of have already either knew or surmised — that Joe was cheating on her. Jesus told her. In the last three days or so, Jesus had told her the most amazing, terrible, distressing things imaginable. They sickened her, they destroyed her sleep, they were destroying her sanity but were they wonderful? Weren't they just! And would she stop listening, simply tip Jesus over on His face, perhaps scream at Him to shut up? Absolutely not. For one thing, he was the Savior. For another thing, there was a grisly sort of compulsion in knowing the things Jesus told her.

Jesus was on top of the Paulsons' Zenith television and He had been in that same spot for just about twenty years. Before resting atop the Zenith, He had rested atop two RCAs (Joe Paulson had always bought American). This was a beautiful 3-D picture of Jesus that Rebecca's sister, who lived in Portsmouth, had sent her. Jesus was dressed in a simple white robe, and He was holding a Shepard's staff. Because the picture had been created ('Becka considered "made" much too mundane a word for a likeness which seemed so real you could almost stick your hand into it) before the Beatles and the changes they had wreaked on male hairstyles, His hair was not too long, and perfectly neat. The Christ on 'Becka Paulson's TV combed His hair a little bit like Elvis Presley after Elvis got out of the army. His eyes were brown and mild and kind. Behind Him, in perfect perspective, sheep as white as the linens in TV soap commercials trailed away into the distance. 'Becka and her sister Corinne and her brother Roland had grown up on a sheep farm in New Gloucester, and 'Becka knew from personal experience that sheep were never that white and uniformly woolly, like little fair weather clouds that had fallen to earth. But, she reasoned, if Jesus could turn water into wine and bring the dead back to life, there was no reason at all why He couldn't make the shit caked around a bunch of lambs' rumps disappear if He wanted to.

A couple of times Joe had tried to move that picture off the TV, and she supposed that now she new why, oh yessirree Bob, oh yes indeedy. Joe of course, had his trumped-up tales. "it doesn't seem

right to have Jesus on top of the television while we're watching Three's Company or Charlie's Angels" he'd say. "Why don't you put it up on your bureau, 'Becka? Or I'll tell you what! Why not put it up on your bureau until Sunday, and then you can bring it down and out it back on the TV while you watch Jimmy Swaggart and Rex Humbard and Jerry Falwell? I'll bet Jesus likes Jerry Falwell one hell of a lot better than he likes Charlie's Angels."

She refused.

"When it's my turn to have the Thursday-night poker game, the guys don't like it," he said another time. "No one wants to have Jesus Christ looking at them while He tries to fill a flush or draw to an inside straight."

"Maybe they feel uncomfortable because they know gambling's the Devil's work," 'Becka said.

Joe, who was a good poker player, bridled. "then it was the Devil's work that bought you your hair dryer and that garnet ring you like so well," he said. "better take 'em back for refunds and give the money to the Salvation Army. Wait, I think I got the receipts in my den."

She allowed as how Joe could turn the 3-D picture of Jesus around to face the wall on the one Thursday night a month that he had his dirty-talking, beer-swilling friends in to play poker but that was all.

And now she knew the real reason he wanted to get rid of that picture. He must have had an idea all along that that picture was a magic picture. Oh she supposed sacred was a better word, magic was for pagans — headhunters and Catholics and people like that — but the came almost to one and the same, didn't they? All along Joe must have sensed that picture was special, that it would be the means by which his sin would be found out.

Oh, she supposed she must have had some idea of what all his recent preoccupation had meant, must have known there was a reason why he was never after her at night anymore. But the truth

was, that had been a relief — sex was just as her mother had told her it would be, nasty and brutish, sometimes painful and always humiliating. Had she also smelled perfume on his collar from time to time? If so, she had ignored that, too, and she might have gone on ignoring it indefinitely if the picture of Jesus on the Sony hadn't begun to speak on July 7th. She realized now that she had ignored a third factor, as well; at about the same time the pawings had stopped the perfume smells had begun, old Charlie Estabrooke had retired and a woman named Nancy Voss had come up from the Falmouth post office to take his place. She guessed that the Voss woman (whom, 'Becka had now come to think of simply as The Hussy) was perhaps five years older than her and Joe, which would make her around fifty, but she was a trim, well-kept and handsome fifty. 'Becka herself had put on a little weight during her marriage, going from one hundred and twenty-six to a hundred and ninety-three, most of that since Byron, their only chick and child, had flown from the nest.

She could have gone on ignoring it, and perhaps what would even have been for the best. If The Hussey really enjoyed the animalism of sexual congress, with its gruntings and thrustings and that final squirt of sticky stuff that smelled faintly like codfish and looked like cheap dish detergent, then it only proved that The Hussy was little more than an animal herself — and of course it freed 'Becka of a tiresome, if ever more occasional, obligation. But when the picture of Jesus spoke up, telling her exactly what was going on, it became impossible to ignore. She knew that something would have to be done.

The picture first spoke at just past three in the afternoon on Thursday. This was eight days after shooting herself in the head and about four days after her resolution to forget it was a hole and not just a mark had begun to take effect. 'Becka was coming back into the living room from the kitchen with a little snack (half a coffeecake and a beer stein filled with Kool-Aid) to watch General Hospital. She no longer really believed that Luke would ever find Laura, but she could not quite find it in her heart to completely give up hope.

She was bending down to turn on the Zenith when Jesus said, “Becka, Joe is putting the boots to that Hussey down at the pee-oh just about every lunch hour and sometimes after punching out time in the afternoon. Once he was so randy he drove it to her while he was supposed to be helping her sort the mail. And do you know what? She never even said ‘At least wait until I get the first-class into the boxes.’ “

‘Becka screamed and spilled her Kool-Aid down the front of the TV. It was a wonder, she thought later, when she was able to think at all, that the picture tube didn’t blow. Her coffeecake went on the rug.

“And that’s not all,” Jesus told her. He walked halfway across the picture, His robe fluttering around His ankles, and sat down on a rock that jutted out of the ground. He held His staff between his knees and looked at her grimly. “There’s a lot going on in Haven. Why, you wouldn’t believe the half of it.”

‘Becka screamed again and fell on her knees. One of them landed squarely on her coffeecake and squirted raspberry filling into the face of Ozzie Nelson, who had crept into the living room to see what was going on. “My Lord! My Lord!” ‘Becka shrieked. Ozzie ran, hissing, for the kitchen, where he crawled under the stove with red goo dripping from his whiskers. He stayed under there the rest of the day.

“Well, none of the Paulsons was ever any good,” Jesus said. A sheep wandered towards Him and He whacked it away, using His staff with an absentminded impatience that reminded ‘Becka, even in her current frozen state, of her long-dead father. The sheep went, rippling slightly through the 3-D effect. It disappeared from the picture, actual seeming to curve as it went off the edge but that was just an optical illusion, she felt sure. “No good at all, “Jesus went on. “Joe’s granddad was a whoremaster of the purest sense, as you well know, ‘Becka. Spent his whole life pecker-led. And when he came up here, do you know what we said? ‘No room!’ that’s what we said.” Jesus leaned forward, still holding His staff. ““Go see Mr. Splitfoot down below,’ we said. ‘You’ll find your haven-home, all right. But you

may find you new landlord a hard taskmaster,' we said." Incredibly, Jesus winked at her and that was when 'Becka fled, shrieking, from the house.

She stopped in the backyard, panting, her hair, a mousy blond that was really not much of any color at all, hanging in her face. Her heart was beating so fast in her chest that it frightened her. No one had heard her shriekings and carryings-on, thank the Lord; she and Joe lived far out on the Nista Road, and their nearest neighbors were the Brodskys were half a mile away. If anyone had heard her, they would have thought there was a crazywoman down at Joe and 'Becka Paulson's.

Well there is a crazywoman at the Paulsons', isn't there? she thought. If you really think that picture of Jesus started to talk to you, why, you really must be crazy. Daddy'd beat you three shades of blue for thinking such a thing — one shade for lying, another shade for believing the lie, and a third for raising your voice. 'Becka, you are crazy. Pictures don't talk.

No and it didn't, another voice spoke up suddenly. That voice came out of your own head, 'Becka. I don't know how it could be how you could know such things but that's what happened. Maybe it had something to do with what happened to you last week, or maybe not, but you made that picture of Jesus talk your own self. It didn't really no more than that little rubber Topo Gigio mouse on the Ed Sullivan Show.

But somehow the idea that it might have something to do with that that

(hole)

other thing was scarier than the idea that the picture itself had spoken, because that was the sort of thing they sometimes had on Marcus Welby, like that show about the fellow who had the brain tumor and it was making him wear his wife's nylon stockings and step-ins. She refused to allow it mental houseroom. It might be a

miracle. After all, miracles happened every day. There was the Shroud of Turin, and the cures at Lourdes, and that Mexican fellow who had a picture of the Virgin Mary burned into the surface of a taco or an enchilada or something. Not to mention those children that had made the headlines of one of the tabloids — children who cried rocks. Those were all bona fide miracles (the children who wept rocks was, admittedly, a rather gritty one), as uplifting as a Jimmy Swaggart sermon. Hearing voices was only crazy.

But that's what happened. And you've been hearing voices for quite a little while now, haven't you? You've been hearing His voice. Joe's voice. And that's where it came from, not from Jesus but from Joe, from Joe's head

"No," 'Becka whimpered. "No, I ain't heard any voices in my head."

She stood by her clothesline in the hot backyard, looking blankly off toward the woods on the other side of the Nista Road, blue-gray-hazy in the heat. She wrung her hands in front of her and began to weep.

"I ain't no heard no voices in my head."

Crazy, her dead father's implacable voice replied. Crazy with the heat. You come on over here, 'Becka Bouchard, I'm gonna beat you three shades of blister-blue for that crazy talk.

"I ain't heard no voices in my head," 'Becka moaned. "That picture really did talk, I swear, I can't do ventriloquism!"

Better believe the picture. If it was the hole, it was a brain tumor, sure. If it was the picture, it was a miracle. Miracles came from God. Miracles came from Outside. A miracle could drive you crazy — and the dear God knew she felt like she was going crazy now — but it didn't mean you were crazy, or that your brains were scrambled. As for believing that you could hear other people's thoughts that was just crazy.

'Becka looked down at her legs and saw blood gushing from her left knee. She shrieked again and ran back into the house to call the doctor, MEDIX, somebody. She was in the living room again, pawing at the dial with the phone to her ear, when Jesus said:

"That's raspberry filling from your coffeecake, 'Becka. Why don't you just relax, before you have a heart attack?"

She looked at the TV, the telephone receiver falling to the table with a clunk. Jesus was still sitting on the rock outcropping. It looked as though He had crossed His legs. It was really surprising how much He looked like her own father only He didn't seem forbidding, ready to be hitting angry at a moment's notice. He was looking at her with a kind of exasperated patience.

"Try it and see if I'm not right," Jesus said.

She touched her knee gently, wincing, expecting pain. There was none. She saw the seeds in the red stuff and relaxed. She licked the raspberry filling off her fingers.

"Also," Jesus said, "you have got to get these ideas about hearing voices and going crazy out of your head. It's just Me. And I can talk to anyone I want to, any way I want to."

"Because you're the Savior," 'Becka whispered.

"That's right," Jesus said, and looked down. Below Him, a couple of animated salad bowls were dancing in appreciation of the hidden Valley Ranch Dressing which they were about to receive. "And I'd like you to please turn that crap off, if you don't mind. We don't need that thing running. Also, it makes My feet tingle."

'Becka approached the TV and turned it off.

"My Lord," she whispered.

Now it was Sunday, July 10th. Joe was lying fast asleep out in the backyard hammock with Ozzie lying limply across him ample stomach like a black and white fur stole. She stood in the living room, holding the curtain back with her left hand and looking out at Joe. Sleeping in the hammock, dreaming of The Hussy, no doubt — dreaming of throwing her down in a great big pile of catalogs from Carroll Reed and fourth-class junk mail and then — how would Joe and his piggy poker-buddies out it? — “putting the boots to her.”

She was holding the curtain with her left hand because she had a handful of square nine-volt batteries in her right. She had bought them yesterday down at the town hardware store. Now she let the curtain drop and took the batteries into the kitchen, where she was assembling a little something on the counter. Jesus had told her how to make it. She told Jesus she couldn't build things. Jesus told her not to be a cussed fool. If she could follow a recipe, she could build this little gadget. She was delighted to find that Jesus was absolutely right. It was not only easy, it was fun. A lot more fun than cooking, certainly; she had never really had the knack for that. Her cakes almost always fell and her breads almost never rose. She had begun this little thing yesterday, working with the toaster, the motor from her old Hamilton-Beach blender, and a funny board full of electronic things which had come from the back of an old radio in the shed. She thought she would be done long before Joe woke up and came in to watch the Red Sox on TV at two o'clock.

Actually, it was funny how many ideas she'd had in the last few days. Some Jesus had told her about; others just seemed to come to her at odd moments.

Her sewing machine, for instance — she'd always wanted one of those attachments that made the zigzag stitches, but Joe had told her she would have to wait until he could afford to buy her a new machine (and that would probably be along about the twelfth of Never, if she knew Joe). Just four days ago she had seen how, if she just moved the button stitcher and added a second needle where it had been at an angle of forty-five degrees to the first needle, she

could make all the zigzags she wanted. All it took was a screwdriver — even a dummy like her could use one of those — and it worked just as well as you could want. She saw that the camshaft would probably warp out of true before long because of the weight differential, but there were ways to fix that, too, when it happened.

Then there was the Electrolux. Jesus had told her about that one. Getting her ready for Joe, maybe. It had been Jesus who told her how to use Joe's little butane welding torch, and that made it easier. She had gone over to Derry and bought three of those electronic Simon games at KayBee Toys. Once she was back home she broke them open and pulled out the memory boards. Following Jesus' instructions, she connected the boards and wired Eveready dry cells to the memory circuits she had created. Jesus told her how to program the Electrolux and power it (she had in fact, already figured this out for herself, but she was much too polite to tell Him so). Now it vacuumed the kitchen, living room, and downstairs bathroom all by itself. It had a tendency to get caught under the piano bench or in the bathroom (where it just kept on butting its stupid self against the toilet until she came running to turn it around), and it scared the granola out of Ozzie, but it was still an improvement over dragging a thirty-pound vac around like a dead dog. She had much more time to catch up on the afternoon stories — and now these included true stories Jesus told her. Her new, improved Electrolux used juice awfully fast, though, and sometimes it got tangled in its own electrical cord. She thought she might just scratch the dry cells and hook up a motorcycle battery to it one day soon. There would be time — after this problem of Joe and The Hussy had been solved.

Or just last night. She had lain awake in bed long after Joe was snoring beside her, thinking about numbers. It occurred to 'Becka (who had never gotten beyond Business Math in high school) that if you gave numbers letter values, you could un-freeze them — you could turn them into something that was like Jell-O. When they — the numbers — were letters, you could pour them into any old mold you liked. Then you could turn the letters back into numbers, and that was like putting the Jell-O into the fridge so it would set, and

keep the shape of the mold when you turned it out onto a plate later on.

That way you could always figure things out, 'Becka had thought, delighted. She was unaware that her fingers had gone to the spot above her left eye and were rubbing, rubbing, rubbing. For instance, just look! You could make things fall into a line every time by saying $ax + bx + c = 0$, and that proves it. It always works. It's like Captain Marvel saying Shazam! Well, there is the zero factor; you can't let "a" be zero or that spoils it. But otherwise

She had lain awake a while longer, considering this, and then had fallen asleep, unaware that she had just reinvented the quadratic equation, and polynomials, and the concept of factoring.

Ideas. Quite a few of them just lately.

'Becka picked up Joe's little blowtorch and lit it deftly with a kitchen match. She would have laughed last month if you'd told her she would ever be working with something like this. But it was easy. Jesus had told her exactly how to solder the wires to the electronics board from the old radio. It was just like fixing up the vacuum cleaner, only this idea was even better.

Jesus had told her a lot of other things in the last three days or so. They had murdered her sleep (and what little sleep she had gotten was nightmare-driven), they had made her afraid to show her face in the village itself (I'll always know when you've done something wrong, 'Becka, her father had told her, because your face just can't keep a secret), they had made her lose her appetite. Joe, totally bound up in his work, the Red Sox, and his Hussy, noticed none of these things although he had noticed the other night as he watched television that 'Becka was gnawing her fingernails, something she had never done before — it was, in fact, one of the many things she nagged him about. But she was doing it now, all right; they were bitten right down to the quick. Joe Paulson considered this for all of twelve seconds before looking back at the Sony TV and losing himself in dreams of Nancy Voss's billowy white breasts.

Here were just a few of the afternoon stories Jesus had told her which had caused 'Becka to sleep poorly and to begin biting her fingernails at the advanced age of forty-five:

In 1973, Moss Harlingen, one of Joe's poker buddies, had murdered his father. They had been hunting deer up in Greenville and it had supposedly been one of those tragic accidents, but the shooting of Abel Harlingen had been no accident. Moss simply lay up behind a fallen tree with his rifle and waited until his father splashed towards him across a small stream about fifty yards down the hill from where Moss was. Moss shot his father carefully and deliberately through the head. Moss thought he had killed his father for money. His (Moss's) business, Big Ditch Construction, had two notes falling due with two different banks, and neither bank would extend because of the other. Moss went to Abel, but Abel refused to help, although he could afford to. So Moss shot his father and inherited a lot of money as soon as the county coroner handed down his verdict of death by misadventure. The note was paid and Moss Harlingen really believed (except perhaps in his deepest dreams) that he had committed the murder for gain. The real motive had been something else. Far in the past, when Moss was ten and his little brother Emery but seven, Abel's wife went south to Rhode Island for one whole winter. Moss's and Emery's uncle had died suddenly, and his wife needed help getting on her feet. While their mother was gone, there were several incidents of buggery in the Harlingens' Troy home. The buggery stopped when the boy's mother came back, and the incidents were never repeated. Moss had forgotten all about them. He never remembered lying awake in the dark anymore, lying awake in mortal terror and watching the doorway for the shadow of his father. He had absolutely no recollection of lying with his mouth pressed against his forearm, hot salty tears of shame and rage squeezing out of his eyes and coursing down his face to his mouth as Abel Harlingen slathered lard onto his cock and then slid it up his son's back door with a grunt and a sigh. It had all made so little impression on Moss that he could not remember biting his arm until it bled to keep from crying out, and he certainly could not remember Emery's breathless little cries from the next bed — "Please, no,

daddy, please not me tonight, please, daddy, please no.” Children, of course, forget very easily. But some subconscious memory must have lingered, because when Moss Harlingen actually pulled the trigger, as he had dreamed of doing every night for the last thirty-two years of his life, as the echoes first rolled away and then rolled back, finally disappearing into the great forested silence of the up-Maine wilderness, Moss whispered: “Not you, Em, not tonight.” That Jesus had told her this not two hours after Moss had stopped in to return a fishing rod which belonged to Joe never crossed ‘Becka’s mind.

1 Alice Kimball, who taught at the Haven Grammar School, was a lesbian. Jesus told ‘Becka this Friday, not long after the lady herself, looking large and solid and respectable in a green pant suit, had stopped by, collecting for the American Cancer Society.

2 Darla Gaines, the pretty seventeen-year-old girl who brought the Sunday paper, had half an ounce of “bitchin’ reefer” between the mattress and box spring of her bed. Jesus told ‘Becka not fifteen minutes after Darla had come by on Saturday to collect for the last five weeks (three dollars plus a fifty-cent tip ‘Becka now wished she had withheld). That she and her boyfriend smoked the reefer in Darla’s bed after doing what they called “the horizontal bop.” They did the horizontal bop and smoked reefer almost every weekday from two until three o’clock or so. Darla’s parents both worked at Splended Shoe in Derry and they didn’t get home until well past four.

3 Hank Buck, another of Joe’s poker buddies, worked at a large supermarket in Bangor and hated his boss so much that a year ago he had put half a box of Ex-Lax in the man’s chocolate shake when he, the boss, sent Hank out to McDonald’s to get his lunch one day. The boss had shit his pants promptly at quarter past three in the afternoon, as he was slicing luncheon meat in the deli of Paul’s Down-East Grocery Mart. Hank managed to hold on until punching-out time, and then he sat in his car, laughing until he almost shit his pants. “He laughed,” Jesus told ‘Becka. “He laughed. Can you believe that?”

And these things were only the tip of the iceberg, so to speak. It seemed that Jesus knew something unpleasant or upsetting about everyone — everyone 'Becka herself came in contact with, anyway.

She couldn't live with such an awful outpouring.

But she didn't know if she could live without it anymore, either.

One thing was certain — she had to do something. Something.

"You are doing something," Jesus said. He spoke from behind her, from the picture on top of the TV — of course He did — and the idea that the voice was coming from inside her own head, and that it was a cold mutation of her own thoughts that was nothing but a dreadful passing illusion. "In fact, you're almost done with this part, 'Becka. Just solder that red wire to that point beside the long doohickey not that one, the one next to it that's right. Not too much solder! It's like Brylcreem, 'Becka. A little dab'll do ya."

Strange, hearing Jesus Christ talk about Brylcreem.

Joe woke up at quarter of two, tossed Ozzie off his lap, strolled to the back of his lawn, had a comfortable whizz into the poison ivy back there, then headed into the house to watch the Yankees and the Red Sox. He opened the refrigerator in the kitchen, glancing briefly at the little snips of wire on the counter and wondering just what the hell his wife had been up to. Then he dismissed it and grabbed a quart of Bud.

He padded into the living room. 'Becka was sitting in her rocking chair, pretending to read a book. Just ten minutes before Joe came in, she had finished wiring her little gadget into the Zenith console television, following Jesus' instructions to the letter.

"You got to be careful, taking the back off a television, 'Becka," Jesus had told her. "More juice back there than there is in a Bird's Eye warehouse."

“Thought you’d have this all warmed up for me,” Joe said.

“I guess you can do it,” ‘Becka said.

“Ayuh, guess I can,” Joe said, completing the last conversational exchange the two of them would ever have.

He pushed the button that made the TV come on and better than two thousand volts of electricity slammed into him. His eyes popped wide open. When the electricity hit him, his hand clenched hard enough to break the bottle in his hand and drive brown glass into his palm and fingers. Beer foamed and ran.

“EEEEEEOOOOOOOOAARRRRRRRRRUMMMMMMMMM!” Joe screamed.

His face began to turn black. Blue smoke began to pour from his hair. His finger appeared nailed to the Zenith’s ON button. A picture popped up on the TV. It showed Joe and Nancy Voss screwing on the post office floor in a litter of catalogues and Congressional newsletters and sweepstakes announcements from Publishers’ Clearing House.

“No!” ‘Becka screamed, and the picture changed. Now she saw Moss Harlingen behind a fallen pine, slightly down the barrel of a .30-.30. the picture changed and she saw Darla Gaines and her boyfriend doing the horizontal bop in Darla’s upstairs bedroom while Rick Springfield stared at them from the wall.

Joe Paulson’s clothes burst into flames.

The living room was filled with the hot smell of cooking beer.

A moment later, the 3-D picture of Jesus exploded.

“No!” ‘Becka shrieked, suddenly understanding that it had been her all along, her, her, her, she had thought everything up, she had read their thoughts, somehow read their thoughts, it had been the hole in

her head and it had done something to her mind — had suped it up somehow. The picture on the TV changed again and she saw herself backing down the stepladder with the .22 pistol in her hand, pointed toward her — she looked like a woman bent on suicide rather than on cleaning.

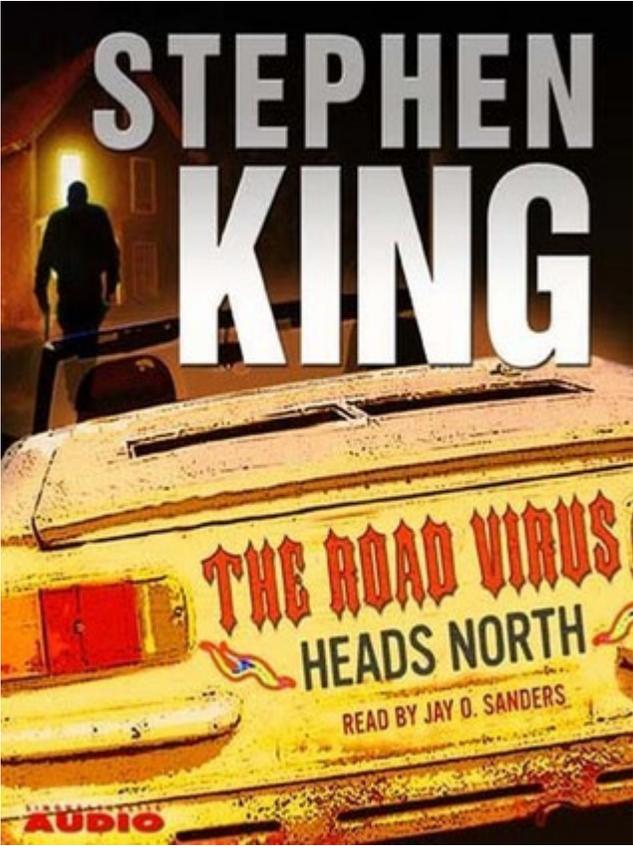
Her husband was turning black before her very eyes.

She ran to him, seized his shredded, wet hand and and was herself galvanized by electricity. She was no more able to let go than Brer Rabbit had been after he slapped the tar baby for insolence.

Jesus oh Jesus, she thought as the current slammed into her, driving her up on her toes.

And a mad, cackling voice, the voice of her father, rode in her brain: Fooled you, 'Becka! Fooled you, didn't I? Fooled you good!

The back of the television, which she had screwed back on after she had finished with her alterations (on the off-chance that Joe might look back there), exploded backward in a mighty blue flash of light. Joe and 'Becka Paulson tumbled to the carpet. Joe was already dead. And by the time the smouldering wallpaper behind the TV had ignited the, 'Becka was dead, too.



THE ROAD VIRUS HEADS NORTH

Stephen King

I actually have the picture described in this story, how weird is that? My wife saw it and thought I'd like it (or at least react to it), so she gave it to me as a ... birthday present? Christmas present? I can't remember. What I can remember is that none of my three kids liked it. I hung it in my office, and they claimed the driver's eyes followed them as they crossed the room (as a very small boy, my son Owen was similarly freaked by a picture of Jim Morrison). I like stories about pictures that change, and finally I wrote this one about my picture. The only other time I can remember being inspired to write a story based on an actual picture was "The House on Maple Street," based on a black-and-white drawing by Chris Van Allsburg. That story is in *Nightmares and Dreamscapes*. I also wrote a novel about a picture that changes. It's called *Rose Madder*, and is probably the least read of my novels (no movie, either). In that story, the Road Virus is named Norman.

Richard Kinnell wasn't frightened when he first saw the picture at the yard sale in Rosewood.

He was fascinated by it, and he felt he'd had the good luck to find something which might be very special, but fright? No. It didn't occur to him until later ("not until it was too late," as he might have written in one of his own numbingly successful novels) that he had felt much the same way about certain illegal drugs as a young man.

He had gone down to Boston to participate in a PEN/New England conference titled "The Threat of Popularity." You could count on PEN to come up with such subjects, Kinnell had found; it was actually sort of comforting. He drove the two hundred and sixty miles from Derry rather than flying because he'd come to a plot impasse on his latest book and wanted some quiet time to try to work it out.

At the conference, he sat on a panel where people who should have known better asked him where he got his ideas and if he ever scared himself. He left the city by way of the Tobin Bridge, then got on Route 1. He never took the turnpike when he was trying to work out problems; the turnpike lulled him into a state that was like dreamless,

waking sleep. It was restful, but not very creative. The stop-and-go traffic on the coast road, however, acted like grit inside an oyster—it created a fair amount of mental activity ... and sometimes even a pearl.

Not, he supposed, that his critics would use that word. In an issue of *Esquire* last year, Bradley Simons had begun his review of *Nightmare City* this way: “Richard Kinnell, who writes like Jeffrey Dahmer cooks, has suffered a fresh bout of projectile vomiting. He has titled this most recent mass of ejecta *Nightmare City*.”

Route 1 took him through Revere, Malden, Everett, and up the coast to Newburyport. Beyond Newburyport and just south of the Massachusetts-New Hampshire border was the tidy little town of Rosewood. A mile or so beyond the town center, he saw an array of cheap-looking goods spread out on the lawn of a two-story Cape. Propped against an avocado-colored electric stove was a sign reading YARD SALE. Cars were parked on both sides of the road, creating one of those bottlenecks which travellers unaffected by the yard sale mystique curse their way through. Kinnell liked yard sales, particularly the boxes of old books you sometimes found at them. He drove through the bottleneck, parked his Audi at the head of the line of cars pointed toward Maine and New Hampshire, then walked back.

A dozen or so people were circulating on the littered front lawn of the blue-and-gray Cape Cod. A large television stood to the left of the cement walk, its feet planted on four paper ashtrays that were doing absolutely nothing to protect the lawn. On top was a sign reading MAKE AN OFFER—YOU MIGHT BE SURPRISED. An electrical cord, augmented by an extension, trailed back from the TV and through the open front door. A fat woman sat in a lawn chair before it, shaded by an umbrella with CINZANO printed on the colorful scalloped flaps. There was a card table beside her with a cigar box, a pad of paper, and another hand-lettered sign on it. This sign read ALL SALES CASH, ALL SALES FINAL. The TV was on, tuned to an afternoon soap opera where two beautiful young people looked on

the verge of having deeply unsafe sex. The fat woman glanced at Kinnell, then back at the TV. She looked at it for a moment, then looked back at him again. This time her mouth was slightly sprung.

Ah, Kinnell thought, looking around for the liquor box filled with paperbacks that was sure to be here someplace, a fan.

He didn't see any paperbacks, but he saw the picture, leaning against an ironing board and held in place by a couple of plastic laundry baskets, and his breath stopped in his throat. He wanted it at once.

He walked over with a casualness that felt exaggerated and dropped to one knee in front of it. The painting was a watercolor, and technically very good. Kinnell didn't care about that; technique didn't interest him (a fact the critics of his own work had duly noted). What he liked in works of art was content, and the more unsettling the better. This picture scored high in that department. He knelt between the two laundry baskets, which had been filled with a jumble of small appliances, and let his fingers slip over the glass facing of the picture. He glanced around briefly, looking for others like it, and saw none—only the usual yard sale art collection of Little Bo Peeps, praying hands, and gambling dogs.

He looked back at the framed watercolor, and in his mind he was already moving his suitcase into the backseat of the Audi so he could slip the picture comfortably into the trunk.

It showed a young man behind the wheel of a muscle car—maybe a Grand Am, maybe a GTX, something with a T-top, anyway—crossing the Tobin Bridge at sunset. The T-top was off, turning the black car into a half-assed convertible. The young man's left arm was cocked on the door; his right wrist was draped casually over the wheel. Behind him, the sky was a bruise-colored mass of yellows and grays, streaked with veins of pink. The young man had lank blond hair that spilled over his low forehead. He was grinning, and his parted lips revealed teeth which were not teeth at all but fangs.

Or maybe they're filed to points, Kinnell thought. Maybe he's supposed to be a cannibal.

He liked that; liked the idea of a cannibal crossing the Tobin Bridge at sunset. In a Grand Am. He knew what most of the audience at the PEN panel discussion would have thought—Oh, yes, great picture for Rich Kinnell; he probably wants it for inspiration, a feather to tickle his tired old gorge into one more fit of projectile vomiting—but most of those folks were ignoramuses, at least as far as his work went, and what was more, they treasured their ignorance, cossetted it the way some people inexplicably treasured and cossetted those stupid, mean-spirited little dogs that yapped at visitors and sometimes bit the paperboy's ankles. He hadn't been attracted to this painting because he wrote horror stories; he wrote horror stories because he was attracted to things like this painting. His fans sent him stuff—pictures, mostly—and he threw most of them away, not because they were bad art but because they were tiresome and predictable. One fan from Omaha had sent him a little ceramic sculpture of a screaming, horrified monkey's head poking out of a refrigerator door, however, and that one he had kept. It was unskillfully executed, but there was an unexpected juxtaposition there that lit up his dials. This painting had some of the same quality, but it was even better. Much better.

As he was reaching for it, wanting to pick it up right now, this second, wanting to tuck it under his arm and proclaim his intentions, a voice spoke up behind him: "Aren't you Richard Kinnell?"

He jumped, then turned. The fat woman was standing directly behind him, blotting out most of the immediate landscape. She had put on fresh lipstick before approaching, and now her mouth had been transformed into a bleeding grin.

"Yes, I am," he said, smiling back.

Her eyes dropped to the picture. "I should have known you'd go right to that," she said, simpering. "It's so you."

“It is, isn’t it?” he said, and smiled his best celebrity smile. “How much would you need for it?”

“Forty-five dollars,” she said. “I’ll be honest with you, I started it at seventy, but nobody likes it, so now it’s marked down. If you come back tomorrow, you can probably have it for thirty.” The simper had grown to frightening proportions. Kinnell could see little gray spit-buds in the dimples at the corners of her stretched mouth.

“I don’t think I want to take that chance,” he said. “I’ll write you a check right now.”

The simper continued to stretch; the woman now looked like some grotesque John Waters parody. Divine does Shirley Temple. “I’m really not supposed to take checks, but all right,” she said, her tone that of a teenage girl finally consenting to have sex with her boyfriend. “Only while you have your pen out, could you write an autograph for my daughter? Her name is Robin?”

“What a nice name,” Kinnell said automatically. He took the picture and followed the fat woman back to the card table. On the TV next to it, the lustful young people had been temporarily displaced by an elderly woman gobbling bran flakes.

“Robin reads all your books,” the fat woman said. “Where in the world do you get all those crazy ideas?”

“I don’t know,” Kinnell said, smiling more widely than ever. “They just come to me. Isn’t that amazing?”

*

The yard sale minder’s name was Judy Diment, and she lived in the house next door. When Kinnell asked her if she knew who the artist happened to be, she said she certainly did; Bobby Hastings had done it, and Bobby Hastings was the reason she was selling off the Hastingses’ things. “That’s the only painting he didn’t burn,” she said. “Poor Iris! She’s the one I really feel sorry for. I don’t think George

cared much, really. And I know he didn't understand why she wants to sell the house." She rolled her eyes in her large, sweaty face—the old can-you-imagine-that look. She took Kinnell's check when he tore it off, then gave him the pad where she had written down all the items she'd sold and the prices she'd obtained for them. "Just make it out to Robin," she said. "Pretty please with sugar on it?" The simper reappeared, like an old acquaintance you'd hoped was dead.

"Uh-huh," Kinnell said, and wrote his standard thanks-for-being-a-fan message. He didn't have to watch his hands or even think about it anymore, not after twenty-five years of writing autographs. "Tell me about the picture, and the Hastingses."

Judy Diment folded her pudgy hands in the manner of a woman about to recite a favorite story.

"Bobby was just twenty-three when he killed himself this spring. Can you believe that? He was the tortured-genius type, you know, but still living at home." Her eyes rolled, again asking Kinnell if he could imagine it. "He must have had seventy, eighty paintings, plus all his sketchbooks. Down in the basement, they were." She pointed her chin at the Cape Cod, then looked at the picture of the fiendish young man driving across the Tobin Bridge at sunset. "Iris—that's Bobby's mother—said most of them were real bad, lots worse'n this. Stuff that'd curl your hair." She lowered her voice to a whisper, glancing at a woman who was looking at the Hastingses' mismatched silverware and a pretty good collection of old McDonald's plastic glasses in a Honey, I Shrank the Kids motif. "Most of them had sex stuff in them."

"Oh no," Kinnell said.

"He did the worst ones after he got on drugs," Judy Diment continued. "After he was dead—he hung himself down in the basement, where he used to paint—they found over a hundred of those little bottles they sell crack cocaine in. Aren't drugs awful, Mr. Kinnell?"

“They sure are.”

“Anyway, I guess he finally just got to the end of his rope, no pun intended. He took all of his sketches and paintings out into the backyard—except for that one, I guess—and burned them. Then he hung himself down in the basement. He pinned a note to his shirt. It said, ‘I can’t stand what’s happening to me.’ Isn’t that awful, Mr. Kinnell? Isn’t that just the horriblest thing you ever heard?”

“Yes,” Kinnell said, sincerely enough. “It just about is.”

“Like I say, I think George would go right on living in the house if he had his druthers,” Judy Diment said. She took the sheet of paper with Robin’s autograph on it, held it up next to Kinnell’s check, and shook her head, as if the similarity of the signatures amazed her. “But men are different.”

“Are they?”

“Oh, yes, much less sensitive. By the end of his life, Bobby Hastings was just skin and bone, dirty all the time—you could smell him—and he wore the same Tee-shirt, day in and day out. It had a picture of the Led Zeppelins on it. His eyes were red, he had a scraggle on his cheeks that you couldn’t quite call a beard, and his pimples were coming back, like he was a teenager again. But she loved him, because a mother’s love sees past all those things.”

The woman who had been looking at the silverware and the glasses came over with a set of Star Wars placemats. Mrs. Diment took five dollars for them, wrote the sale carefully down on her pad below “ONE DOZ. ASSORTED POTHOLDERS & HOTPADS,” then turned back to Kinnell.

“They went out to Arizona,” she said, “to stay with Iris’s folks. I know George is looking for work out there in Flagstaff—he’s a draftsman—but I don’t know if he’s found any yet. If he has, I suppose we might not ever see them again here in Rosewood. She marked out all the stuff she wanted me to sell—Iris did—and told me I could keep

twenty per cent for my trouble. I'll send a check for the rest. There won't be much." She sighed.

"The picture is great," Kinnell said.

"Yeah, too bad he burned the rest, because most of this other stuff is your standard yard sale crap, pardon my French. What's that?"

Kinnell had turned the picture around. There was a length of Dymotape pasted to the back.

"A title, I think."

"What does it say?"

He grabbed the picture by the sides and held it up so she could read it for herself. This put the picture at eye-level to him, and he studied it eagerly, once again taken by the simpleminded weirdness of the subject: kid behind the wheel of a muscle car, a kid with a nasty, knowing grin that revealed the filed points of an even nastier set of teeth.

It fits, he thought. If ever a title fitted a painting, this one does.

"The Road Virus Heads North," she read. "I never noticed that when my boys were lugging stuff out. Is it the title, do you think?"

"Must be." Kinnell couldn't take his eyes off the blond kid's grin. I know something, the grin said. I know something you never will.

"Well, I guess you'd have to believe the fella who did this was high on drugs," she said, sounding upset—authentically upset, Kinnell thought. "No wonder he could kill himself and break his mamma's heart."

"I've got to be heading north myself," Kinnell said, tucking the picture under his arm. "Thanks for—"

"Mr. Kinnell?"

“Yes?”

“Can I see your driver’s license?” She apparently found nothing ironic or even amusing in this request. “I ought to write the number on the back of your check.”

Kinnell put the picture down so he could dig for his wallet. “Sure. You bet.”

The woman who’d bought the Star Wars placemats had paused on her way back to her car to watch some of the soap opera playing on the lawn TV. Now she glanced at the picture, which Kinnell had propped against his shins.

“Ag,” she said. “Who’d want an ugly old thing like that? I’d think about it every time I turned the lights out.”

“What’s wrong with that?” Kinnell asked.

*

Kinnell’s Aunt Trudy lived in Wells, which is about six miles north of the Maine-New Hampshire border. Kinnell pulled off at the exit which circled the bright green Wells water tower, the one with the comic sign on it (KEEP MAINE GREEN, BRING MONEY in letters four feet high), and five minutes later he was turning into the driveway of her neat little saltbox house. No TV sinking into the lawn on paper ashtrays here, only Aunt Trudy’s amiable masses of flowers. Kinnell needed to pee and hadn’t wanted to take care of that in a roadside rest-stop when he could come here, but he also wanted an update on all the family gossip. Aunt Trudy retailed the best; she was to gossip what Zabar’s is to deli. Also, of course, he wanted to show her his new acquisition.

She came out to meet him, gave him a hug, and covered his face with her patented little birdy-kisses, the ones that had made him shiver all over as a kid.

“Want to see something?” he asked her. “It’ll blow your pantyhose off.”

“What a charming thought,” Aunt Trudy said, clasping her elbows in her palms and looking at him with amusement.

He opened the trunk and took out his new picture. It affected her, all right, but not in the way he had expected. The color fell out of her face in a sheet—he had never seen anything quite like it in his entire life. “It’s horrible,” she said in a tight, controlled voice. “I hate it. I suppose I can see what attracted you to it, Richie, but what you play at, it does for real. Put it back in your trunk, like a good boy. And when you get to the Saco River, why don’t you pull over into the breakdown lane and throw it in?”

He gaped at her. Aunt Trudy’s lips were pressed tightly together to stop them trembling, and now her long, thin hands were not just clasping her elbows but clutching them, as if to keep her from flying away. At that moment she looked not sixty-one but ninety-one.

“Auntie?” Kinnell spoke tentatively, not sure what was going on here. “Auntie, what’s wrong?”

“That,” she said, unlocking her right hand and pointing at the picture. “I’m surprised you don’t feel it more strongly yourself, an imaginative guy like you.”

Well, he felt something, obviously he had, or he never would have unlimbered his checkbook in the first place. Aunt Trudy was feeling something else, though ... or something more. He turned the picture around so he could see it (he had been holding it out for her, so the side with the Dymotaped title faced him), and looked at it again. What he saw hit him in the chest and belly like a one-two punch.

The picture had changed, that was punch number one. Not much, but it had clearly changed. The young blond man’s smile was wider, revealing more of those filed cannibal-teeth. His eyes were squinted

down more, too, giving his face a look which was more knowing and nastier than ever.

The degree of a smile ... the vista of sharpened teeth widening slightly ... the tilt and squint of the eyes ... all pretty subjective stuff. A person could be mistaken about things like that, and of course he hadn't really studied the painting before buying it. Also, there had been the distraction of Mrs. Diment, who could probably talk the cock off a brass monkey.

But there was also punch number two, and that wasn't subjective. In the darkness of the Audi's trunk, the blond young man had turned his left arm, the one cocked on the door, so that Kinnell could now see a tattoo which had been hidden before. It was a vine-wrapped dagger with a bloody tip. Below it were words. Kinnell could make out DEATH BEFORE, and he supposed you didn't have to be a big best-selling novelist to figure out the word that was still hidden. DEATH BEFORE DISHONOR was, after all, just the sort of a thing a hoodoo travelling man like this was apt to have on his arm. And an ace of spades on the other one, Kinnell thought.

"You hate it, don't you, Auntie?" he asked.

"Yes," she said, and now he saw an even more amazing thing: she had turned away from him, pretending to look out at the street (which was dozing and deserted in the hot afternoon sunlight) so she wouldn't have to look at the picture. "In fact, Auntie loathes it. Now put it away and come on into the house. I'll bet you need to use the bathroom."

*

Aunt Trudy recovered her savoir-faire almost as soon as the watercolor was back in the trunk. They talked about Kinnell's mother (Pasadena), his sister (Baton Rouge), and his ex-wife, Sally (Nashua). Sally was a space-case who ran an animal shelter out of a double-wide trailer and published two newsletters each month. Survivors was filled with astral info and supposedly true tales of the

spirit world; Visitors contained the reports of people who'd had close encounters with space aliens. Kinnell no longer went to fan conventions which specialized in fantasy and horror. One Sally in a lifetime, he thought, was enough.

When Aunt Trudy walked him back out to the car, it was four-thirty and he'd turned down the obligatory dinner invitation. "I can get most of the way back to Derry in daylight, if I leave now."

"Okay," she said. "And I'm sorry I was so mean about your picture. Of course you like it, you've always liked your ... your oddities. It just hit me the wrong way. That awful face." She shuddered. "As if we were looking at him ... and he was looking right back."

Kinnell grinned and kissed the tip of her nose. "You've got quite an imagination yourself, sweetheart."

"Of course, it runs in the family. Are you sure you don't want to use the facility again before you go?"

He shook his head. "That's not why I stop, anyway, not really."

"Oh? Why do you?"

He grinned. "Because you know who's being naughty and who's being nice. And you're not afraid to share what you know."

"Go on, get going," she said, pushing at his shoulder but clearly pleased. "If I were you, I'd want to get home quick. I wouldn't want that nasty guy riding along behind me in the dark, even in the trunk. I mean, did you see his teeth? Ag!"

*

He got on the turnpike, trading scenery for speed, and made it as far as the Gray service area before deciding to have another look at the picture. Some of his aunt's unease had transmitted itself to him like a

germ, but he didn't think that was really the problem. The problem was his perception that the picture had changed.

The service area featured the usual gourmet chow—burgers by Roy Rogers, cones by TCBY—and had a small, littered picnic and dog-walking area at the rear. Kinnell parked next to a van with Missouri plates, drew in a deep breath, let it out. He'd driven to Boston in order to kill some plot gremlins in the new book, which was pretty ironic. He'd spent the ride down working out what he'd say on the panel if certain tough questions were tossed at him, but none had been—once they'd found out he didn't know where he got his ideas, and yes, he did sometimes scare himself, they'd only wanted to know how you got an agent.

And now, heading back, he couldn't think of anything but the damned picture.

Had it changed? If it had, if the blond kid's arm had moved enough so he, Kinnell, could read a tattoo which had been partly hidden before, then he could write a column for one of Sally's magazines. Hell, a four-part series. If, on the other hand, it wasn't changing, then ... what? He was suffering a hallucination? Having a breakdown? That was crap. His life was pretty much in order, and he felt good. Had, anyway, until his fascination with the picture had begun to waver into something else, something darker.

"Ah, fuck, you just saw it wrong the first time," he said out loud as he got out of the car. Well, maybe. Maybe. It wouldn't be the first time his head had screwed with his perceptions. That was also a part of what he did. Sometimes his imagination got a little ... well ...

"Feisty," Kinnell said, and opened the trunk. He took the picture out of the trunk and looked at it, and it was during the space of the ten seconds when he looked at it without remembering to breathe that he became authentically afraid of the thing, afraid the way you were afraid of a sudden dry rattle in the bushes, afraid the way you were when you saw an insect that would probably sting if you provoked it.

The blond driver was grinning insanely at him now—yes, at him, Kinnell was sure of it—with those filed cannibal-teeth exposed all the way to the gumlines. His eyes simultaneously glared and laughed. And the Tobin Bridge was gone. So was the Boston skyline. So was the sunset. It was almost dark in the painting now, the car and its wild rider illuminated by a single streetlamp that ran a buttery glow across the road and the car's chrome. It looked to Kinnell as if the car (he was pretty sure it was a Grand Am) was on the edge of a small town on Route 1, and he was pretty sure he knew what town it was—he had driven through it himself only a few hours ago.

“Rosewood,” he muttered. “That’s Rosewood. I’m pretty sure.”

The Road Virus was heading north, all right, coming up Route 1 just as he had. The blond's left arm was still cocked out the window, but it had rotated enough back toward its original position so that Kinnell could no longer see the tattoo. But he knew it was there, didn't he? Yes, you bet.

The blond kid looked like a Metallica fan who had escaped from a mental asylum for the criminally insane.

“Jesus,” Kinnell whispered, and the word seemed to come from someplace else, not from him. The strength suddenly ran out of his body, ran out like water from a bucket with a hole in the bottom, and he sat down heavily on the curb separating the parking lot from the dog-walking zone. He suddenly understood that this was the truth he'd missed in all his fiction, this was how people really reacted when they came face-to-face with something which made no rational sense. You felt as if you were bleeding to death, only inside your head.

“No wonder the guy who painted it killed himself,” he croaked, still staring at the picture, at the ferocious grin, at the eyes that were both shrewd and stupid.

There was a note pinned to his shirt, Mrs. Diment had said. “I can't stand what's happening to me.” Isn't that awful, Mr. Kinnell?

Yes, it was awful, all right.

Really awful.

He got up, gripping the picture by its top, and strode across the dog-walking area. He kept his eyes trained strictly in front of him, looking for canine land mines. He did not look down at the picture. His legs felt trembly and untrustworthy, but they seemed to support him all right. Just ahead, close to the belt of trees at the rear of the service area, was a pretty young thing in white shorts and a red halter. She was walking a cocker spaniel. She began to smile at Kinnell, then saw something in his face that straightened her lips out in a hurry. She headed left, and fast. The cocker didn't want to go that fast, so she dragged it, coughing, in her wake.

The scrubby pines behind the service area sloped down to a boggy acre that stank of plant and animal decomposition. The carpet of pine-needles was a road-litter fallout zone: burger wrappers, paper soft-drink cups, TCBY napkins, beer cans, empty wine-cooler bottles, cigarette butts. He saw a used condom lying like a dead snail next to a torn pair of panties with the word TUESDAY stitched on them in cursive girly-girl script.

Now that he was here, he chanced another look down at the picture. He steeled himself for further changes—even for the possibility that the painting would be in motion, like a movie in a frame—but there was none. There didn't have to be, Kinnell realized; the blond kid's face was enough. That stone-crazy grin. Those pointed teeth. The face said, Hey, old man, guess what? I'm done fucking with civilization. I'm a representative of the real generation X, the next millennium is right here behind the wheel of this fine, high-steppin' mo-sheen.

Aunt Trudy's initial reaction to the painting had been to advise Kinnell that he should throw it into the Saco River. Auntie had been right. The Saco was now almost twenty miles behind him, but ...

"This'll do," he said. "I think this'll do just fine."

He raised the picture over his head like a guy holding up some kind of sports trophy for the postgame photographers and then heaved it down the slope. It flipped over twice, the frame catching winks of hazy late-day sun, then struck a tree. The glass facing shattered. The picture fell to the ground and then slid down the dry, needle-carpeted slope, as if down a chute. It landed in the bog, one corner of the frame protruding from a thick stand of reeds. Otherwise, there was nothing visible but the strew of broken glass, and Kinnell thought that went very well with the rest of the litter.

He turned and went back to his car, already picking up his mental trowel. He would wall this incident off in its own special niche, he thought ... and it occurred to him that that was probably what most people did when they ran into stuff like this. Liars and wannabees (or maybe in this case they were wannasees) wrote up their fantasies for publications like *Survivors* and called them truth; those who blundered into authentic occult phenomena kept their mouths shut and used those trowels. Because when cracks like this appeared in your life, you had to do something about them; if you didn't, they were apt to widen and sooner or later everything would fall in.

Kinnell glanced up and saw the pretty young thing watching him apprehensively from what she probably hoped was a safe distance. When she saw him looking at her, she turned around and started toward the restaurant building, once more dragging her cocker spaniel behind her and trying to keep as much sway out of her hips as possible.

You think I'm crazy, don't you, pretty girl? Kinnell thought. He saw he had left his trunk lid up. It gaped like a mouth. He slammed it shut. But I'm not crazy. Absolutely not. I just made a little mistake, that's all. Stopped at a yard sale I should have passed up. Anyone could have done it. You could have done it. And that picture—

"What picture?" Rich Kinnell asked the hot summer evening, and tried on a smile. "I don't see any picture."

He slid behind the wheel of his Audi and started the engine. He looked at the fuel gauge and saw it had dropped under a half. He was going to need gas before he got home, but he thought he'd fill the tank a little farther up the line. Right now all he wanted to do was to put a belt of miles—as thick a one as possible—between him and the discarded painting.

*

Once outside the city limits of Derry, Kansas Street becomes Kansas Road. As it approaches the incorporated town limits (an area that is actually open countryside), it becomes Kansas Lane. Not long after, Kansas Lane passes between two fieldstone posts. Tar gives way to gravel. What is one of Derry's busiest downtown streets eight miles east of here has become a driveway leading up a shallow hill, and on moonlit summer nights it glimmers like something out of an Alfred Noyes poem. At the top of the hill stands an angular, handsome barn-board structure with reflectorized windows, a stable that is actually a garage, and a satellite dish tilted at the stars. A waggish reporter from the Derry News once called it the House that Gore Built ... not meaning the vice president of the United States. Richard Kinnell simply called it home, and he parked in front of it that night with a sense of weary satisfaction. He felt as if he had lived through a week's worth of time since getting up in the Boston Harbor hotel that morning at nine o'clock.

No more yard sales, he thought, looking up at the moon. No more yard sales ever.

"Amen," he said, and started toward the house. He probably should stick the car in the garage, but the hell with it. What he wanted right now was a drink, a light meal—something microwaveable—and then sleep. Preferably the kind without dreams. He couldn't wait to put this day behind him.

He stuck his key in the lock, turned it, and punched 3817 to silence the warning bleep from the burglar-alarm panel. He turned on the front-hall light, stepped through the door, pushed it shut behind him,

began to turn, saw what was on the wall where his collection of framed book covers had been just two days ago, and screamed. In his head he screamed. Nothing actually came out of his mouth but a harsh exhalation of air. He heard a thump and a tuneless little jingle as his keys fell out of his relaxing hand and dropped to the carpet between his feet.

The Road Virus Heads North was no longer in the puckerbrush behind the Gray turnpike service area.

It was mounted on his entry wall.

It had changed yet again. The car was now parked in the driveway of the yard sale yard. The goods were still spread out everywhere—glassware and furniture and ceramic knickknacks (Scottie dogs smoking pipes, bare-assed toddlers, winking fish), but now they gleamed beneath the light of the same skullface moon that rode in the sky above Kinnell's house. The TV was still there, too, and it was still on, casting its own pallid radiance onto the grass, and what lay in front of it, next to an overturned lawn chair. Judy Diment was on her back, and she was no longer all there. After a moment, Kinnell saw the rest. It was on the ironing board, dead eyes glowing like fifty-cent pieces in the moonlight.

The Grand Am's taillights were a blur of red-pink watercolor paint. It was Kinnell's first look at the car's back deck. Written across it in Old English letters were three words: THE ROAD VIRUS.

Makes perfect sense, Kinnell thought numbly. Not him, his car. Except for a guy like this, there's probably not much difference.

"This isn't happening," he whispered, except it was. Maybe it wouldn't have happened to someone a little less open to such things, but it was happening. And as he stared at the painting he found himself remembering the little sign on Judy Diment's card table. ALL SALES CASH, it had said (although she had taken his check, only adding his driver's license ID number for safety's sake). And it had said something else, too.

ALL SALES FINAL.

Kinnell walked past the picture and into the living room. He felt like a stranger inside his own body, and he sensed part of his mind groping around for the trowel he had used earlier. He seemed to have misplaced it.

He turned on the TV, then the Toshiba satellite tuner which sat on top of it. He turned to V-14, and all the time he could feel the picture out there in the hall, pushing at the back of his head. The picture that had somehow beaten him here.

“Must have known a shortcut,” Kinnell said, and laughed.

He hadn't been able to see much of the blond in this version of the picture, but there had been a blur behind the wheel which Kinnell assumed had been him. The Road Virus had finished his business in Rosewood. It was time to move north. Next stop—

He brought a heavy steel door down on that thought, cutting it off before he could see all of it. “After all, I could still be imagining all this,” he told the empty living room. Instead of comforting him, the hoarse, shaky quality of his voice frightened him even more. “This could be ...” But he couldn't finish. All that came to him was an old song, belted out in the pseudo-hip style of some early fifties Sinatra clone: This could be the start of something BIG ...

The tune oozing from the TV's stereo speakers wasn't Sinatra but Paul Simon, arranged for strings. The white computer type on the blue screen said WELCOME TO NEW ENGLAND NEWSWIRE. There were ordering instructions below this, but Kinnell didn't have to read them; he was a Newswire junkie and knew the drill by heart. He dialed, punched in his MasterCard number, then 508.

“You have ordered Newswire for [slight pause] central and northern Massachusetts,” the robot voice said. “Thank you very m—”

Kinnell dropped the phone back into the cradle and stood looking at the New England Newswire logo, snapping his fingers nervously. “Come on,” he said. “Come on, come on.”

The screen flickered then, and the blue background became green. Words began scrolling up, something about a house fire in Taunton. This was followed by the latest on a dog-racing scandal, then tonight’s weather—clear and mild. Kinnell was starting to relax, starting to wonder if he’d really seen what he thought he’d seen on the entryway wall or if it had been a bit of travel-induced fugue, when the TV beeped shrilly and the words BREAKING NEWS appeared. He stood watching the caps scroll up.

NENphAUG19/8:40P A ROSEWOOD WOMAN HAS BEEN BRUTALLY MURDERED WHILE DOING A FAVOR FOR AN ABSENT FRIEND. 38-YEAR-OLD JUDITH DIMENT WAS SAVEGELY HACKED TO DEATH ON THE LAWN OF HER NEIGHBOR’S HOUSE, WHERE SHE HAD BEEN CONDUCTING A YARD SALE. NO SCREAMS WERE HEARD AND MRS. DIMENT WAS NOT FOUND UNTIL EIGHT O’CLOCK, WHEN A NEIGHBOR ACROSS THE STREET CAME OVER TO COMPLAIN ABOUT LOUD TELEVISION NOISE. THE NEIGHBOR, MATTHEW GRAVES, SAID THAT MRS. DIMENT HAD BEEN DECAPITATED. “HER HEAD WAS ON THE IRONING BOARD,” HE SAID. “IT WAS THE MOST AWFUL THING I’VE EVER SEEN IN MY LIFE.” GRAVES SAID HE HEARD NO SIGNS OF A STRUGGLE, ONLY THE TV AND, SHORTLY BEFORE FINDING THE BODY, A LOUD CAR, POSSIBLY EQUIPPED WITH A GLASSPACK MUFFLER, ACCELERATING AWAY FROM THE VICINITY ALONG ROUTE ONE. SPECULATION THAT THIS VEHICLE MAY HAVE BELONGED TO THE KILLER—

Except that wasn’t speculation; that was a simple fact.

Breathing hard, not quite panting, Kinnell hurried back into the entryway. The picture was still there, but it had changed once more. Now it showed two glaring white circles—headlights—with the dark shape of the car hulking behind them.

He's on the move again, Kinnell thought, and Aunt Trudy was on top of his mind now—sweet Aunt Trudy, who always knew who had been naughty and who had been nice. Aunt Trudy, who lived in Wells, no more than forty miles from Rosewood.

“God, please God, please send him by the coast road,” Kinnell said, reaching for the picture. Was it his imagination or were the headlights farther apart now, as if the car were actually moving before his eyes ... but stealthily, the way the minute hand moved on a pocket watch? “Send him by the coast road, please.”

He tore the picture off the wall and ran back into the living room with it. The screen was in place before the fireplace, of course; it would be at least two months before a fire was wanted in here. Kinnell batted it aside and threw the painting in, breaking the glass fronting—which he had already broken once, at the Gray service area—against the firedogs. Then he pelted for the kitchen, wondering what he would do if this didn't work either.

It has to, he thought. It will because it has to, and that's all there is to it.

He opened the kitchen cabinets and pawed through them, spilling the oatmeal, spilling a canister of salt, spilling the vinegar. The bottle broke open on the counter and assaulted his nose and eyes with the high stink.

Not there. What he wanted wasn't there.

He raced into the pantry, looked behind the door—nothing but a plastic bucket and an O Cedar—and then on the shelf by the dryer. There it was, next to the briquets.

Lighter fluid.

He grabbed it and ran back, glancing at the telephone on the kitchen wall as he hurried by. He wanted to stop, wanted to call Aunt Trudy. Credibility wasn't an issue with her; if her favorite nephew called and

told her to get out of the house, to get out right now, she would do it ... but what if the blond kid followed her? Chased her?

And he would. Kinnell knew he would.

He hurried across the living room and stopped in front of the fireplace.

“Jesus,” he whispered. “Jesus, no.”

The picture beneath the splintered glass no longer showed oncoming headlights. Now it showed the Grand Am on a sharply curving piece of road that could only be an exit ramp. Moonlight shone like liquid satin on the car’s dark flank. In the background was a water tower, and the words on it were easily readable in the moonlight. KEEP MAINE GREEN, they said. BRING MONEY.

Kinnell didn’t hit the picture with the first squeeze of lighter fluid; his hands were shaking badly and the aromatic liquid simply ran down the unbroken part of the glass, blurring the Road Virus’s back deck. He took a deep breath, aimed, then squeezed again. This time the lighter fluid squirted in through the jagged hole made by one of the firedogs and ran down the picture, cutting through the paint, making it run, turning a Goodyear Wide Oval into a sooty teardrop.

Kinnell took one of the ornamental matches from the jar on the mantel, struck it on the hearth, and poked it in through the hole in the glass. The painting caught at once, fire billowing up and down across the Grand Am and the water tower. The remaining glass in the frame turned black, then broke outward in a shower of flaming pieces. Kinnell crunched them under his sneakers, putting them out before they could set the rug on fire.

*

He went to the phone and punched in Aunt Trudy’s number, unaware that he was crying. On the third ring, his aunt’s answering machine picked up. “Hello,” Aunt Trudy said, “I know it encourages the

burglars to say things like this, but I've gone up to Kennebunk to watch the new Harrison Ford movie. If you intend to break in, please don't take my china pigs. If you want to leave a message, do so at the beep."

Kinnell waited, then, keeping his voice as steady as possible, he said: "It's Richie, Aunt Trudy. Call me when you get back, okay? No matter how late."

He hung up, looked at the TV, then dialed Newswire again, this time punching in the Maine area code. While the computers on the other end processed his order, he went back and used a poker to jab at the blackened, twisted thing in the fireplace. The stench was ghastly—it made the spilled vinegar smell like a flowerpatch in comparison—but Kinnell found he didn't mind. The picture was entirely gone, reduced to ash, and that made it worthwhile.

What if it comes back again?

"It won't," he said, putting the poker back and returning to the TV. "I'm sure it won't."

*

But every time the news scroll started to recycle, he got up to check. The picture was just ashes on the hearth ... and there was no word of elderly women being murdered in the Wells-Saco-Kennebunk area of the state. Kinnell kept watching, almost expecting to see A GRAND AM MOVING AT HIGH SPEED CRASHED INTO A KENNEBUNK MOVIE THEATER TONIGHT, KILLING AT LEAST TEN, but nothing of the sort showed up.

At a quarter of eleven the telephone rang. Kinnell snatched it up. "Hello?"

"It's Trudy, dear. Are you all right?"

"Yes, fine."

“You don’t sound fine,” she said. “Your voice sounds trembly and ... funny. What’s wrong? What is it?” And then, chilling him but not really surprising him: “It’s that picture you were so pleased with, isn’t it? That goddamned picture!”

It calmed him somehow, that she should guess so much ... and, of course, there was the relief of knowing she was safe.

“Well, maybe,” he said. “I had the heebie-jeebies all the way back here, so I burned it. In the fireplace.”

She’s going to find out about Judy Diment, you know, a voice inside warned. She doesn’t have a twenty-thousand-dollar satellite hookup, but she does subscribe to the Union Leader and this’ll be on the front page. She’ll put two and two together. She’s far from stupid.

Yes, that was undoubtedly true, but further explanations could wait until the morning, when he might be a little less freaked ... when he might’ve found a way to think about the Road Virus without losing his mind ... and when he’d begun to be sure it was really over.

“Good!” she said emphatically. “You ought to scatter the ashes, too!” She paused, and when she spoke again, her voice was lower. “You were worried about me, weren’t you? Because you showed it to me.”

“A little, yes.”

“But you feel better now?”

He leaned back and closed his eyes. It was true, he did. “Uh-huh. How was the movie?”

“Good. Harrison Ford looks wonderful in a uniform. Now, if he’d just get rid of that little bump on his chin ...”

“Good night, Aunt Trudy. We’ll talk tomorrow.”

“Will we?”

“Yes,” he said. “I think so.”

He hung up, went over to the fireplace again, and stirred the ashes with the poker. He could see a scrap of fender and a ragged little flap of road, but that was it. Fire was what it had needed all along, apparently. Wasn't that how you usually killed supernatural emissaries of evil? Of course it was. He'd used it a few times himself, most notably in *The Departing*, his haunted train station novel.

“Yes, indeed,” he said. “Burn, baby, burn.”

He thought about getting the drink he'd promised himself, then remembered the spilled bottle of vinegar (which by now would probably be soaking into the spilled oatmeal—what a thought). He decided he would simply go on upstairs instead. In a book—one by Richard Kinnell, for instance—sleep would be out of the question after the sort of thing which had just happened to him.

In real life, he thought he might sleep just fine.

*

He actually dozed off in the shower, leaning against the back wall with his hair full of shampoo and the water beating on his chest. He was at the yard sale again, and the TV standing on the paper ashtrays was broadcasting Judy Diment. Her head was back on, but Kinnell could see the medical examiner's primitive industrial stitch-work; it circled her throat like a grisly necklace. “Now this New England Newswire update,” she said, and Kinnell, who had always been a vivid dreamer, could actually see the stitches on her neck stretch and relax as she spoke. “Bobby Hastings took all his paintings and burned them, including yours, Mr. Kinnell ... and it is yours, as I'm sure you know. All sales are final, you saw the sign. Why, you just ought to be glad I took your check.”

Burned all his paintings, yes, of course he did, Kinnell thought in his watery dream. He couldn't stand what was happening to him, that's

what the note said, and when you get to that point in the festivities, you don't pause to see if you want to except one special piece of work from the bonfire. It's just that you got something special into The Road Virus Heads North, didn't you, Bobby? And probably completely by accident. You were talented, I could see that right away, but talent has nothing to do with what's going on in that picture.

"Some things are just good at survival," Judy Diment said on the TV. "They keep coming back no matter how hard you try to get rid of them. They keep coming back like viruses."

Kinnell reached out and changed the channel, but apparently there was nothing on all the way around the dial except for The Judy Diment Show.

"You might say he opened a hole into the basement of the universe," she was saying now. "Bobby Hastings, I mean. And this is what drove out. Nice, isn't it?"

Kinnell's feet slid then, not enough to go out from under him completely, but enough to snap him to.

He opened his eyes, winced at the immediate sting of the soap (Prell had run down his face in thick white rivulets while he had been dozing), and cupped his hands under the shower-spray to splash it away. He did this once and was reaching out to do it again when he heard something. A ragged rumbling sound.

Don't be stupid, he told himself. All you hear is the shower. The rest is only imagination. Your stupid, overtrained imagination.

Except it wasn't.

Kinnell reached out and turned off the water.

The rumbling sound continued. Low and powerful. Coming from outside.

He got out of the shower and walked, dripping, across his bedroom on the second floor. There was still enough shampoo in his hair to make him look as if it had turned white while he was dozing—as if his dream of Judy Diment had turned it white.

Why did I ever stop at that yard sale? he asked himself, but for this he had no answer. He supposed no one ever did.

The rumbling sound grew louder as he approached the window overlooking the driveway—the driveway that glimmered in the summer moonlight like something out of an Alfred Noyes poem.

As he brushed aside the curtain and looked out, he found himself thinking of his ex-wife, Sally, whom he had met at the World Fantasy Convention in 1978. Sally, who now published two newsletters out of her trailer home, one called Survivors, one called Visitors. Looking down at the driveway, these two titles came together in Kinnell's mind like a double image in a stereopticon.

He had a visitor who was definitely a survivor.

The Grand Am idled in front of the house, the white haze from its twin chromed tailpipes rising in the still night air. The Old English letters on the back deck were perfectly readable. The driver's-side door stood open, and that wasn't all; the light spilling down the porch steps suggested that Kinnell's front door was also open.

Forgot to lock it, Kinnell thought, wiping soap off his forehead with a hand he could no longer feel. Forgot to reset the burglar alarm, too... not that it would have made much difference to this guy.

Well, he might have caused it to detour around Aunt Trudy, and that was something, but just now the thought brought him no comfort.

Survivors.

The soft rumble of the big engine, probably at least a 442 with a four-barrel carb, reground valves, fuel injection.

He turned slowly on legs that had lost all feeling, a naked man with a headful of soap, and saw the picture over his bed, just as he'd known he would. In it, the Grand Am stood in his driveway with the driver's door open and two plumes of exhaust rising from the chromed tailpipes. From this angle he could also see his own front door, standing open, and a long man-shaped shadow stretching down the hall.

Survivors.

Survivors and visitors.

Now he could hear feet ascending the stairs. It was a heavy tread, and he knew without having to see that the blond kid was wearing motorcycle boots. People with DEATH BEFORE DISHONOR tattooed on their arms always wore motorcycle boots, just as they always smoked unfiltered Camels. These things were like a national law.

And the knife. He would be carrying a long, sharp knife—more of a machete, actually, the sort of knife that could strike off a person's head in a single stroke.

And he would be grinning, showing those filed cannibal teeth.

Kinnell knew these things. He was an imaginative guy, after all.

He didn't need anyone to draw him a picture.

"No," he whispered, suddenly conscious of his global nakedness, suddenly freezing all the way around his skin. "No, please, go away." But the footfalls kept coming, of course they did. You couldn't tell a guy like this to go away. It didn't work; it wasn't the way the story was supposed to end.

Kinnell could hear him nearing the top of the stairs. Outside, the Grand Am went on rumbling in the moonlight.

The feet coming down the hall now, worn bootheels rapping on polished hardwood.

A terrible paralysis had gripped Kinnell. He threw it off with an effort and bolted toward the bedroom door, wanting to lock it before the thing could get in here, but he slipped in a puddle of soapy water and this time he did go down, flat on his back on the oak planks, and what he saw as the door clicked open and the motorcycle boots crossed the room toward where he lay, naked and with his hair full of Prell, was the picture hanging on the wall over his bed, the picture of the Road Virus idling in front of his house with the driver's-side door open.

The driver's-side bucket seat, he saw, was full of blood. I'm going outside, I think, Kinnell thought, and closed his eyes.

SKYBAR

Brian Hartz and Stephen King

The following story was written from a contest with Doubleday books to promote the 1982 "Do it Yourself Bestseller" book edited by Tom Silberkleit and Jerry Biederman.

There were many authors featured in the book, including Belva Plain and Isaac Asimov. Each writer provided the beginning and ending to a story.

It was up to the reader to provide the middle, hence the name "Do It Yourself Bestseller."

As part of the promotion, Doubleday books held a national contest to see who could write the best middle portion.

Each winner was chosen by the individual writer - in this case, Stephen King. Brian Hartz was 18 at the time it was written.

This story contains strong language and material that may be unsuitable for younger readers.

There were twelve of us when we went in that night, but only two of us came out - my friend Kirby and me. And Kirby was insane. All of the things I'm going to tell you about happened twelve years ago. I was eleven then, in the sixth grade. Kirby was ten and in the fifth. In those days, before gas shot up to \$1.40 a gallon or more (as I recall the best deal in town was at Dewey's Sunoco, where you could get hi-test for 31.9 cents, plus double S&H Green stamps), Skybar Amusement Park was still a growing concern; its great double Ferris wheel turned endlessly against a summer sky, and you could hear the great, grinding mechanical laugh of the fun-house clown even at my house, five miles inland, when the wind was right

Yeah, Skybar was the place to go, all right - you could blast away with the .22 of your choice at Pop Dupree's Dead Eye Shootin' Gallery, you could ride the Whip until you puked, wander into the Mirror Labyrinth, or look at the Adults Only freak tent and wonder what was in there...you especially wondered when the people came

out, white-faced, some of the women crying, or hysterical. Brant Callahan said it was all just a fake, whatever it was, but sometimes I saw the doubt even in Brant's tough gray eyes.

Then, of course, the murders started, and eventually Skybar was shut down. The double Ferris stood frozen against the sky, and the only sound the mechanical clown's mouth produced was the lunatic hooting of the sea breeze. We went in, the twelve of us, and...but I'm getting ahead of myself. It began just after school let out that June; it began when Randy Stayner, a seventh-grader from the junior high school, was thrown from the highest point of the SkyCoaster. I was there that day - Kirby was with me, in fact - and we both heard his scream as he came down.

It was one of the strangest ways for a person to die - the shadowed Ferris wheel turned in the sunlight, the bumper cars honked and sparked the roof and walls of Spunky's Dodge 'Em, the carousel spun wildly to the rise and fall of horses and lions, and the steady beat of its repeating tune echoed throughout the park. A man balancing his screaming son in one hand, ice cream cones in the other, little kids with cotton candy racing to see who's first to get on Sandee's Spinning Sombrero, and in the midst of all the peaceful confusion, Randy Stayner performing a one-time solo swan dive 100 feet into the solid steel tracks of the SkyCoaster.

For a while, I wasn't all too sure the people around me weren't thinking it was just an act - a Saturday afternoon performance by a skilled diver. When blood and bone hit, however, it was clear the act was over. And then, as if to clear the whole thing up with a final attempt to achieve his original goal, he rolled lazily over the bottom rails of the SkyCoaster into the brown murky water of Skybar Pond, swirls of red and grey following him.

The SkyCoaster was shut down the day of Randy's dive, and despite weeks of dragging the pond's bottom, his body was never found. Authorities concluded that his remains had drifted under a sandbar or some unmarked passageway, and all search ceased after four weeks.

Skybar lost a lot of customers after that. Most people were afraid to go there, and other businesses in the town began to boom because of it. In fact, Starboard Cinema, which showed horror movies to an audience of four or five during the parks better days now showed repeats of "I was a Teen Age Werewolf" to sell-out crowds. More and more, people drifted away from Skybar until it was shut down for good.

It was during those last few weeks that the worst accidents started happening. A morning worker, reaching under a car on the Whip for a paper cup, caught his arm on the supporting bar between two clamps just as a faulty circuit started the machine. He was crushed between two cars. Another worker was fixing a bottom rail on the Ferris wheel when a 500 pound car dropped off the top and smeared him onto the asphalt below. These and several other rides were shut down, and when the only thing left open was Pop Dupree's .22 gallery and the Adults Only freak tent, the spark ran out of Skybar's amusement, and it was forced to shut down after its third year in operation.

It had only been closed for two months when Brant Callahan came up with his plan that night. We were in a group of five camping in back of John Wilkenson's dad's workshop, in a single five-man Sportsman pup tent illuminated by four flashlights shining on back issues of Famous Detective Stories, when he stood up (or rather scuffled on his knees, due to the height of the tent) and proposed we all do something to separate the pussies from the men.

I tossed aside my Mystery of the Haunted Hearse, leaned teach in the glow of Dewey Howardson's light, and squinted halfway at the hulking shadow crouching by the double-flap zipper door. No one else appeared to pay any attention to him.

"Come on, lard-asses!" he shouted. "Are ya all just going to sit around playing Dick-fucking-Tracy all night?"

Kirby slapped at the bugs attacking his glowing arm and looked from Brant, to me, to the rest of the guys still gazing with mild interest at

their Alfred Hitchcock tales of suspense, unaware of any other activities going on in their presence. I gazed at my watch. It was 11:30.

“What the hell are you raving about, Brant?” His face came to life now that he was being noticed, and he looked at me with great excitement, like some dumb little kid who was about to tell some terrible secret and was getting the great flood of details together to form a top-confidential plan.

“The SkyCoaster.”

Dewey looked over the top of his magazine and shot Brant a look of mild interest.

“Skybar’s SkyCoaster?”

“Course, ya damn idiot. What other roller coaster ya gonna find in Starboard? Now the way I figger it, we could make it over the barbed wire and inside to the SkyCoaster easy enough.”

“What the fuck for?” I asked. Brant was always pulling stunts like this, and it was no telling what the crazy bastard was up to this time. I remember one year when we were out smashing coins on the BY&W tracks by Harrow’s Point, Brant got tired of watching trains run over his pennies and dimes and dared us to take on a real challenge. Whenever Brant came up with a real challenge, you could almost always count on calling up the You Asked For It or Ripleys Believe It or Not crews for live coverage. Not that the challenge was anything like that man from Brazil who swallowed strips of razor blades, or that fat lady from Ohio who balanced fire sticks on her forehead - Brant’s dares were far more challenging than those. And, as young volunteers from his reluctant audience, we were obligated to take part in them or kiss our reputation for bravery goodbye.

Brant reached into his pants pocket that day and pulled out a small cardboard box wrapped tightly with a red rubber band. Unwrapping it, he revealed four or five shiny copper bullets, the kind I used to see

on reruns of Mannix when Mike Connors would stop blasting away at crime rings long enough to load up his revolver again. They were different from T.V., though. On the tube they appeared to be no more than tiny pieces of dull plastic jammed into a Whamco Cap Pistol. In front of me then, they sat mystically in Brant's hand, the shells glittering bright rays of light in the late afternoon sun, the tip of greyish lead heavily refusing to reflect any light at all.

Then Brant clapped them all together in a fist and headed up the bank toward the tracks. I started after him, half expecting him to wheel out a gun for them at any minute, hoping he was just going to relieve himself rather than starting to open fire on something, or trying some other dangerous stunt. It was dangerous, as it turned out, but I didn't say anything. I just stood there by the rails, taking a plug off the chewing tobacco Dewey brought along, my mind watching from some faraway place as he set them up single file on the left rail.

"The train wheels should set 'em off the second they hit," he smiled smugly, eagerly forming his plan. "All we have to do is stand here by the rails until they do. How's that for a challenge, huh? Oh, and the first one to jump is pussy of the year."

I didn't say anything. but I thought a lot about it. About how stupid it was, how dangerous it was, and how weird a persons brain had to be to think things like that up. I thought about how I should bug out right then, just yell "Screw you, Brant!" and take off for home. But that would have made me green. And if it was one thing we all had to show each other back then, it was that we were no cowards.

So there we were, Brant, John, Dewey, me, and Kirby, although Kirby wouldn't set foot near the tracks, bullets or no bullets, with a train coming (he began to conveniently get sick on the tobacco and had to lie down). We lined up next to the rails, determination in our eyes as the bullets gleamed in front of us. John was the first one to hear the train, and as we stepped closer to Brant's orders, I could hear him softly muttering a short prayer over and over to himself.

Dewey stood on the far right side of me, the last person in our Fearless Freddy Fan Club

Then the first heavy rumbling of the cars came, John reeled as it got louder, and I thought surely he was going to collapse over the tracks, but he didn't, and we all stood still as the train came on. The churning squeak of the wheels hit our ears, and I stared blankly at the bullets in front of us, thinking how small they seemed under the wheels of the 4:40. But the more I looked, the larger they began to appear, until it seemed they were almost the size of cannonballs. I shut my eyes and prayed with John.

In the distance. the whistle rang out a terrifyingly loud Hooooo-HOO Hoooo, and I was sure it was on top of us, sure that I would feel the cracks of lead pounding in my ears any second, feel the hot metal in my legs. Then the steady thud-thud-thud of its wheels grinding closer bit into my ears, and I screamed. turned, and fell down the slope to where the black gravel ended and the high meadowy grass began. I ran and didn't stop or look back until I was what felt like at least a mile away, and then collapsed in the stickery high grass, my hands and knees filling with sharp pain.

Behind me, five or six bullets roared into the air consecutively, and I wondered vaguely how Mike Connors could stand such a loud sound every time he squeezed the trigger. My ears filled up with a steady EEEEEEEEEEE, and I lay back in the grass, my hair full of stickers, my pride full of shame.

Then Kirby was in front of me, telling me I was all right. I sat up in the grass, and down the hm about ten or fifteen feet from me, Brant, Dewey, and John sat puffing loudly, laughing, out of breath. The air filled with smoke and I collapsed again into the high sea of shrub and stickers, feeling fine.

Brant admitted time after time that we were all brave for going along with him that day, but he never brought up the fact that we all had run away, he and Dewey in the lead. Somewhere in my mind, the fact appeared to me that somewhere in Brant, his ego ended and his

brains began. That's why I listened along with the others, and why we all wound up going with him that night when he began scheming up another mastermind stunt.

"First we make it over the fence. When we do, we head for the SkyCoaster. Here's the trick: we'll all meet in the station and start up the tracks - not the wooden beams - the tracks, and, in single file, climb to the King drop, then back down." "You're fuckin nuts, Brant." "Maybe. But at least I'm not fuckin' pussy." "Who's pussy?" I asked, pulling my Converse All-Star tennis shoes on. "You in?" asked Kirby, his lower jaw shaking. It was almost like that shaking jaw and those glassy, scared deer eyes of his were trying to pull me back, to help me forget about the dare and get back to reading another chapter in *Amazing Detective Stories* - as if that once shaking jaw were a sonar, bouncing off waves of detection and coming up with the same reading: *Dangerous Barrier Ahead*.

"Don't be ridiculous, Kirb. 'Course I'm goin'" I shot a glance at John and Dewey, who both gave me nods of bravery and confidence, mixed highly with regrets of Brant's ever being with us that night. We left the flashlights on in the tent in case John's dad peeked out the back windows of his house to check on us. It turned out he never did.

Skybar can be pretty damn dark at night with no lights on. Few people know that like I do since most have only seen it in the daytime with sunlight bouncing off of the metal roofs of Pop Dupree's and the Adults Only freak tent or at night with the magical lights blazing lazily around on the Ferris wheel and bulbs flashing crazily in single file, creating a racing form of neon display up and down the hills of the 100 foot high SkyCoaster.

There were no lights that night, however. No lights, no moon, no light clouds, zilchamundo. Brant had stopped on the way to pick up a couple of his friends from the White Dragons. The Dragons were a street gang that held a high position in the field of respect with all wise kids back then, and luckily they brought spare flashlights, matches for their cigarettes, and 5-inch steel Randell switchblades

(in case some maniacal drunk or thug was claiming the park space as a home base for his operations).

Both of the White Dragon members appeared to be gods in the eyes of all of us that evening - their hair slicked back to their scalps James Dean style, black leather jackets with pale, fire breathing dragons on them, a general air of confidence and security beaming off them as if they were more protective beacons for us than general good company joining us in the daredevil fun.

Five more members of the Dragons were to meet us after a field party they were having up on Grange's Point. Brant hadn't let us in on that fact at first, but when I found out they were supposed to meet us at the front gate at 12:30. more confidence rose in me, and it began to feel more like we were heading toward a late game of craps or penny ante poker instead of a 100 foot climb on slick poles. What we didn't know was that they were practically carrying the party with them, each with a bottle of Jack Daniel's Black label, or Southern Comfort, or Everclear, and each was singing in rickety unison the agonizing 75th stanza to "99 Bottles of Beer."

Excitement heaved up my chest to my throat as we approached the outer gate, and I can still remember how mystic and strange the park looked in the dark night air. The chain fence stretched onward in both directions to what seemed infinity, sealing us out from its unknown hidden powers, and I recall that it almost seemed that it was shielding Skybar inside, preventing it from wielding its wrath on the innocent people living outside its domain. Once you crossed the barrier, however, there was no turning back. Here was where the two worlds divided, and the choice was made - pussy or man.

Everybody was anxious to get inside the park's gates to prove where he stood. With the gang you felt cold and nervous while awaiting the wrath of whatever might be lurking inside-but outside, the chances of surviving any lurking danger alone made you even more nervous-jittery enough to crawl up into a ball and piss your pants at every crack of a twig.

So, you see, it's not that we all wanted to go inside. But even if we were scared to death of climbing the cold rails of the SkyCoaster, staying alone while the rest of the bunch climbed over and ventured inside was even worse than the original dare itself. Surprisingly enough, Kirby was the first one up the fence to lay his jacket across the barbed wire and hop to the soft asphalt of Skybar on the other side. The rest of us followed, thud, sputt, thud sounding through the night air as we each dropped to the ground on the other side. We were in now. Eddie Frachers, the shorter of the two White Dragons, lit up a smoke, flicked on the flashlight, and led the way with Brant.

The station was empty when we got to the steel rails of the coaster, and climbing the steps to the gate station was an unusual experience in itself since there was no waiting in line for an hour while an old man standing in front of you blew cigarette fumes in your face in the riding hot sun as your stomach turned putred, your facial skin pale. Now it was home free between the coaster and us, free space all the way.

Hurry hurry step right up!

The metal floor thundered hundreds of beats under our feet as we made our way across the vacant station to the terminal gates, and I looked several times over my shoulder as we walked the deserted leading board, my senses ready for anything that might decide to go more than "bump" in the night. I was the first one to hear it, in fact, and my body grew limp, my bowels limp with it when I heard the direction it was coming from - the coaster cars.

They all sat in front of us, grey and orange from rust and age, their silent features corrupting the night with an evil air, and I recall standing there as the others began to hear it too, my hands shaking, legs drooping, mouth hanging open stupidly as I attempted to say something - I don't know what - and nothing would come out.

I don't know how long we all stood there, waiting for something, anything to happen. The cars seemed mystic in their own way as they stood their ground and refused to let us any nearer by chanting

some evil spell among themselves to keep us back. A spell is one thing, but if you've ever thought you heard a car (or possibly some dangerous lunatic hiding behind a car) singing something, you'd understand how we all felt that night. Even Brant and the two White Dragons appeared motionless in the soft glow from the flashlight, but somehow Eddie brought the flashlight up to meet whatever was occupying the first car.

"Hey! Turn it off damnit!"

A surge of relief at its at least being human swelled up in me, but I still stood there, motionless and quivering, even as Eddie and the rest of the bunch, even Kirby, started toward the coaster. I must have still been in a daze, because I found myself wanting to stop them, to pull them back to me, to end it all, turn around and get the hell back over the fence. But I still stood there as fog rolled around my eyes and my sight blurred, leaving only my ears to tell me the horrible fate of our party.

"What the hell are you..." ". . . are you sure that it's them ..." "What are they doing here like this..." A long, ear-piercing scream followed, the kind women usually scream in those horror movies at Starboard Cinema when the vampire wraps his cape around his victim and starts sucking the living blood out of her. It rose to almost unbelievable splitting levels then faded away with suppressed laughter followed by "59 bottles of beer on the wall, 59 bottles of beer..."

A hand touched my shoulder and I reeled to find Kirby at my feet, telling me that the other guys had gone ahead without me and I'd better hurry up. I ran and caught up with them by the main track, where they had already begun the climb. Brant was first, then the White Dragons, and then Dewey and John, clinging tightly to the steel tracks behind them. I ran the 20 feet to the final, highest 100 foot drop, and started up after them.

The cold steel rails clapped clamily into my skin as I started shinnying up, looking to where Brant and the Dragons were perched

high above. I couldn't weigh the amount of energy I had left to figure how I was gonna climb 100 fucking feet barehanded. It's kind of like that joke about the little ant crawling up the elephant's hind leg with rape on its mind. I probably wouldn't make it, but I had high hopes.

Kirby never touched the rails. I couldn't blame him after the train event, maybe something happened to him when he was younger, or something. Kirby told me a lot of things best left confidential, but he never told me anything about it either. He may not have wanted to climb, but to me he was no pussy.

A lot of things go through your mind when you're 45 feet off the ground climbing rail by rail on a ladder without rungs. One hundred feet of sheer pole climbing with occasional crosspieces to hang on to isn't much, and you begin to wonder, What if Dewey slips and falls into me? What if I lose my grip and sail to the bottom? How will I get down once I'm up there? Can drunk Dragons fly? And then you look at the bottom, and all of your fears are summed up in one phrase:

Don't look down.

Hand over hand, pull over pull, I made my way upward, trusting that the pace of those above me wasn't too slow. I never really looked up to where Brant and his friends were while I was climbing. Even to this day I remember the blackness of the night sky mixing well with my own blackout as I shut my eyes tightly to the things around me. I was climbing to the top, and I just couldn't stop. Hand over hand. That's when the screaming started, loud and forceful, over and over, with an occasional splashing behind it as if someone below were enjoying a late night swim and horseplay in the murky pond. Ignoring my own rule, I shot a glance down.

God, how weird it looked. If you've ever been on a roller coaster right as it goes down the steepest slope, you can understand the feeling; the depth, the rails shooting together as they plummet below right as you drop over the top. Imagine yourself frozen in that position. Below, the rails meet and your stomach assumes a new position in your throat. And standing on those gleaming rails, still holding

Eddie's flashlight and stained with the dark was Kirby, gazing back up at me, a look of confusion, horror and what to do next? written across his face. He scared the hell out of me the way he just stood there, arms at his side, staring at me but saying nothing.

"What the hell's the matter with you?" I shouted down with extra force. No answer. "Kirby, what's wrong?" By then I knew damn well what was wrong. The tracks had begun to drum under my hands, and the frame of the SkyCoaster itself had begun to sway rhythmically from side to side. Then the awful sound of the roar of a coaster car spinning around some distant bend, fading out, then coming back in, fading out again-and coming back with thunderous racket that sent my stomach and my heart both jumping on top of my tonsils.

Then Brant screamed. It was like the scream of a woman's that I described earlier, but louder, blending in with the steady clack-clack-clack of a chain-dragged coaster car on an electrified track. I didn't ask any questions, but simply locked both hands together, swung both feet together and slid down the rail to the bottom.

If you've ever been on a roller car as it plummets the final hill - the Granddaddy drop - you'll probably know the feeling of fear that builds up in you. There's always a chance that you may fly from the car to the steel tracks below as the force presses your spine against the back cover and shakes you with head-splitting strength to the bottom. There was no car for me to ride in that night -no seat, no belt, no safety bar to pull against my slumped torso. And as I sailed to the bottom, my mind made a different rule that I was forced to follow - Don't look.

The wind stopped suddenly in my hair, and I realized that I was down on the bottom rails of the coaster, hanging dreadfully close to the murky waters of Skybar Pond. And as I hung there momentarily I could picture Randy Stayner waiting below, a mossy green hand beginning to emerge to the surface, and as I imagined this, I also visualized others like him in a sea of arms, reaching for my dangling shirt tail as I hung there, all of them coming up to the surface to get

me, or desperately reaching out as they were dragged down. A splurge of violent bubbling water popped to the surface, jolting me back to Skybar and, getting to my feet, I pulled myself to the shore and somehow managed to pull Kirby with me. He was still standing in a daze, eyes fixed on the tracks where the coaster car was falling toward us.

And as we ran through the depot station past the empty coaster cars, I could hear the steady thud-thud-thud of the one car advancing on us. I shot a glance over my shoulder as we both ran on, my feet and eyes growing with every step.

Then I let go of Kirby. I can't clearly remember when, but I remember all that ran through my mind was Run Like Hell! I flew up the chain link fence behind Pop Dupree's, cutting my hands severely on the barbed wire. After jumping to the safe ground on the other side, I didn't stop running until I was almost a mile away on Granges Point, where I could still hear the soft screaming laughter of the seabreeze through the Funhouse clown, and could see the vague form of the SkyCoaster winding through the trees. Somewhere behind one of the tents - I can still swear it was the freak tent - a light glowed softly. I sat there, staring at it, wondering if it was Kirby trying to find his way out of the dark. Then I heard the cracking grass of footsteps behind me and whirled to find Kirby standing in front of me. My legs were shaking, and my teeth began to chatter softly, and he walked up to me and put his arm around me.

"It's okay. We made it. We're pretty brave, huh? Right up and right down those rails. We're far away from it now, though. We're not there now" I stared at him and wondered how the hell he got there. I couldn't recall dragging him with me. I couldn't believe how calm he stood there-how he acted like it was all a scary movie at Starboard Cinema and we were walking home in the dark trying to calm ourselves down. Then he turned me toward the park and started to walk away.

"Coming?" "Kirb, you're headin' the wrong way."

I turned toward home and started to run again. After a while. Kirby came running up to me, and we didn't stop until we were five miles away from Skybar and on my front porch. I can still see the horror in poor Kirby's eyes as he saw his best friends and the Dragons drop to death before him. Even after seeing that smiling, rotting freak clambering from behind the safety bar of the coaster car that had rolled over Brant and the others, he stuck with me at the bottom and didn't run. The only ones who acted as bravely as Kirby were the drunk Dragons who jumped at the first sight of the coaster car coming toward them. Maybe it was bravery, maybe it was the liquor, but it doesn't matter because the 100 foot dive to the pond was a mistake either way. Brant and the rest may have tried to slide, but they never made it to safety and the authorities still haven't pulled their bodies from the murky pond waters to this day.

And still, in my dreams, I feel Kirby taking my hand and telling me it was okay; we were safe, we were home free. And then I heard the thud-thud-thud of a single SkyCoaster car rolling toward us. I want to tell Kirby not to look -"Don't look, man!" I scream, but the words won't come out. He does look. And as the car rolls up to the deserted station, we see Randy Stayner lolling behind the safety bar, his head driven almost into his chest. The fun-house clown begins to scream laughter somewhere behind us, and Kirby begins to scream with it. I try to run, but my feet tangle in each other and I fall, sprawling. Behind me I can see Randy's corpse pushing the safety bar back and he begins to stumble toward me, his dead, shredded fingers hooked into seeking claws. I see these things in my dreams, and in the moments before I wake, screaming, in my wife's arms, I know what the grown-ups must have seen that summer in the freak tent that was for Adults Only. I see these things in my dreams, yes, but when I visit Kirby in that place where he still lives, that place where all the windows are cross-hatched with heavy mesh, I see them in his eyes. I take his hand and his hand is cold, but I sit with him and sometimes I think: These things happened to me when I was young.

SLADE

Stephen King

It was almost dark when Slade rode into Dead Steer Springs. He was tall in the saddle, a grim faced man dressed all in black. Even the handles of his two sinister .45s, which rode low on his hips, were black. Ever since the early 1870s, when the name of Slade had begun to strike fear into the stoutest of Western hearts, there had been many whispered legends about his dress. One story had it that he wore black as a perpetual emblem of mourning for his Illinois sweetheart, Miss Polly Peachtree of Paduka, who passed tragically from this vale of tears when a flaming Montgolfer balloon crashed into the Peachtree barn while Polly was milking the cows. But some said he wore black because Slade was the Grim Reaper's agent in the American Southwest - the devil's handyman. And then there were some who thought he was queerer than a three-dollar bill. No one, however, advanced this last idea to his face.

Now Slade halted his huge black stallion in front of the Brass Cuspidor Saloon and climbed down. He tied his horse and pulled one of his famous Mexican cigars from his breast pocket. He lit it and let the acrid smoke drift out onto the twilight air. From inside the batwing doors of the Brass Cuspidor came noises of drunken revelry. A honkytonk piano was beating out "Oh, Them Golden Slippers."

A faint shuffling noise came to Slade's keen ears, and he wheeled around, drawing both of his sinister .45s in a single blur of motion

"Watch it there, mister!"

Slade shovelled his pistols back into their holsters with a snarl of contempt. It was an old man in a battered Confederate cap, dusty jeans and suspenders. Either the town drunk or the village idiot, Slade surmised. The old man cackled, sending a wave of bad breath over to Slade. "Thought you wuz gonna hole me fer sure, Stranger."

Slade smoked and looked at him.

"Yore Jack Slade, ain'tchee, Pard?" The old man showed his toothless gums in another smile. "Reckon Miss Sandra of the Bar-T

hired you, that right? She's been havin' a passel of trouble with Sam Columbine since her daddy died an' left her to run the place."

Slade smoked and looked at him. - The old man suddenly rolled his eyes. "Or mebbe yore workin' fer Sam Columbine hisseif - that it? I heer he's been hiring a lot of real hardcases to help pry Miss Sandra off'n the Bar-T. Is that-"

"Old man," Slade said, "I hope you run as fast as you talk. Because if you don't, you're gonna be takin' from a plot six feet long an' three wide."

The old sourdough grimaced with sudden fear. "You-you wouldn't-"

Slade drew one sinister .45.

The old geezer started to run in grotesque flying hops. Slade sighted carefully along the barrel of his sinister .45 and winged him once for luck. Then he dropped his gun back into its holster, turned and strode into the Brass Cuspidor, pushing the batwing doors wide.

Every eye in the place turned to stare at him. Faces went white. The bartender dropped the knife he was using to cut off the foamy beer heads. The fancy dan gambler at the back table dropped three aces out of his sleeve - two of them were clubs. The piano player fell off his stool, scrambled up, and ran out the back door. The bartender's dog, General Custer, whined and crawled under the card table. And standing at the bar, calmly downing a straight shot of whiskey, was John "The Backshooter" Parkinan, one of Sam Columbine's top guns.

A horrified whisper ran through the crowd. "Slade!" "It's Jack Slade!" "It's Slade!"

There was a sudden general rush for the doors. Outside someone ran down the street, screaming.

“Slade’s in town! Lock yore doors! Jack Slade is in town an’ God help whoever he’s after!”

“Parkman!” Slade gritted.

Parkman turned to face Slade. He was chewing a match between his ugly snagged teeth, and one hand hovered over the notched butt of his sinister .41.

“What’re you doin’ in Dead Steer, Slade?”

“I’m working fer a sweet lady name of Sandra Dawson,” Slade said laconically. “How about yoreself, ‘Backshooter’?”

“Workin’ fer Sam Columbine, an’ go to hell if you don’t like the sound of it, Pard.”

“I don’t,” Slade growled, and threw away his cigar. The bartender, who was trying to dig a hole in the floor, moaned.

“They say yer fast, Slade.”

“Fast enough.”

Backshooter grinned evilly. “They also say yore queerer’n a three dollar bill.”

“Fill yore hand, you slimy, snaky son of a bitch!” Slade yelled

‘The Backshooter’ went for his gun, but before he had even touched the handle both of Slade’s sinister .45s were out and belching lead. ‘Backshooter’ was thrown back against the bar, where he crumpled.

Slade re-holstered his guns and walked over to Parkman, his spurs jingling. He looked down at him. Slade was a peace-loving man at heart, and what was more peace-loving than a dead body? The thought filled him with quiet joy and a sad yearning for his childhood sweetheart, Miss Polly Peachtree of Paduka, Illinois.

The bartender hurried around the bar and looked at the earthly remains of John 'The

Backshooter' Parkman.

"It ain't possible!" He breathed. "Shot in the heart six times and you could cover all six holes with a twenty-dollar gold piece!"

Slade pulled one of his famous Mexican cigars from his breast pocket and lit up. "Better call the undertaker an' cart him out afore he stinks."

The bartender gave Slade a nervous grin and rushed out through the batwings. Slade went behind the bar, poured himself a shot of Digger's Rye(190 proof), and thought about the lonely life of a gun for hire. Every man's hand turned against you, never sure if the deck was loaded, always expecting a bullet in the back or the gall bladder, which was even worse. It was sure hard to do your business with a bullet in the gall bladder. The batwing doors of the Brass Cuspidor were thrown open, and Slade drew both of his sinister .45s with a quick, flowing motion. But it was a girl - a beautiful blonde with a shape which would have made Ponce de Leon forget about the fountain of youth - Hubba-hubba, Slade thought to himself.

His lips twisted into a thin, lonely smile as he re-holstered his guns. Such a girl was not for him, he was true - to the memory of Polly Peachtree, his one true love.

"Are you Jack Slade?" The blonde asked, parting her lovely red lips, which were the color of cherry blossoms in the month of May.

"Yes ma'am," Slade said, knocking off his shot of Digger's Rye and pouring another.

"I'm Sandra Dawson," she said, coming over to the bar.

"I figgered," Slade said.

Sandra came forward and looked down at the sprawled body of John
“The Backshooter”

Parkman with burning eyes. “This is one of the men that murdered
my father!” She cried

“One of the low, murdering swine that Sam Columbine hired!”

“I reckon,” Slade said.

Sandra Dawson’s bosom heaved. Slade was keeping an eye on it,
just for safety’s sake.

“Did you dispatch him, Mr. Slade?”

“I shore did, ma’am. And it was my pleasure.”

Sandra threw her arms around Slade’s neck and kissed him, her full
lips burning against his own. “You’re the man I’ve been looking for,”
she breathed, her heart racing. “Anything I can do to help you,
Slade, anything -”

Slade shoved her away and drew deeply on his famous Mexican
cigar to regain his composure. “Reckon you took me wrong, ma’am.
I’m bein’ true to the memory of my one true love, Miss Polly
Peachtree of Paduka, Illinois. But anything I can do to help you -”

“You can, you can!” She breathed. “That’s why I wrote you. Sam
Columbine is trying to take over my ranch, the Bar-T! He murdered
my father, and now he’s trying to scare me off the land so he can buy
it cheap and sell it dear when the Great Southwestern Railroad
decides to put a branch line through here! He’s hired a lot of
hardcases like this one-” she prodded

“The Backshooter” with the toe of of her shoe- “and he’s trying to
scare me out!” She looked at Slade pleadingly. “Can you help me?”

“I reckon so,” Slade said. “Just don’t get yore bowels in an uproar,
ma’am.”

“Oh, Slade!” She whispered. She was just melting into his arms when the bartender rushed back into the saloon, with the undertaker in tow. By this time the bartender’s dog, General Custer, had crawled out from under the card table and was eating John “The Backshooter”

Parkman’s vest.

“Miss Dawson! Miss Dawson!” The bartender yelled. “Mose Hart, yore top hand, just rode into town! He says the Bar-T bunkhouse is on fire!”

But before Sandra Dawson could reply, Slade was on his way. Before a minute had passed, he was galloping toward the fire at Sandra Dawson’s Bar-T ranch.

Slade’s huge black stallion, Stokely, carried him rapidly up Winding Bluff Road toward the sinister fire glow on the horizon. As he rode, a grim determination settled over him like warm butter. To find Sam Columbine and put a crimp in his style!

When he arrived at Sandra Dawson’s Bar-T ranch the bunkhouse was a red ball of flame.

And standing in front of it, laughing evilly, were three of Sam Columbine’s gunmen—Sunrise Jackson, Shifty Jack Mulloy, and Doc Logan. Doc Logan himself was rumored to have sent twelve sheep-ranchers to Boot Hill in the bloody Abeliene range war. But at that time Slade had been spending his days in a beautiful daze with his one true love, Miss Polly Peachtree of Paduka, Illinois. She had since been killed in a dreadful accident, and now Slade was cold steel and hot blood - not to mention his silk underwear with the pretty blue flowers.

He climbed down from his stallion and pulled one of his famous Mexican cigars from his pocket. “What’re you boys doin’ here?” He asked calmly.

“Havin’ a little clambake!” Sunrise Jackson said, dropping one hand to the butt of his sinister .50 caliber horse-pistol. “Maw, haw-, haw!”, A wounded cowpoke ran out of the red-flickering shadows. “They put fire to the bunkhouse!” He said. “That one—” he pointed at Doc Logan—“said they wuz doin’ it on the orders of that murderin’ skunk Sam Columbine!”

Doc Logan pulled leather and blew three new holes in the wounded cowpoke, who flopped.

“Thought he looked hot from all that fire,” Doc told Slade, “so I ventilated him.

Haw’, ‘haw, haw!”

“You can always tell a low murderin’ puckerbelly by the way he laughs,” Slade said, dropping his hands over the butts of his sinister .45s.

“Is that right?” Doc said. “How do they laugh?”

“Haw, haw, haw,” Slade gritted.

“Pull leather, you Republican skunk!” Shifty Jack Mulloy yelled, and went for his gun, Slade yanked both of his sinister .45s out in a smooth sweep and blasted Shifty Jack before Mulloy’s

piece had even cleared leather. Sunrise Jackson was already blasting away, and Slade felt a bullet shave by his temple. Slade hit the dirt and let Jackson have it. He took two steps

backward and fell over, dead as a turtle with smallpox.

But Doc Logan was running. He vaulted into the saddle of an Indian pony with a shifty eye and slapped its flank. Slade squeezed off two shots at him, but the light was tricky, Logan’s pony jumped the shakepole fence and was gone into the darkness - to report back to Sam Columbine, no doubt.

Slade walked over to Sunrise Jackson and rolled him over with his boot. Jackson had a hole right between the eyes. Then he went over to Shifty Jack Mulloy, who was gasping his last.

“You got me, Pard!” Shifty Jack gasped. “I feel worse’n a turtle with smallpox”

‘You never shoulda called me a Republican.” Slade snarled down at him. He showed Shifty Jack his Gene McCarthy button and then blasted him.

Slade holstered his sinister .45 and threw away the smoldering butt of his famous Mexican cigar. He started toward the darkened ranch-house to make sure that no more of Sam Columbine’s men were lurking within. He was almost there when the front door was ripped open and someone ran out.

Slade drew in one lightning movement and blasted away, the gunflashes from the barrels of his sinister .45 lighting the dark with bright flashes. Slade walked over and lit a match. He had bagged Sing-Loo, the Chinese cook.

“Well,” Slade said sadly, holstering his gun and feeling a great wave of longing for his one true love, Miss Polly Peachtree of Paduka, “I guess you can’t win them all.”

He started to reach for another famous Mexican cigar, changed his mind and rolled a joint.

After he had begun to see all sorts of interesting blue and green lights in the sky, he climbed back on his sinister black scallion and started towards Dead Steer Springs.

When he got back to the Brass Cuspidor saloon, Mose Hart, the top hand at the Bar-T

rushed out, holding a bottle of Digger’s Rye in one hand, with which he had been soothing his jangled nerves.

“Slade!” He yelled. “Miss Dawson’s been kidnapped by Sam Columbine!”

Slade got down from his huge black stallion, Stokely, and lit up a famous Mexican cigar. He was still brooding over Sing-Loo, the Chinese cook at the Bar-T, who he had drilled by mistake.

“Ain’t you going after her?” Hart asked, his eyes rolling wildly. “Sam Columbine may try to rape her - or even rob her! Ain’t you gonna get on their trail?”

“Right now,” Slade snarled, “I’m gonna check into the Dead Steer Springs Hotel and catch a good night’s sleep. Since I got to this damn town I have had to blast three gunslingers and one Chinese cook and I’m mighty tired.”

‘Yeah,” Hart said sympathetically, “It must really make you feel turrible, havin’ snuffed out four human lives in the space of six hours.”

“That’s right,” Slade said, tying Stokely to the hitching rack, “And I got blisters on my trigger

finger. Do you know where I could get some Solarcaine?”

Hart shook his head, and so Slade started down towards the hotel, his spurs jingling below the heels of his Bonanza cowboy boots (they had elevator lifts inside the heels, Slade was very sensitive about his height). When old men and pregnant ladies saw him coming they took to the other side of the street. One small boy came up and asked for his autograph.

Slade, who didn’t want to encourage that sort of thing, shot him in the leg and walked on.

At the hotel he asked for a room, and the trembling clerk said the second floor suite was available, and Slade went up. He undressed,

then put his boots on again, and climbed into bed. He was asleep in moments.

Around one in the morning, while Slade was dreaming sweetly of his childhood sweetheart Miss Polly Paduka of Peachtree, Illinois, the window was eased up little by little, without even a squeak to alert Slade's keen ears. The shape that crept in was frightful indeed - for if Jack Slade was the most feared gunslinger in the American Southwest, the Hunchback Fred Agnew was the most detested killer. He was a two foot three inch midget with a hump big enough for a camel halfway down his crooked back. In one hand he held a three foot Arabian skinning knife (and although Hunchback Fred had never skinned an Arab with it, he was known to have put it to work changing the faces of three U.S. marshals, two county sheriffs and an old lady from Boston on the way to Arizona to recuperate from Parkinson's disease). In the other hand he held a large box made of woven river reeds.

He slid across the floor in utter silence, holding his Arabian skinning knife ready, should Slade awake. Then he carefully put the box down on the chair by the bed. Grinning fiendishly, he opened the lid and pulled out a twelve-foot python named Sadie Hawkins.

Sadie had been Hunchback Fred's bosom companion for the last twelve years, and had saved the terrifying little man from death many times.

"Do your stuff, hon." Fred whispered affectionately. Sadie seemed to almost grin at him as Hunchback Fred kissed her on her dead black mouth. The snake slid onto the bed and began to crawl towards Slade's head. Giggling fiendishly, Hunchback Fred retreated to the corner to watch the fun.

Sadie wiggled in slow S-curves up the side of the bed, and drew back to strike. In that instant, the faint hiss of scales on the sheet came to Slade's ears.

A woman was in bed with him! That was his first thought as he rolled off the bed and onto the floor, grabbing for the sinister derringer that was always strapped to his right calf. Sadie struck at the pillow where his head had been only a second before. Hunchback Fred screamed with disappointment and threw his three-foot Arabian skinning knife, which nicked the corner of one of Slade's earlobes and quivered in the floor.

Slade fired the derringer and Hunchback Fred fell back against the wall, knocking the picture Niagara Falls off the dresser. His sinister career was at an end.

Carefully avoiding the python (which seemed to have gone to sleep on the bed), Slade got dressed. It was time to go out to Sam Columbine's ranch and put an end to that slimy coyote once and for all.

Strapping on the twin gunbelts of his sinister .45s, Slade went downstairs. The desk clerk looked at him even more nervously than before. "D-did I hear a shot?" He asked.

"Don't think so," Slade said, "But you better go up and close the window by the bed. I left it open -"

"Yessir, Mr. Slade. Of course. Of course."

And then Slade was off, grimly determined to find Sam Columbine and put a crimp in his style once and for all.

Slade shoved his way into the Brass Cuspidor where the foreman of Sandra Dawson's Bar-T, Mose Hart, was leaning over the bar with a bottle of Digger's Rye (206 proof) in one hand.

"Okay, you slimy drunkard," Slade gritted, pulling Hart around and yanking the bottle out of his hand. "Where is Sam Columbine's ranch? I'm going to get that rotten liver-eater, he just sent Hunchback Fred Agnew up against me."

“Hunchback Fred?!” Hart gasped, going white as a sheet. “And you’re still alive?”

“I filled him full of lead,” Slade said grimly. “He should have known that putting a snake in my bed was a no-no.”

“Hunchback Fred Agnew,” Hart whispered, still awed, “There was talk that he might be the next Vice President of the American Southwest.”

Slade let go of a grating laugh that even made the bartenders dog, General Custer, cringe.

“W’ell I reckon that now he can be Vice President of Hell!” Slade proclaimed. He motioned to the bartender, who was standing at the far end of the bar reading a western novel.

“Bartender! What have you got for mixed drinks?”

The bartender approached cautiously, tucking the dog-eared copy of Blood Brides of Sitting Bull into his back pocket. “

Wal, Mr. Slade, we got about the usual - The Geronimo, The Fort Bragg Backbreaker, Popskull Pete, Sourdough Armpit -”

“How about a shot of Digger’s Rye (206 proof)?” Mose Hart said with a glassy grin.

“Shut up,” Slade growled. He turned to the bartender and drew one of his sinister .45s.

“If you don’t produce a drink that I ain’t never had before, friend, you’re gonna be pushing up daisies before dawn.”

The bartender went white, “W-well, we do have drink of my own invention, Mr. Slade. But it’s so potent that I done stopped serving them. I got plumb tired of having people pass out on the roulette wheel”

“What’s it called?”

“We call it a zombie,” the bartender said.

“Well mix me up three of them and make it fast!” Slade commanded.

“Three zombies?” Mose Hart said with popping eyes. “M’God, are you crazy?”

Slade turned to him coldly “Friend, smile when you say that.”

Hart smiled and took another drink of Digger’s Rye.

“Okay,” Slade said, when the three drinks had been placed in front of him. They came in huge beer steins and smelled like the wrath of God. He drained the first one at a single draught, blew out his breath, staggered a little, and lit one of his famous Mexican cigars.

Then he turned to Mose.

“Now just where is Sam Columbine’s ranch?” He asked.

“Three miles west and across the ford,” Mose said. “It’s called the Rotten Vulture Ranch”

“That figursh,” Slade said, draining his second drink to the ice-cubes. He was beginning to feel a trifle woozy. It probably had something to do with the lateness of the hour, he thought, and began to work on his third drink.

“Say -” Mose Hart said timidly, “I don’t really think you’re in any shape to go up against Sam Columbine, Slade. He’s apt to put a crimp in your style.”

“Doan tell me w’hat to do,” Slade, swaggering over to pat General Custer. He breathed in the dog’s face and General Custer promptly went to sleep. “If there’sh one thing that I can do, it’s lick my holder, I mean hold my liquor. Ho get out of my way before I blon you in tno.”

“The door’s out the other way,” the bartender said cautiously.

“Coursh it is. You think I doan tinow where I’m goin’?”

Slade staggered across the bar, stepping on General Custer’s tail (the dog didn’t wake up) and managed to make his way out through the batwing doors where he almost fell off the sidewalk. Just then a steely arm clamped his elbow. Slade looked around blearily.

“I’m Deputy Marshall Hoagy Charmichael,” the stranger said, “and rm taking yuh in-”

“On what charge?” Slade asked.

“Public intoxication. Now let’s go.”

Slade burped. “Everything happen’sh to me,” he groaned. The two of them started off for the Dead Steer Springs jail.

After Slade was sprung from the pokey, Sandra Dawson’s top hand, Mose Hart, went his bail. Slade filled both Hart an Deputy Marshall Hoagy Charmichael full of lead (blame it on his terrible hangover). Then, mounting his huge black stallion, Stokely, Slade made it out to the Rotten Vulture Ranch to have it out once an for all with Sam Columbine.

But Columbine was not there. He was off torturing ex border guards, leaving Sandra Dawson under the watch of three trusted henchmen - Big Fran Nixon, “Quick Draw” John Mitchell, and Shifty Ron Ziegfeld. After a heated shootout, Slade dropped al three of them in

their slimy tracks and freed the fair Sandra.

The acrid, choking smell of gunsmoke filled the room where the lovely Sandra Dawson had been held prisoner. As she saw Slade standing tall and victorious, with a sinister .45 in each hand and a Mexican cigar clenched between his teeth, her eyes filled with love and passion.

“Slade!” she cried, jumping to her feet and running to him. “I’m saved! Thank heaven! When Sam Columbine got back from torturing the Mexican border guards, he was going to feed me to his alligators! You came just in time!”

“Damn right,” Slade gritted. “I always do. Steve King sees to that.”

Her firm, supple, silken fleshed body swooned into his arms, and her lush lips sought Slade’s mouth with ripe humid passion. Slade promptly clubbed her over the head with one sinister .45 and threw his Mexican cigar away, a snarl pulling at his lips.

“Watch it,” he growled “my mom told me about girls like you.”

And he strode off to find Sam Columbine.

Slade strode out of the bunk-room leaving Sandra Dawson in the smoke-filled chamber to rub the bump on her head where he had clouted her with the barrel of his sinister .45. He mounted his huge black stallion, Stokely, and headed for the border, where Sam Columbine was torturing Mexican customs men with the help of his A No.1 Top Gun - “Pinky” Lee. The only two men in the American Southwest that could ever approach “Pinky” for pure, dad-ratted evil were Hunchback Fred Agnew (who Slade gunned down three weeks ago) and Sam Columbine himself. “Pinky” had gotten his infamous nickname during the Civil War when he rode with Captain Quantrill and his Regulators. While passed out in the kitchen of a fancy bordello in Bleeding Heart, Kansas, a Union officer named Randolph P. Sorghum dropped a homemade bomb down the kitchen chimney. “Pinky” lost all his hair, his eyebrows, and all the fingers on his left hand, except for the forth, and smallest. His hair and eyebrows grew back. His fingers did not. He has, however, still faster than greased lightning and meaner than hell. He had sworn to find Randolph P. Sorghum some day and stake him over the nearest anthill.

But Slade was not worried about Lee, because his heart was pure and his strength was as ten.

In a short time the agonized screams of the Mexican customs officials told him he was nearing the border. He dismounted, tied Stokely to a parking-meter and advanced through the sagebrush as noiselessly as a cat. The night was dark and moonless.

“No More! amigo!” The guard was screaming. “I confess! I confess! I am - who am I?”

“Fergetful bastid, ain’t ye?” Pinky said. “Yore Randolph P. Sorghum, the sneakun’ low life that blew off 90% 0’ my hand durin’ the Civil War.”

“I admit it! I admit it!”

Slade had crept close enough now to see what was happening. Lee had the customs official tied to a straight-backed chair, with his bare feet on a hassock. Both feet were coated with honey and Lee’s trained bear, Whomper, was licking it off with his long tongue.

“I can’t stand it!” The guard screamed. “I am theese whatyoumacalluma, Sorghum!”

“Caught you at last!” Lee gloated. He pulled out his sinister Buntline Special and prepared to blow the poor old fellow all the way to Trinidad. Sam Columbine, who was standing far back in the shadows, was ready to bring in the next guard.

Slade stood up suddenly. “Okay, you two skulkin’ varmits! Hold it right there!”

Pinky Lee dropped to his chest, fanning the hammer of his sinister Buntline Special. Slade felt bullets race all around him. He fired back twice, but curse it - the hammers of his two sinister .45s only clicked on empty chambers. He had forgotten to load up after downing the three badmen back at the Rotten Vulture.

Lee rolled to cover behind a barrel of taco chips. Columbine was already crouched behind a giant bottle of mayonnaise that had been

air-dropped a month before after the worst flood disaster in American Southwest history (why drop mayonnaise after a disaster? None of your damn business).

“Who’s that out there?” Lee yelled.

Slade thought quickly. “It’s Randolph P. Sorghum” Hh cried. “The real McCoy, Lee! And this time I’m gunna blow off more than three fingers!”

His crafty challenge had the desired effect. Pinky rushed rashly (or rashly rushed if you preferred) from cover, his sinister Buntline Special blazing. “I’ll blow ya apart!” he yelled “I’ll

-”

But at that moment Slade carefully put a bullet through his head. Pinky Lee flopped, his evil days done.

“Lee?” Sam Columbine called. “Pinky: You out there:” A craven cowardly note had crept into his voice. “I just dropped him, Columbine!” Slade yelled. “And now it’s just you and me...and I’m comin’ to get you!”

sinister .45s blazing, a Mexican cigar clamped between his teeth, Slade started down the hill after Sam Columbine.

Halfway down the slope, Sam Columbine let loose such a volley of shots that Slade had to duck behind a barrel cactus. He could not get off a clear shot at Columbine because the wily villain had hidden behind a convenient, giant bottle of mayonnaise.

“Slade!” Columbine yelled. “It’s time we settled this like men! Holster yore gun and I’ll holster mine! Then we’ll come out an’ draw! The better man will walk away!”

“Okay, you lowdown sidewinder!” Slade yelled back. He holstered his sinister .45s and stepped out from behind the barrel cactus.

Columbine stepped out from behind the bottle of mayonnaise. He was a tall man with an olive complexion and an evil grin. His hand hovered over the barrel of the sinister Smith & Wesson pistol that hung on his hip.

“Well, this is it, pard!” Slade sneered. There was a Mexican cigar clamped between his teeth as he started to walk toward Columbine. “Say hello to everyone in hell for me, Columbine!”

“We’ll see,” Columbine sneered back, but his knees were knocking as he halted, ready for the showdown.

“Okay!” Slade called. “Go fer yore gun!”

“Wait,” Someone screamed. “Wait, wait, WAIT!”

They both stared. It was Sandra Dawson! She was running toward them breathless.

“Slade!” She cried. “Slade!”

“Get down!” Slade growled. “Sam Columbine is-”

“I had to tell you, Slade! I couldn’t let you go off, maybe to get killed! And you’d never know!”

“Know what?” Slade asked.

“That I’m Polly Peachtree!”

Slade gaped at her. “But you can’t be Polly Peachtree! She was my one true love and she was killed by a flaming Montgolfer balloon while milking the cows!”

“I escaped but I had amnesia!” She cried. “It’s all just come back to me tonight. Look!” And she pulled off a blond wig she had been wearing. She was indeed the beautiful Polly Peachtree of Paduka, returned from the dead!

“POLLY!!!”

“SLADE!!!”

Slade rushed to her and they embraced, Sam Columbine forgotten. Slade was just about to ask her how things were going when Sam Columbine, evil rat that he was, crept up behind him and shot Slade in the back three times.

“Thank God!” Polly whispered as she and Sam embraced “At last, he’s gone and we are free, my darling!”

Yeah,” Sam growled “How are things going Polly?”

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You don’t know how terrible it’s been,” she sobbed “Not only was he killing everybody, but he was queerer than a three-dollar bill.”

“Well it’s over,” Sam said.

“Like fun!” Slade said. He sat up and blasted them both. “Good thing I was wearing my bullet proof underwear,” he said lighting a new Mexican cigar. He stared at the cooling bodies of Sam Columbine and Polly Peachtree, and a great wave of sadness swept over him. He threw away his cigar and lit a joint. Then he walked over to where he had tethered Stokely, his black stallion. He wrapped his arms around Stokely’s neck and held him close.

“At last, darling,” Slade whispered. “We’re alone.”

After a long while, Slade and Stokely rode off into the sunset in search of new adventures.

THE END

“Slade.”TheMaineCampus June-August 1970. “Slade” is in some ways the most exciting of King’s uncollected juvenalia, an engaging explosion of off the wall humor, literary pastiche, and cultural criticism, all masquerading as a Western - the adventures of Slade and his quest for Miss Polly Peachtree of Paduka. Published in several installments in the UMO

college newspaper during the summer following King’s graduation, the story is most important in showing King reveling in the joy of writing.

-excerpt from “The Annotated Guide to Stephen King, p.45.

NIGHTMARES & DREAMSCAPES
SNEAKERS



SNEAKERS

Stephen King

John Tell had been working at Tabori Studios just over a month when he first noticed the sneakers. Tabori was in a building which had once been called Music City and had been, in the early days of rock and roll and top-forty rhythm and blues, a very big deal. Back then you never would have seen a pair of sneakers (unless they were on the feet of a delivery boy) above lobby-level. Those days were gone, though, and so were the big-money producers with their reet pleats and pointy-toed snakeskin shoes. Sneakers were now just another part of the Music City uniform, and when Tell first glimpsed these, he made no negative assumptions about their owner. Well, maybe one: the guy really could have used a new pair. These had been white when they were new, but from the look of them new had been a long time ago.

That was all he noticed when he first saw the sneakers in the little room where you so often ended up judging your neighbor by his footwear because that was all you ever saw of him. Tell spied this pair under the door of the first toilet-stall in the third-floor men's room. He passed them on his way to the third and last stall. He came out a few minutes later, washed and dried his hands, combed his hair, and then went back to Studio F, where he was helping to mix an album by a heavy-metal group called The Dead Beats. To say Tell had already forgotten the sneakers would be an overstatement, because they had hardly registered on his mental radar screen to begin with.

Paul Jannings was producing The Dead Beats' sessions. He wasn't famous in the way the old be-bop kings of Music City had been famous—Tell thought rock-and-roll music was no longer strong enough to breed such mythic royalty—but he was fairly well-known, and Tell himself thought he was the best producer of rock-and-roll records currently active in the field; only Jimmy Iovine could come close.

Tell had first seen him at a party following the premiere of a concert film; had, in fact, recognized him from across the room. The hair was graying now, and the sharp features of Jannings's handsome face

had become almost gaunt, but there was no mistaking the man who had recorded the legendary Tokyo Sessions with Bob Dylan, Eric Clapton, John Lennon, and Al Kooper some fifteen years earlier. Other than Phil Spector, Jannings was the only record producer Tell could have recognized by sight as well as by the distinctive sound of his recordings—crystal-clear top ends underscored by percussion so heavy it shook your clavicle. It was that Don McLean clarity you heard first on the Tokyo Sessions recordings, but if you wiped the treble, what you heard pulsing along through the underbrush was pure Sandy Nelson.

Tell's natural reticence was overcome by admiration and he had crossed the room to where Jannings was standing, temporarily unengaged. He introduced himself, expecting a quick handshake and a few perfunctory words at most. Instead, the two of them had fallen into a long and interesting conversation. They worked in the same field and knew some of the same people, but even then Tell had known there was more to the magic of that initial meeting than those things; Paul Jannings was just one of those rare men to whom he found he could talk, and for John Tell, talking really was akin to magic.

Toward the end of the conversation, Jannings had asked him if he was looking for work.

“Did you ever know anyone in this business who wasn't?” Tell asked.

Jannings laughed and asked for his phone number. Tell had given it to him, not attaching much importance to the request—it was most likely a gesture of politeness on the other man's part, he'd thought. But Jannings had called him three days later to ask if Tell would like to be part of the three-man team mixing The Dead Beats' first album. “I don't know if it's really possible to make a silk purse out of a sow's ear,” Jannings had said, “but since Atlantic Records is footing the bills, why not have a good time trying?” John Tell saw no reason at all why not, and signed on for the cruise immediately.

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A week or so after he first saw the sneakers, Tell saw them again. He only registered the fact that it was the same guy because the sneakers were in the same place—under the door of stall number one in the third-floor men's. There was no question that they were the same ones; white (once, anyway) hightops with dirt in the deep creases. He noticed an empty eyelet and thought, Must not have had your own eyes all the way open when you laced that one up, friend. Then he went on down to the third stall (which he thought of, in some vague way, as "his"). This time he glanced at the sneakers on his way out, as well, and saw something odd when he did: there was a dead fly on one of them. It lay on the rounded toe of the left sneaker, the one with the empty eyelet, with its little legs sticking up.

When he got back to Studio F, Jannings was sitting at the board with his head clutched in his hands.

"You okay, Paul?"

"No."

"What's wrong?"

"Me. I was wrong. I am wrong. My career is finished. I'm washed up. Eighty-sixed. Over-done-with-gone."

"What are you talking about?" Tell looked around for Georgie Ronkler and didn't see him anywhere. It didn't surprise him. Jannings had periodic fugues and Georgie always left when he saw one coming on. He claimed his karma didn't allow him to deal with strong emotion. "I cry at supermarket openings," Georgie said.

"You can't make a silk purse out of a sow's ear," Jannings said. He pointed with his fist at the glass between the mixing room and the performance studio. He looked like a man giving the old Nazi Heil Hitler salute. "At least not out of pigs like those."

"Lighten up," Tell said, although he knew Jannings was perfectly right. The Dead Beats, composed of four dull bastards and one dull

bitch, were personally repulsive and professionally incompetent.

“Lighten this up,” Jannings said, and flipped him the bird.

“God, I hate temperament,” Tell said.

Jannings looked up at him and giggled. A second later they were both laughing. Five minutes after that they were back to work.

The mix—such as it was—ended a week later. Tell asked Jannings for a recommendation and a tape.

“Okay, but you know you’re not supposed to play the tape for anyone until the album comes out,” Jannings said.

“I know.”

“And why you’d ever want to, for anyone, is beyond me. These guys make The Butthole Surfers sound like The Beatles.”

“Come on, Paul, it wasn’t that bad. And even if it was, it’s over.”

He smiled. “Yeah. There’s that. And if I ever work in this business again, I’ll give you a call.”

“That would be great.”

They shook hands. Tell left the building which had once been known as Music City, and the thought of the sneakers under the door of stall number one in the third-floor men’s john never crossed his mind.

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Jannings, who had been in the business twenty-five years, had once told him that when it came to mixing bop (he never called it rock and roll, only bop), you were either shit or Superman. For the two months following the Beats’ mixing session, John Tell was shit. He didn’t work. He began to get nervous about the rent. Twice he almost

called Jannings, but something in him thought that would be a mistake.

Then the music mixer on a film called *Karate Masters of Massacre* died of a massive coronary and Tell got six weeks' work at the Brill Building (which had been known as Tin Pan Alley back in the heyday of Broadway and the Big Band sound), finishing the mix. It was library stuff in the public domain—and a few plinking sitars—for the most part, but it paid the rent. And following his last day on the show, Tell had no more than walked into his apartment before the phone rang. It was Paul Jannings, asking him if he had checked the Billboard pop chart lately. Tell said he hadn't.

"It came on at number seventy-nine." Jannings managed to sound simultaneously disgusted, amused, and amazed. "With a bullet."

"What did?" But he knew as soon as the question was out of his mouth.

" 'Diving in the Dirt.' "

It was the name of a cut on The Dead Beats' forthcoming *Beat It 'Til It's Dead* album, the only cut which had seemed to Tell and Jannings remotely like single material.

"Shit!"

"Indeed it is, but I have a crazy idea it's gonna go top ten. Have you seen the video?"

"No."

"What a scream. It's mostly Ginger, the chick in the group, playing mudhoney in some generic bayou with a guy who looks like Donald Trump in overalls. It sends what my intellectual friends like to call 'mixed cultural messages.' " And Jannings laughed so hard Tell had to hold the phone away from his ear.

When Jannings had himself under control again, he said, “Anyway, it probably means the album’ll go top ten, too. A platinum-plated dog-turd is still a dog-turd, but a platinum reference is platinum all the way through—you understand dis t’ing, Bwana?”

“Indeed I do,” Tell said, pulling open his desk drawer to make sure his Dead Beats cassette, unplayed since Jannings had given it to him on the last day of the mix, was still there.

“So what are you doing?” Jannings asked him.

“Looking for a job.”

“You want to work with me again? I’m doing Roger Daltrey’s new album. Starts in two weeks.”

“Christ, yes!”

The money would be good, but it was more than that; following The Dead Beats and six weeks of Karate Masters of Massacre, working with the ex-lead singer of The Who would be like coming into a warm place on a cold night. Whatever he might turn out to be like personally, the man could sing. And working with Jannings again would be good, too. “Where?”

“Same old stand. Tabori at Music City.”

“I’m there.”

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Roger Daltrey not only could sing, he turned out to be a tolerably nice guy in the bargain. Tell thought the next three or four weeks would be good ones. He had a job, he had a production credit on an album that had popped onto the Billboard charts at number forty-one (and the single was up to number seventeen and still climbing), and he felt safe about the rent for the first time since he had come to New York from Pennsylvania four years ago.

It was June, trees were in full leaf, girls were wearing short skirts again, and the world seemed a fine place to be. Tell felt this way on his first day back at work for Paul Jannings until approximately 1:45 P.M. Then he walked into the third-floor bathroom, saw the same once-white sneakers under the door of stall one, and all his good feelings suddenly collapsed.

They are not the same. Can't be the same.

They were, though. That single empty eyelet was the clearest point of identification, but everything else about them was also the same. Exactly the same, and that included their positions. There was only one real difference that Tell could see: there were more dead flies around them now.

He went slowly into the third stall, "his" stall, lowered his pants, and sat down. He wasn't surprised to find that the urge which had brought him here had entirely departed. He sat still for a little while just the same, however, listening for sounds. The rattle of a newspaper. The clearing of a throat. Hell, even a fart.

No sounds came.

That's because I'm in here alone, Tell thought. Except, that is, for the dead guy in the first stall.

The bathroom's outer door banged briskly open. Tell almost screamed. Someone hummed his way over to the urinals, and as water began to splash out there, an explanation occurred to Tell and he relaxed. It was so simple it was absurd ... and undoubtedly correct. He glanced at his watch and saw it was 1:47.

A regular man is a happy man, his father used to say. Tell's dad had been a taciturn fellow, and that saying (along with Clean your hands before you clean your plate) had been one of his few aphorisms. If regularity really did mean happiness, then Tell supposed he was a happy man. His need to visit the bathroom came on at about the same time every day, and he supposed the same must be true of his

pal Sneakers, who favored Stall #1 just as Tell himself favored Stall #3.

If you needed to pass the stalls to get to the urinals, you would have seen that stall empty lots of times, or with different shoes under it. After all, what are the chances a body could stay undiscovered in a men's-room toilet-stall for ...

He worked out in his mind the time he'd last been there.

... four months, give or take?

No chance at all was the answer to that one. He could believe the janitors weren't too fussy about cleaning the stalls—all those dead flies—but they would have to check on the toilet-paper supply every day or two, right? And even if you left those things out, dead people started to smell after awhile, right? God knew this wasn't the sweetest-smelling place on earth—and following a visit from the fat guy who worked down the hall at Janus Music it was almost uninhabitable—but surely the stink of a dead body would be a lot louder. A lot gaudier.

Gaudy? Gaudy? Jesus, what a word. And how would you know? You never smelled a decomposing body in your life.

True, but he was pretty sure he'd know what he was smelling if he did. Logic was logic and regularity was regularity and that was the end of it. The guy was probably a pencil-pusher from Janus or a writer for Snappy Kards, on the other side of the floor. For all John Tell knew, the guy was in there composing greeting-card verse right now:

Roses are red and violets are blue,

You thought I was dead but that wasn't true;

I just deliver my mail at the same time as you!

That sucks, Tell thought, and uttered a wild little laugh. The fellow who had banged the door open, almost startling him into a scream, had progressed to the wash-basins. Now the splashing-lathering sound of him washing his hands stopped briefly. Tell could imagine the newcomer listening, wondering who was laughing behind one of the closed stall doors, wondering if it was a joke, a dirty picture, or if the man was just crazy. There were, after all, lots of crazy people in New York. You saw them all the time, talking to themselves and laughing for no appreciable reason ... the way Tell had just now.

Tell tried to imagine Sneakers also listening and couldn't.

Suddenly he didn't feel like laughing anymore.

Suddenly he just felt like getting out of there.

He didn't want the man at the basin to see him, though. The man would look at him. Just for a moment, but that would be enough to know what he was thinking. People who laughed behind closed toilet-stall doors were not to be trusted.

Click-clack of shoes on the old white hexagonal bathroom tiles, whooze of the door being opened, hisshh of it settling slowly back into place. You could bang it open but the pneumatic elbow-joint kept it from banging shut. That might upset the third-floor receptionist as he sat smoking Camels and reading the latest issue of Krrang!

God, it's so silent in here! Why doesn't the guy move? At least a little?

But there was just the silence, thick and smooth and total, the sort of silence the dead would hear in their coffins if they could still hear, and Tell again became convinced that Sneakers was dead, fuck logic, he was dead and had been dead for who knew how long, he was sitting in there and if you opened the door you would see some slumped mossy thing with its hands dangling between its thighs, you would see—

For a moment he was on the verge of calling, Hey Sneaks! You all right?

But what if Sneakers answered, not in a questioning or irritated voice but in a froggy grinding croak? Wasn't there something about waking the dead? About—

Suddenly Tell was up, up fast, flushing the toilet and buttoning his pants, out of the stall, zipping his fly as he headed for the door, aware that in a few seconds he was going to feel silly but not caring. Yet he could not forbear one glance under the first stall as he passed. Dirty white misplaced sneakers. And dead flies. Quite a few of them.

Weren't any dead flies in my stall. And just how is it that all this time has gone by and he still hasn't noticed that he missed one of the eyelets? Or does he wear em that way all the time, as some kind of artistic statement?

Tell hit the door pretty hard coming out. The receptionist just up the hall glanced at him with the cool curiosity he saved for beings merely mortal (as opposed to such deities in human form as Roger Daltrey).

Tell hurried down the hall to Tabori Studios.

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“Paul?”

“What?” Jannings answered without looking up from the board. Georgie Ronkler was standing off to one side, watching Jannings closely and nibbling a cuticle—cuticles were all he had left to nibble; his fingernails simply did not exist above the point where they parted company with live flesh and hot nerve-endings. He was close to the door. If Jannings began to rant, Georgie would slip through it.

“I think there might be something wrong in—”

Jannings groaned. “Something else?”

“What do you mean?”

“This drum track is what I mean. It’s badly botched, and I don’t know what we can do about it.” He flicked a toggle, and drums crashed into the studio. “You hear it?”

“The snare, you mean?”

“Of course I mean the snare! It stands out a mile from the rest of the percussion, but it’s married to it!”

“Yes, but—”

“Yes but Jesus bloody fuck, I hate shit like this! Forty tracks I got here, forty goddam tracks to record a simple bop tune and some IDIOT technician—”

From the tail of his eye Tell saw Georgie disappear like a cool breeze.

“But look, Paul, if you lower the equalization—”

“The eq’s got nothing to do with—”

“Shut up and listen a minute,” Tell said soothingly—something he could have said to no one else on the face of the earth—and slid a switch. Jannings stopped ranting and started listening. He asked a question. Tell answered it. Then he asked one Tell couldn’t answer, but Jannings was able to answer it himself, and all of a sudden they were looking at a whole new spectrum of possibilities for a song called “Answer to You, Answer to Me.”

After awhile, sensing that the storm had passed, Georgie Ronkler crept back in.

And Tell forgot all about the sneakers.

*

They returned to his mind the following evening. He was at home, sitting on the toilet in his own bathroom, reading *Wise Blood* while Vivaldi played mildly from the bedroom speakers (although Tell now mixed rock and roll for a living, he owned only four rock records, two by Bruce Springsteen and two by John Fogerty).

He looked up from his book, somewhat startled. A question of cosmic ludicrousness had suddenly occurred to him: How long has it been since you took a crap in the evening, John?

He didn't know, but he thought he might be taking them then quite a bit more frequently in the future. At least one of his habits might change, it seemed.

Sitting in the living room fifteen minutes later, his book forgotten in his lap, something else occurred to him: he hadn't used the third-floor rest room once that day. They had gone across the street for coffee at ten, and he had taken a whiz in the men's room of Donut Buddy while Paul and Georgie sat at the counter, drinking coffee and talking about overdubs. Then, on his lunch hour, he had made a quick pit-stop at the Brew 'n Burger ... and another on the first floor late that afternoon when he had gone down to drop off a bunch of mail that he could have just as easily stuffed into the mail-slot by the elevators.

Avoiding the third-floor men's? Was that what he'd been doing today without even realizing it? You bet your Reeboks it was. Avoiding it like a scared kid who goes a block out of his way coming home from school so he won't have to go past the local haunted house. Avoiding it like the plague.

"Well, so what?" he said out loud.

He couldn't exactly articulate the so-what, but he knew there was one; there was something just a little too existential, even for New

York, about getting spooked out of a public bathroom by a pair of dirty sneakers.

Aloud, very clearly, Tell said: “This has got to stop.”

*

But that was Thursday night and something happened on Friday night that changed everything. That was when the door closed between him and Paul Jannings.

Tell was a shy man and didn't make friends easily. In the rural Pennsylvania town where he had gone to high school, a quirk of fate had put Tell up on stage with a guitar in his hands—the last place he'd ever expected to be. The bassist of a group called The Satin Saturns fell ill with salmonella the day before a well-paying gig. The lead guitarist, who was also in the school band, knew John Tell could play both bass and rhythm. This lead guitarist was big and potentially violent. John Tell was small, humble, and breakable. The guitarist offered him a choice between playing the ill bassist's instrument and having it rammed up his ass to the fifth fret. This choice had gone a long way toward clarifying his feelings about playing in front of a large audience.

But by the end of the third song, he was no longer frightened. By the end of the first set he knew he was home. Years after that first gig, Tell heard a story about Bill Wyman, bassist of The Rolling Stones. According to the story, Wyman actually nodded off during a performance—not in some tiny club, mind you, but in a huge hall—and fell from the stage, breaking his collarbone. Tell supposed lots of people thought the story was apocryphal, but he himself had an idea it was true ... and he was, after all, in a unique position to understand how something like that could happen. Bassists were the invisible men of the rock world. There were exceptions—Paul McCartney, for one—but they only proved the rule.

Perhaps because of the job's very lack of glamor, there was a chronic shortage of bass players. When The Satin Saturns broke up

a month later (the lead guitarist and the drummer got into a fist-fight over a girl), Tell joined a band formed by the Saturns' rhythm man, and his life's course was chosen, as simply and quietly as that.

Tell liked playing in the band. You were up front, looking down on everyone else, not just at the party but making the party happen; you were simultaneously almost invisible and absolutely essential. Every now and then you had to sing a little backup, but nobody expected you to make a speech or anything.

He had lived that life—part-time student and full-time band gypsy—for ten years. He was good, but not ambitious—there was no fire in his belly. Eventually he drifted into session work in New York, began fooling with the boards, and discovered he liked life even better on the far side of the glass window. During all that time he had made one good friend: Paul Jannings. That had happened fast, and Tell supposed the unique pressures that went with the job had had something to do with it... but not everything. Mostly, he suspected, it had been a combination of two factors: his own essential loneliness and Jannings's personality, which was so powerful it was almost overwhelming. And it wasn't so different for Georgie, Tell came to realize following what happened on that Friday night.

He and Paul were having a drink at one of the back tables in McManus's Pub, talking about the mix, the biz, the Mets, whatever, when all of a sudden Jannings's right hand was under the table and gently squeezing Tell's crotch.

Tell moved away so violently that the candle in the center of the table fell over and Jannings's glass of wine spilled. A waiter came over and righted the candle before it could scorch the tablecloth, then left. Tell stared at Jannings, his eyes wide and shocked.

"I'm sorry," Jannings said, and he did look sorry ... but he also looked unperturbed.

"Jesus Christ, Paul!" It was all he could think of to say, and it sounded hopelessly inadequate.

“I thought you were ready, that’s all,” Jannings said. “I suppose I should have been a little more subtle.”

“Ready?” Tell repeated. “What do you mean? Ready for what?”

“To come out. To give yourself permission to come out.”

“I’m not that way,” Tell said, but his heart was pounding very hard and fast. Part of it was outrage, part was fear of the implacable certainty he saw in Jannings’s eyes, most of it was dismay. What Jannings had done had shut him out.

“Let’s let it go, shall we? We’ll just order and make up our minds that it never happened.” Until you want it to, those implacable eyes added.

Oh, it happened, all right, Tell wanted to say, but didn’t. The voice of reason and practicality would not allow it... would not allow him to risk lighting Paul Jannings’s notoriously short fuse. This was, after all, a good job ... and the job per se wasn’t all. He could use Roger Daltrey’s tape in his portfolio even more than he could use two more weeks’ salary. He would do well to be diplomatic and save the outraged-young-man act for another time. Besides, did he really have anything to feel outraged about? It wasn’t as if Jannings had raped him, after all.

And that was really just the tip of the iceberg. The rest was this: his mouth closed because that was what his mouth had always done. It did more than close—it snapped shut like a bear-trap, with all his heart below those interlocked teeth and all his head above.

“All right,” was all he said, “it never happened.”

*

Tell slept badly that night, and what sleep he did get was haunted by bad dreams: one of Jannings groping him in McManus’s was followed by one of the sneakers under the stall door, only in this one

Tell opened the door and saw Paul Jannings sitting there. He had died naked, and in a state of sexual excitement that somehow continued even in death, even after all this time. Paul's mouth dropped open with an audible creak. "That's right; I knew you were ready," the corpse said on a puff of greenly rotten air, and Tell woke himself up by tumbling onto the floor in a tangle of coverlet. It was four in the morning. The first touches of light were just creeping through the chinks between the buildings outside his window. He dressed and sat smoking one cigarette after another until it was time to go to work.

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Around eleven o'clock on that Saturday—they were working six-day weeks to make Daltrey's deadline—Tell went into the third-floor men's room to urinate. He stood just inside the door, rubbing his temples, and then looked around at the stalls.

He couldn't see. The angle was wrong.

Then never mind! Fuck it! Take your piss and get out of here!

He walked slowly over to one of the urinals and unzipped. It took a long time to get going.

On his way out he paused again, head cocked like Nipper the Dog's on the old RCA Victor record labels, and then turned around. He walked slowly back around the corner, stopping as soon as he could see under the door of the first stall. The dirty white sneakers were still there. The building which used to be known as Music City was almost completely empty, Saturday-morning-empty, but the sneakers were still there.

Tell's eyes fixed upon a fly just outside the stall. He watched with an empty sort of avidity as it crawled beneath the stall door and onto the dirty toe of one of the sneakers. There it stopped and simply fell dead. It tumbled into the growing pile of insect corpses around the sneakers. Tell saw with no surprise at all (none he felt, anyway) that

among the flies were two small spiders and one large cockroach, lying on its back like an upended turtle.

Tell left the men's room in large painless strides, and his progress back to the studios seemed most peculiar; it was as if, instead of him walking, the building was flowing past him, around him, like river-rapids around a rock.

When I get back I'll tell Paul I don't feel well and take the rest of the day off, he thought, but he wouldn't. Paul had been in an erratic, unpleasant mood all morning, and Tell knew he was part (or maybe all) of the reason why. Might Paul fire him out of spite? A week ago he would have laughed at such an idea. But a week ago he had still believed what he had come to believe in his growing-up: friends were real and ghosts were make-believe. Now he was starting to wonder if maybe he hadn't gotten those two postulates turned around somehow.

"The prodigal returns," Jannings said without looking around as Tell opened the second of the studio's two doors—the one that was called the "dead air" door. "I thought you died in there, Johnny."

"No," Tell said. "Not me."

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It was a ghost, and Tell found out whose a day before the Daltrey mix—and his association with Paul Jannings—ended, but before that happened a great many other things did. Except they were all the same thing, just little mile-markers, like the ones on the Pennsylvania Turnpike, announcing John Tell's steady progress toward a nervous breakdown. He knew this was happening but could not keep it from happening. It seemed he was not driving this particular road but being chauffeured.

At first his course of action had seemed clear-cut and simple: avoid that particular men's room, and avoid all thoughts and questions about the sneakers. Simply turn that subject off. Make it dark.

Except he couldn't. The image of the sneakers crept up on him at odd moments and pounced like an old grief. He would be sitting home, watching CNN or some stupid chat-show on the tube, and all at once he'd find himself thinking about the flies, or about what the janitor who replaced the toilet paper was obviously not seeing, and then he would look at the clock and see an hour had passed. Sometimes more.

For awhile he was almost convinced it was some sort of malevolent joke. Paul was in on it, of course, and probably the fat guy from Janus Music—Tell had seen them talking together quite frequently, and hadn't they looked at him once and laughed? The receptionist was also a good bet, him with his Camels and his dead, skeptical eyes. Not Georgie, Georgie couldn't have kept the secret even if Paul had hectored him into going along, but anyone else was possible. For a day or two Tell even speculated on the possibility that Roger Daltrey himself might have taken a turn wearing the misplaced white sneakers.

Although he recognized these thoughts as paranoid fantasies, recognition did not lead to dispersion. He would tell them to go away, would insist there was no Jannings-led cabal out to get him, and his mind would say Yeah, okay, makes sense to me, and five hours later—or maybe only twenty minutes—he would imagine a bunch of them sitting around Desmond's Steak House two blocks downtown: Paul, the chain-smoking receptionist with the taste for heavy-metal, heavy-leather groups, maybe even the skinny guy from Snappy Kards, all of them eating shrimp cocktails and drinking. And laughing, of course. Laughing at him, while the dirty white sneakers they took turns wearing sat under the table in a crumpled brown bag.

Tell could see that brown bag. That was how bad it had gotten.

But that short-lived fantasy wasn't the worst. The worst was simply this: the third-floor men's room had acquired a pull. It was as if there were a powerful magnet in there and his pockets were full of iron filings. If someone had told him something like that he would have laughed (maybe just inside, if the person making the metaphor

seemed very much in earnest), but it was really there, a feeling like a swerve every time he passed the men's on his way to the studios or to the elevators. It was a terrible feeling, like being pulled toward an open window in a tall building or watching helplessly, as if from outside yourself, as you raised a pistol to your mouth and sucked the barrel.

He wanted to look again. He realized that one more look was about all it would take to finish him off, but it made no difference. He wanted to look again.

Each time he passed, that mental swerve.

In his dreams he opened that stall door again and again. Just to get a look.

A really good look.

And he couldn't seem to tell anyone. He knew it would be better if he did, understood that if he poured it into someone else's ear it would change its shape, perhaps even grow a handle with which he could hold it. Twice he went into bars and managed to strike up conversations with the men next to him. Because bars, he thought, were the places where talk was at its absolute cheapest. Bargain-basement rates.

He had no more than opened his mouth on the first occasion when the man he had picked began to sermonize on the subject of the Yankees and George Steinbrenner. Steinbrenner had gotten under this man's skin in a big way, and it was impossible to get a word in edgeways with the fellow on any other subject. Tell soon gave up trying.

The second time, he managed to strike up a fairly casual conversation with a man who looked like a construction worker. They talked about the weather, then about baseball (but this man, thankfully, was not nuts on the subject), and progressed to how tough it was to find a good job in New York. Tell was sweating. He

felt as if he were doing some heavy piece of manual labor—pushing a wheelbarrow filled with cement up a slight grade, maybe—but he also felt that he wasn't doing too badly.

The guy who looked like a construction worker was drinking Black Russians. Tell stuck to beer. It felt as if he was sweating it out as fast as he put it in, but after he had bought the guy a couple of drinks and the guy had bought Tell a couple of schooners, he nerved himself to begin.

“You want to hear something really strange?” he said.

“You queer?” the guy who looked like a construction worker asked him before Tell could get any further. He turned on his stool and looked at Tell with amiable curiosity. “I mean, it's nothin to me whether y'are or not, but I'm gettin those vibes and I just thought I'd tell you I don't go for that stuff. Have it up front, you know?”

“I'm not queer,” Tell said.

“Oh. What's really strange?”

“Huh?”

“You said something was really strange.”

“Oh, it really wasn't that strange,” Tell said. Then he glanced down at his watch and said it was getting late.

*

Three days before the end of the Daltrey mix, Tell left Studio F to urinate. He now used the bathroom on the sixth floor for this purpose. He had first used the one on four, then the one on five, but these were stacked directly above the one on three, and he had begun to feel the owner of the sneakers radiating silently up through the floors, seeming to suck at him. The men's room on six was on

the opposite side of the building, and that seemed to solve the problem.

He breezed past the reception desk on his way to the elevators, blinked, and suddenly, instead of being in the elevator car, he was in the third-floor bathroom with the door hisshing softly shut behind him. He had never been so afraid. Part of it was the sneakers, but most of it was knowing he had just dropped three to six seconds of consciousness. For the first time in his life his mind had simply shorted out.

He had no idea how long he might have stood there if the door hadn't suddenly opened behind him, cracking him painfully in the back. It was Paul Jannings. "Excuse me, Johnny," he said. "I had no idea you came in here to meditate."

He passed Tell without waiting for a response (he wouldn't have got one in any case, Tell thought later; his tongue had been frozen to the roof of his mouth), and headed for the stalls. Tell was able to walk over to the first urinal and unzip his fly, doing these things only because he thought Paul might enjoy it too much if he turned and scurried out. There had been a time not so long ago when he had considered Paul a friend—maybe his only friend, at least in New York. Times had certainly changed.

Tell stood at the urinal for ten seconds or so, then flushed it. He headed for the door, then stopped. He turned around, took two quiet on-tiptoe steps, bent, and looked under the door of the first stall. The sneakers were still there, now surrounded by mounds of dead flies.

So were Paul Jannings's Gucci loafers.

What Tell was seeing looked like a double exposure, or one of the hokey ghost effects from the old Topper TV program. First he would be seeing Paul's loafers through the sneakers; then the sneakers would seem to solidify and he would be seeing them through the loafers, as if Paul were the ghost. Except, even when he was seeing

through them, Paul's loafers made little shifts and movements, while the sneakers remained as immobile as always.

Tell left. For the first time in two weeks he felt calm.

*

The next day he did what he probably should have done at once: he took Georgie Ronkler out to lunch and asked him if he had ever heard any strange tales or rumors about the building which used to be called Music City. Why he hadn't thought of doing this earlier was a puzzle to him. He only knew that what had happened yesterday seemed to have cleared his mind somehow, like a brisk slap or a faceful of cold water. Georgie might not know anything, but he might; he had been working with Paul for at least seven years, and a lot of that work had been done at Music City.

"Oh, the ghost, you mean?" Georgie asked, and laughed. They were in Cartin's, a deli-restaurant on Sixth Avenue, and the place was noon-noisy. Georgie bit into his corned-beef sandwich, chewed, swallowed, and sipped some of his cream soda through the two straws poked into the bottle. "Who told you 'bout that, Johnny?"

"Oh, one of the janitors, I guess," Tell said. His voice was perfectly even.

"You sure you didn't see him?" Georgie asked, and winked. This was as close as Paul's long-time assistant could get to teasing.

"Nope." Nor had he, actually. Just the sneakers. And some dead bugs.

"Yeah, well, it's pretty much died down now, but for awhile it was all anybody ever talked about—how the guy was haunting the place. He got it right up there on the third floor, you know. In the john." Georgie raised his hands, trembled them beside his peach-fuzzy cheeks, hummed a few bars of The Twilight Zone theme, and tried to look ominous. This was an expression he was incapable of achieving.

“Yes,” Tell said. “That’s what I heard. But the janitor wouldn’t tell me any more, or maybe he didn’t know any more. He just laughed and walked away.”

“It happened before I started to work with Paul. Paul was the one who told me about it.”

“He never saw the ghost himself?” Tell asked, knowing the answer. Yesterday Paul had been sitting in it. Shitting in it, to be perfectly vulgarly truthful.

“No, he used to laugh about it.” Georgie put his sandwich down. “You know how he can be sometimes. Just a little m-mean.” If forced to say something even slightly negative about someone, Georgie developed a mild stutter.

“I know. But never mind Paul; who was this ghost? What happened to him?”

“Oh, he was just some dope pusher,” Georgie said. “This was back in 1972 or ‘73, I guess, when Paul was just starting out—he was only an assistant mixer himself, back then. Just before the slump.”

Tell nodded. From 1975 until 1980 or so, the rock industry had lain becalmed in the horse latitudes. Kids spent their money on video games instead of records. For perhaps the fiftieth time since 1955, the pundits announced the death of rock and roll. And, as on other occasions, it proved to be a lively corpse. Video games topped out; MTV checked in; a fresh wave of stars arrived from England; Bruce Springsteen released *Born in the U.S.A.*; rap and hip-hop began to turn some numbers as well as heads.

“Before the slump, record-company execs used to deliver coke backstage in their attache cases before big shows,” Georgie said. “I was concert-mixing back then, and I saw it happen. There was one guy—he’s been dead since 1978, but you’d know his name if I said it—who used to get a jar of olives from his label before every gig. The jar would come wrapped up in pretty paper with bows and ribbon and

everything. Only instead of water, the olives came packed in cocaine. He used to put them in his drinks. Called them b-b-blast-off martinis.”

“I bet they were, too,” Tell said.

“Well, back then lots of people thought cocaine was almost like a vitamin,” Georgia said. “They said it didn’t hook you like heroin or f-fuck you over the next day like booze. And this building, man, this building was a regular snowstorm. Pills and pot and hash too, but cocaine was the hot item. And this guy—”

“What was his name?”

Georgie shrugged. “I don’t know. Paul never said and I never heard it from anyone in the building—not that I remember, anyway. But he was s-supposed to be like one of the deli delivery boys you see going up and down in the elevators with coffee and doughnuts and b-bagels. Only instead of delivering coffee-and, this guy delivered dope. You’d see him two or three times a week, riding all the way up and then working his way down. He’d have a topcoat slung over his arm and an alligator-skin briefcase in that hand. He kept the overcoat over his arm even when it was hot. That was so people wouldn’t see the cuff. But I guess sometimes they did a-a-anyway.”

“The what?”

“C-C-Cuff,” Georgie said, spraying out bits of bread and corned beef and immediately going crimson. “Gee, Johnny, I’m sorry.”

“No problem. You want another cream soda?”

“Yes, thanks,” Georgie said gratefully.

Tell signalled the waitress.

“So he was a delivery boy,” he said, mostly to put Georgie at his ease again—Georgie was still patting his lips with his napkin.

“That’s right.” The fresh cream soda arrived and Georgie drank some. “When he got off the elevator on the eighth floor, the briefcase chained to his wrist would be full of dope. When he got off it on the ground floor again, it would be full of money.”

“Best trick since lead into gold,” Tell said.

“Yeah, but in the end the magic ran out. One day he only made it down to the third floor. Someone offed him in the men’s room.”

“Knifed him?”

“What I heard was that someone opened the door of the stall where he was s-sitting and stuck a pencil in his eye.”

For just a moment Tell saw it as vividly as he had seen the crumpled bag under the imagined conspirators’ restaurant table: a Berol Black Warrior, sharpened to an exquisite point, sliding forward through the air and then shearing into the startled circle of pupil. The pop of the eyeball. He winced.

Georgia nodded. “G-G-Gross, huh? But it’s probably not true. I mean, not that part. Probably someone just, you know, stuck him.”

“Yes.”

“But whoever it was must have had something sharp with him, all right,” Georgie said.

“He did?”

“Yes. Because the briefcase was gone.”

Tell looked at Georgie. He could see this, too. Even before Georgie told him the rest he could see it.

“When the cops came and took the guy off the toilet, they found his left hand in the b-bowl.”

“Oh,” Tell said.

Georgie looked down at his plate. There was still half a sandwich on it. “I guess maybe I’m f-f-full,” he said, and smiled uneasily.

*

On their way back to the studio, Tell asked, “So the guy’s ghost is supposed to haunt ... what, that bathroom?” And suddenly he laughed, because, gruesome as the story had been, there was something comic in the idea of a ghost haunting a shithouse.

Georgie smiled. “You know people. At first that was what they said. When I started in working with Paul, guys would tell me they’d seen him in there. Not all of him, just his sneakers under the stall door.”

“Just his sneakers, huh? What a hoot.”

“Yeah. That’s how you’d know they were making it up, or imagining it, because you only heard it from guys who knew him when he was alive. From guys who knew he wore sneakers.”

Tell, who had been a know-nothing kid still living in rural Pennsylvania when the murder happened, nodded. They had arrived at Music City. As they walked across the lobby toward the elevators, Georgie said, “But you know how fast the turnover is in this business. Here today and gone tomorrow. I doubt if there’s anybody left in the building who was working here then, except maybe for Paul and a few of the j-janitors, and none of them would have bought from the guy.”

“Guess not.”

“No. So you hardly ever hear the story anymore, and no one s-sees the guy anymore.”

They were at the elevators.

“Georgie, why do you stick with Paul?”

Although Georgie lowered his head and the tips of his ears turned a bright red, he did not sound really surprised at this abrupt shift in direction. "Why not? He takes care of me."

Do you sleep with him, Georgie? The question occurred at once, a natural outgrowth, Tell supposed, of the previous question, but he wouldn't ask. Didn't really dare to ask. Because he thought Georgie would give him an honest answer.

Tell, who could barely bring himself to talk to strangers and hardly ever made friends, suddenly hugged Georgie Ronkler. Georgie hugged him back without looking up at him. Then they stepped away from each other, and the elevator came, and the mix continued, and the following evening, at six-fifteen, as Jannings was picking up his papers (and pointedly not looking in Tell's direction), Tell stepped into the third-floor men's room to get a look at the owner of the white sneakers.

*

Talking with Georgie, he'd had a sudden revelation ... or perhaps you called something this strong an epiphany. It was this: sometimes you could get rid of the ghosts that were haunting your life if you could only work up enough courage to face them.

There was no lapse in consciousness this time, nor any sensation of fear... only that slow steady deep drumming in his chest. All his senses had been heightened. He smelled chlorine, the pink disinfectant cakes in the urinals, old farts. He could see minute cracks in the paint on the wall, and chips on the pipes. He could hear the hollow click of his heels as he walked toward the first stall.

The sneakers were now almost buried in the corpses of dead spiders and flies.

There were only one or two at first. Because there was no need for them to die until the sneakers were there, and they weren't there until I saw them there.

“Why me?” he asked clearly in the stillness.

The sneakers didn't move and no voice answered.

“I didn't know you, I never met you, I don't take the kind of stuff you sold and never did. So why me?”

One of the sneakers twitched. There was a papery rustle of dead flies. Then the sneaker—it was the misplaced one—settled back.

Tell pushed the stall door open. One hinge shrieked in properly gothic fashion. And there it was. Mystery guest, sign in, please, Tell thought.

The mystery guest sat on the john with one hand lying limply on his thigh. He was much as Tell had seen him in his dreams, with this difference: there was only the single hand. The other arm ended in a dusty maroon stump to which several more flies had adhered. It was only now that Tell realized he had never noticed Sneakers's pants (and didn't you always notice the way lowered pants bunched up over the shoes if you happened to glance under a bathroom stall? something helplessly comic, or just defenseless, or one on account of the other?). He hadn't because they were up, belt buckled, fly zipped. They were bell-bottoms. Tell tried to remember when bells had gone out of fashion and couldn't.

Above the bells Sneakers wore a blue chambray work-shirt with an appliqued peace symbol on each flap pocket. He had parted his hair on the right. Tell could see dead flies in the part. From the hook on the back of the door hung the topcoat of which Georgie had told him. There were dead flies on its slumped shoulders.

There was a grating sound not entirely unlike the one the hinge had made. It was the tendons in the dead man's neck, Tell realized. Sneakers was raising his head. Now he looked at him, and Tell saw with no sense of surprise whatever that, except for the two inches of pencil protruding from the socket of his right eye, it was the same

face that looked out of the shaving mirror at him every day. Sneakers was him and he was Sneakers.

“I knew you were ready,” he told himself in the hoarse toneless voice of a man who has not used his vocal cords in a long time.

“I’m not,” Tell said. “Go away.”

“To know the truth of it, I mean,” Tell told Tell, and the Tell standing in the stall doorway saw circles of white powder around the nostrils of the Tell sitting on the john. He had been using as well as pushing, it seemed. He had come in here for a short snort; someone had opened the stall door and stuck a pencil in his eye. But who committed murder by pencil? Maybe only someone who committed the crime on ...

“Oh, call it impulse,” Sneakers said in his hoarse and toneless voice. “The world-famous impulse crime.”

And Tell—the Tell standing in the stall doorway—understood that was exactly what it had been, no matter what Georgie might think. The killer hadn’t looked under the door of the stall and Sneakers had forgotten to flip the little hinged latch. Two converging vectors of coincidence that, under other circumstances, would have called for no more than a mumbled “Excuse me” and a hasty retreat. This time, however, something different had happened. This time it had led to a spur-of-the-moment murder.

“I didn’t forget the latch,” Sneakers told him in his toneless husk of a voice. “It was broken.”

Yes, all right, the latch had been broken. It didn’t make any difference. And the pencil? Tell was positive the killer had been holding it in his hand when he pushed open the stall door, but not as a murder weapon. He had been holding it only because sometimes you wanted something to hold—a cigarette, a bunch of keys, a pen or pencil to fiddle with. Tell thought maybe the pencil had been in Sneakers’s eye before either of them had any idea that the killer was

going to put it there. Then, probably because the killer had also been a customer who knew what was in the briefcase, he had closed the door again, leaving his victim seated on the john, had exited the building, got ... well, got something ...

“He went to a hardware store five blocks over and bought a hacksaw,” Sneakers said in his toneless voice, and Tell suddenly realized it wasn’t his face anymore; it was the face of a man who looked about thirty, and vaguely Native American. Tell’s hair was gingery-blond, and so had this man’s been at first, but now it was a coarse, dull black.

He suddenly realized something else—realized it the way you realize things in dreams: when people see ghosts, they always see themselves first. Why? For the same reason deep divers pause on their way to the surface, knowing that if they rise too fast they will get nitrogen bubbles in their blood and suffer, perhaps die, in agony. There were reality bends, as well.

“Perception changes once you get past what’s natural, doesn’t it?” Tell asked hoarsely. “And that’s why life has been so weird for me lately. Something inside me’s been gearing up to deal with ... well, to deal with you.”

The dead man shrugged. Flies tumbled dryly from his shoulders. “You tell me, Cabbage—you got the head on you.”

“All right,” Tell said. “I will. He bought a hacksaw and the clerk put it in a bag for him and he came back. He wasn’t a bit worried. After all, if someone had already found you, he’d know; there’d be a big crowd around the door. That’s the way he’d figure. Maybe cops already, too. If things looked normal, he’d go on in and get the briefcase.”

“He tried the chain first,” the harsh voice said. “When that didn’t work, he used the saw to cut off my hand.”

They looked at each other. Tell suddenly realized he could see the toilet seat and the dirty white tiles of the back wall behind the

corpse... the corpse that was, finally, becoming a real ghost.

“You know now?” it asked Tell. “Why it was you?”

“Yes. You had to tell someone.”

“No—history is shit,” the ghost said, and then smiled a smile of such sunken malevolence that Tell was struck by horror. “But knowing sometimes does some good ... if you’re still alive, that is.” It paused. “You forgot to ask your friend Georgie something important, Tell. Something he might not have been so honest about.”

“What?” he asked, but was no longer sure he really wanted to know.

“Who my biggest third-floor customer was in those days. Who was into me for almost eight thousand dollars. Who had been cut off. Who went to a rehab in Rhode Island and got clean two months after I died. Who won’t even go near the white powder these days. Georgie wasn’t here back then, but I think he knows the answer to all those questions just the same. Because he hears people talk. Have you ever noticed the way people talk around Georgie, as if he isn’t there?”

Tell nodded.

“And there’s no stutter in his brain. I think he knows, all right. He’d never tell, Tell, but I think he knows.”

The face began to change again, and now the features swimming out of that primordial fog were saturnine and finely chiseled. Paul Jannings’s features.

“No,” Tell whispered.

“He got better than thirty grand,” the dead man with Paul’s face said. “It’s how he paid for rehab ... with plenty left over for all the vices he didn’t give up.”

And suddenly the figure on the toilet seat was fading out entirely. A moment later it was gone. Tell looked down at the floor and saw the flies were gone, too.

He no longer needed to go to the bathroom. He went back into the control room, told Paul Jannings he was a worthless bastard, paused just long enough to relish the expression of utter stunned surprise on Paul's face, and then walked out the door. There would be other jobs; he was good enough at what he did to be able to count on that. Knowing it, however, was something of a revelation. Not the day's first, but definitely the day's best.

When he got back to his apartment, he went straight through the living room and to the john. His need to relieve himself had returned—had become rather pressing, in fact—but that was all right; that was just another part of being alive. "A regular man is a happy man," he said to the white tile walls. He turned a little, grabbed the current issue of Rolling Stone from where he'd left it on the toilet tank, opened it to the Random Notes column, and began to read.

STEPHEN KING'S
SOMETIMES
THEY COME
BACK



SOMETIMES THEY COME BACK

Stephen King

Jim Norman's wife had been waiting for him since two, and when she saw the car pull up in front of their apartment building, she came out to meet him. She had gone to the store and bought a celebration meal—a couple of steaks, a bottle of Lancer's, a head of lettuce, and Thousand Island dressing. Now, watching him get out of the car, she found herself hoping with some desperation (and not for the first time that day) that there was going to be something to celebrate.

He came up the walk, holding his new briefcase in one hand and four texts in the other. She could see the title of the top one—Introduction to Grammar. She put her hands on his shoulder and asked, "How did it go?"

And he smiled.

But that night, he had the old dream for the first time in a very long time and woke up sweating, with a scream behind his lips.

His interview had been conducted by the principal of Harold Davis High School and the head of the English Department. The subject of his breakdown had come up. He had expected it would.

The principal, a bald and cadaverous man named Fenton, had leaned back and looked at the ceiling. Simmons, the English head, lit his pipe.

"I was under a great deal of pressure at the time," Jim Norman said. His fingers wanted to twist about in his lap, but he wouldn't let them.

"I think we understand that," Fenton said, smiling. "And while we have no desire to pry, I'm sure we'd all agree that teaching is a pressure occupation, especially at the high-school level. You're onstage five periods out of seven, and you're playing to the toughest audience in the world. That's why," he finished with some pride, "teachers have more ulcers than any other professional group, with the exception of air-traffic controllers."

Jim said, “The pressures involved in my breakdown were ... extreme.”

Fenton and Simmons nodded noncommittal encouragement, and Simmons clicked his lighter open to rekindle his pipe. Suddenly the office seemed very tight, very close. Jim had the queer sensation that someone had just turned on a heat lamp over the back of his neck. His fingers were twisting in his lap, and he made them stop.

“I was in my senior year and practice teaching. My mother had died the summer before—cancer—and in my last conversation with her, she asked me to go right on and finish. My brother, my older brother, died when we were both quite young. He had been planning to teach and she thought ...”

He could see from their eyes that he was wandering and thought: God, I’m making a botch of this.

“I did as she asked,” he said, leaving the tangled relationship of his mother and his brother Wayne—poor, murdered Wayne—and himself behind. “During the second week of my intern teaching, my fiancée was involved in a hit-and-run accident. She was the hit part of it. Some kid in a hot rod ... they never caught him.”

Simmons made a soft noise of encouragement.

“I went on. There didn’t seem to be any other course. She was in a great deal of pain—a badly broken leg and four fractured ribs—but no danger. I don’t think I really knew the pressure I was under.”

Careful now. This is where the ground slopes away.

“I interned at Center Street Vocational Trades High,” Jim said.

“Garden spot of the city,” Fenton said. “Switchblades, motor-cycle boots, zip guns in the lockers, lunch-money protection rackets, and every third kid selling dope to the other two. I know about Trades.”

“There was a kid named Mack Zimmerman,” Jim said. “Sensitive boy. Played the guitar. I had him in a composition class, and he had talent. I came in one morning and two boys were holding him while a third smashed his Yamaha guitar against the radiator. Zimmerman was screaming. I yelled for them to stop and give me the guitar. I started for them and someone slugged me.” Jim shrugged. “That was it. I had a breakdown. No screaming meemies or crouching in the corner. I just couldn’t go back. When I got near Trades, my chest would tighten up. I couldn’t breathe right, I got cold sweat—”

“That happens to me, too,” Fenton said amiably.

“I went into analysis. A community therapy deal. I couldn’t afford a psychiatrist. It did me good. Sally and I are married. She has a slight limp and a scar, but otherwise, good as new.” He looked at them squarely. “I guess you could say the same for me.”

Fenton said, “You actually finished your practice teaching requirement at Cortez High School, I believe.”

“That’s no bed of roses, either,” Simmons said.

“I wanted a hard school,” Jim said. “I swapped with another guy to get Cortez.”

“A’s from your supervisor and critic teacher,” Fenton commented.

“Yes.”

“And a four-year average of 3.88. Damn close to straight A’s.”

“I enjoyed my college work.”

Fenton and Simmons glanced at each other, then stood up. Jim got up.

“We’ll be in touch, Mr. Norman,” Fenton said. “We do have a few more applicants to interview—”

“Yes, of course.”

“—but speaking for myself, I’m impressed by your academic records and personal candor.”

“It’s nice of you to say so.”

“Sim, perhaps Mr. Norman would like a coffee before he goes.”

They shook hands.

In the hall, Simmons said, “I think you’ve got the job if you want it. That’s off the record, of course.”

Jim nodded. He had left a lot off the record himself.

Davis High was a forbidding rockpile that housed a remarkably modern plant—the science wing alone had been funded at 1.5 million in last year’s budget. The classrooms, which still held the ghosts of the WPA workers who had built them and the postwar kids who had first used them, were furnished with modern desks and soft-glare blackboards. The students were clean, well dressed, vivacious, affluent. Six out of ten seniors owned their own cars. All in all, a good school. A fine school to teach in during the Sickie Seventies. It made Center Street Vocational Trades look like darkest Africa.

But after the kids were gone, something old and brooding seemed to settle over the halls and whisper in the empty rooms. Some black, noxious beast, never quite in view. Sometimes, as he walked down the Wing 4 corridor toward the parking lot with his new briefcase in one hand, Jim Norman thought he could almost hear it breathing.

He had the dream again near the end of October, and that time he did scream. He clawed his way into waking reality to find Sally sitting up in bed beside him, holding his shoulder. His heart was thudding heavily.

“God” he said, and scrubbed a hand across his face.

“Are you all right?”

“Sure. I yelled, didn’t I?”

“Boy, did you. Nightmare?”

“Yes.”

“Something from when those boys broke that fellow’s guitar?”

“No,” he said. “Much older than that. Sometimes it comes back, that’s all. No sweat.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes.”

“Do you want a glass of milk?” Her eyes were dark with concern.

He kissed her shoulder. “No. Go to sleep.”

She turned off the light and he lay there, looking into the darkness.

He had a good schedule for the new teacher on the staff. Period one was free. Two and three were freshman comp, one group dull, one kind of fun. Period four was his best class: American Lit with college-bound seniors who got a kick out of bashing the ole masters around for a period each day. Period five was a “consultation period,” when he was supposed to see students with personal or academic problems. There were very few who seemed to have either (or who wanted to discuss them with him), and he spent most of those periods with a good novel. Period six was a grammar course, dry as chalkdust.

Period seven was his only cross. The class was called Living with Literature, and it was held in a small box of a classroom on the third floor. The room was hot in the early fall and cold as the winter approached. The class itself was an elective for what school catalogues coyly call “the slow learner.”

There were twenty-seven “slow learners” in Jim’s class, most of them school jocks. The kindest thing you could accuse them of would be disinterest, and some of them had a streak of outright malevolence. He walked in one day to find an obscene and cruelly accurate caricature of himself on the board, with “Mr. Norman” unnecessarily chalked under it. He wiped it off without comment and proceeded with the lesson in spite of the snickers.

He worked up interesting lesson plans, included a/v materials, and ordered several high-interest, high-comprehension texts—all to no avail. The classroom mood veered between unruly hilarity and sullen silence. Early in November, a fight broke out between two boys during a discussion of *Of Mice and Men*. Jim broke it up and sent both boys to the office. When he opened his book to where he had left off, the words “Bite It” glared up at him.

He took the problem to Simmons, who shrugged and lit his pipe. “I don’t have any real solution, Jim. Last period is always a bitch. And for some of them, a D grade in your class means no more football or basketball. And they’ve had the other gut English courses, so they’re stuck with it.”

“And me, too,” Jim said glumly.

Simmons nodded. “Show them you mean business, and they’ll buckle down, if only to keep their sports eligibility.”

But period seven remained a constant thorn in his side.

One of the biggest problems in *Living with Lit* was a huge, slow-moving moose named Chip Osway. In early December, during the brief hiatus between football and basketball (Osway played both), Jim caught him with a crib sheet and ran him out of the classroom.

“If you flunk me, we’ll get you, you son of a bitch!” Osway yelled down the dim third-floor corridor. “You hear me?”

“Go on,” Jim said. “Don’t waste your breath.”

“We’ll get you, creepo!”

Jim went back into the classroom. They looked up at him blandly, faces betraying nothing. He felt a surge of unreality, like the feeling that had washed over him before ... before ...

We’ll get you, creepo.

He took his grade book out of his desk, opened it to the page titled “Living with Literature,” and carefully lettered an F in the exam slot next to Chip Osway’s name.

That night he had the dream again.

The dream was always cruelly slow. There was time to see and feel everything. And there was the added horror of reliving events that were moving toward a known conclusion, as helpless as a man strapped into a car going over a cliff.

In the dream he was nine and his brother Wayne was twelve. They were going down Broad Street in Stratford, Connecticut, bound for the Stratford Library. Jim’s books were two days overdue, and he had hooked four cents from the cupboard bowl to pay the fine. It was summer vacation. You could smell the freshly cut grass. You could hear a ballgame floating out of some second-floor apartment window, Yankees leading the Red Sox six to nothing in the top of the eighth, Ted Williams batting, and you could see the shadows from the Burrets Building Company slowly lengthening across the street as the evening turned slowly toward dark.

Beyond Teddy’s Market and Burrets, there was a railroad overpass, and on the other side, a number of the local losers hung around a closed gas station—five or six boys in leather jackets and pegged jeans. Jim hated to go by them. They yelled out hey four-eyes and hey shit-heels and hey you got an extra quarter and once they chased them half a block. But Wayne would not take the long way around. That would be chicken.

In the dream, the overpass loomed closer and closer, and you began to feel dread struggling in your throat like a big black bird. You saw everything: the Burrets neon sign, just starting to stutter on and off; the flakes of rust on the green overpass; the glitter of broken glass in the cinders of the railroad bed; a broken bike rim in the gutter.

You try to tell Wayne you've been through this before, a hundred times. The local losers aren't hanging around the gas station this time; they're hidden in the shadows under the trestle. But it won't come out. You're helpless.

Then you're underneath, and some of the shadows detach themselves from the walls and a tall kid with a blond crew cut and a broken nose pushes Wayne up against the sooty cinderblocks and says: Give us some money.

Let me alone.

You try to run, but a fat guy with greasy black hair grabs you and throws you against the wall next to your brother. His left eyelid is jittering up and down nervously and he says: Come on, kid, how much you got?

F-four cents.

You fuckin' liar.

Wayne tries to twist free and a guy with odd, orange-colored hair helps the blond one to hold him. The guy with the jittery eyelid suddenly bashes you one in the mouth. You feel a sudden heaviness in your groin, and a dark patch appears on your jeans.

Look, Vinnie, he wet himself!

Wayne's struggles become frenzied, and he almost—not quite — gets free. Another guy, wearing black chinos and a white T-shirt, throws him back. There is a small strawberry birthmark on his chin.

The stone throat of the overpass is beginning to tremble. The metal girders pick up a thrumming vibration. Train coming.

Someone strikes the books out of your hands and the kid with the birthmark on his chin kicks them into the gutter. Wayne suddenly kicks out with his right foot, and it connects with the crotch of the kid with the jittery face. He screams.

Vinnie, he's gettin' away!

The kid with the jittery face is screaming about his nuts, but even his howls are lost in the gathering, shaking roar of the approaching train. Then it is over them, and its noise fills the world.

Light flashes on switchblades. The kid with the blond crew cut is holding one and Birthmark has the other. You can't hear Wayne, but his words are in the shape of his lips:

Run Jimmy run.

You slip to your knees and the hands holding you are gone and you skitter between a pair of legs like a frog. A hand slaps down on your back, groping for purchase, and gets none. Then you are running back the way you came, with all of the horrible sludgy slowness of dreams. You look back over your shoulder and see—

He woke in the dark, Sally sleeping peacefully beside him. He bit back the scream, and when it was throttled, he fell back.

When he had looked back, back into the yawning darkness of the overpass, he had seen the blond kid and the birthmarked kid drive their knives into his brother—Blondie's below the breastbone, and Birthmark's directly into his brother's groin.

He lay in the darkness, breathing harshly, waiting for that nine-year-old ghost to depart, waiting for honest sleep to blot it all away.

An unknown time later, it did.

The Christmas vacation and semester break were combined in the city's school district, and the holiday was almost a month long. The dream came twice, early on, and did not come again. He and Sally went to visit her sister in Vermont, and skied a great deal. They were happy.

Jim's Living with Lit problem seemed inconsequential and a little foolish in the open, crystal air. He went back to school with a winter tan, feeling cool and collected.

Simmons caught him on the way to his period-two class and handed him a folder. "New student, period seven. Name is Robert Lawson. Transfer."

"Hey, I've got twenty-seven in there right now, Sim. I'm overloaded."

"You've still got twenty-seven. Bill Stearns got killed the Tuesday after Christmas. Car accident. Hit-and-run."

"Billy?"

The picture formed in his mind in black and white, like a senior photograph. William Stearns, Key Club 1, Football 1, 2, Pen & Lance, 2. He had been one of the few good ones in Living with Lit. Quiet, consistent A's and B's on his exams. Didn't volunteer often, but usually summoned the correct answers (laced with a pleasing dry wit) when called on. Dead? Fifteen years old. His own mortality suddenly whispered through his bones like a cold draft under a door.

"Christ, that's awful. Do they know what happened?"

"Cops are checking into it. He was downtown exchanging a Christmas present. Started across Rampart Street and an old Ford sedan hit him. No one got the license number, but the words 'Snake Eyes' were written on the side door ... the way a kid would do it."

"Christ," Jim said again.

“There’s the bell,” Simmons said.

He hurried away, pausing to break up a crowd of kids around a drinking fountain. Jim went toward his class, feeling empty.

During his free period he flipped open Robert Lawson’s folder. The first page was a green sheet from Milford High, which Jim had never heard of. The second was a student personality profile. Adjusted IQ of 78. Some manual skills, not many. Antisocial answers to the Barnett-Hudson personality test. Poor aptitude scores. Jim thought sourly that he was a Living with Lit kid all the way.

The next page was a disciplinary history, the yellow sheet. The Milford sheet was white with a black border, and it was depressingly well filled. Lawson had been in a hundred kinds of trouble.

He turned the next page, glanced down at a school photo of Robert Lawson, then looked again. Terror suddenly crept into the pit of his belly and coiled there, warm and hissing.

Lawson was staring antagonistically into the camera, as if posing for a police mug shot rather than a school photographer. There was a small strawberry birthmark on his chin.

By period seven, he had brought all the civilized rationalizations into play. He told himself there must be thousands of kids with red birthmarks on their chins. He told himself that the hood who had stabbed his brother that day sixteen long dead years ago would now be at least thirty-two.

But, climbing to the third floor, the apprehension remained. And another fear to go with it: This is how you felt when you were cracking up. He tasted the bright steel of panic in his mouth.

The usual group of kids was horsing around the door of Room 33, and some of them went in when they saw Jim coming. A few hung around, talking in undertones and grinning. He saw the new boy

standing beside Chip Osway. Robert Lawson was wearing blue jeans and heavy yellow tractor boots—all the rage this year.

“Chip, go on in.”

“That an order?” He smiled vacuously over Jim’s head.

“Sure.”

“You flunk me on that test?”

“Sure.”

“Yeah, that’s ...” The rest was an under-the-breath mumble.

Jim turned to Robert Lawson. “You’re new,” he said. “I just wanted to tell you how we run things around here.”

“Sure, Mr. Norman.” His right eyebrow was split with a small scar, a scar Jim knew. There could be no mistake. It was crazy, it was lunacy, but it was also a fact. Sixteen years ago, this kid had driven a knife into his brother.

Numbly, as if from a great distance, he heard himself beginning to outline the class rules and regulations. Robert Lawson hooked his thumbs into his garrison belt, listened, smiled, and began to nod, as if they were old friends.

*

“Jim?”

“Hmmm?”

“Is something wrong?”

“No.”

“Those Living with Lit boys still giving you a hard time?”

No answer.

“Jim?”

“No.”

“Why don’t you go to bed early tonight?”

But he didn’t.

The dream was very bad that night. When the kid with the strawberry birthmark stabbed his brother with his knife, he called after Jim: “You next, kid. Right through the bag.”

He woke up screaming.

He was teaching *Lord of the Flies* that week, and talking about symbolism when Lawson raised his hand.

“Robert?” he said evenly.

“Why do you keep starin’ at me?” Jim blinked and felt his mouth go dry.

“You see somethin’ green? Or is my fly unzipped?”

A nervous titter from the class.

Jim replied evenly: “I wasn’t staring at you, Mr. Lawson. Can you tell us why Ralph and Jack disagreed over—”

“You were starin’ at me.”

“Do you want to talk about it with Mr. Fenton?”

Lawson appeared to think it over. “Naw.”

“Good. Now can you tell us why Ralph and Jack—”

“I didn’t read it. I think it’s a dumb book.”

Jim smiled tightly. “Do you, now? You want to remember that while you’re judging the book, the book is also judging you. Now can anyone else tell me why they disagreed over the existence of the beast?”

Kathy Slavin raised her hand timidly, and Lawson gave her a cynical once-over and said something to Chip Osway. The words leaving his lips looked like “nice tits.” Chip nodded.

“Kathy?”

“Isn’t it because Jack wanted to hunt the beast?”

“Good.” He turned and began to write on the board. At the instant his back was turned, a grapefruit smashed against the board beside his head.

He jerked backward and wheeled around. Some class members laughed, but Osway and Lawson only looked at Jim innocently.

Jim stooped and picked up the grapefruit. “Someone,” he said, looking toward the back of the room, “ought to have this jammed down his goddamn throat.”

Kathy Slavin gasped.

He tossed the grapefruit in the wastebasket and turned back to the blackboard.

He opened the morning paper, sipping his coffee, and saw the headline about halfway down. “God!” he said, splitting his wife’s easy flow of morning chatter. His belly felt suddenly filled with splinters—

“Teen-Age Girl Falls to Her Death: Katherine Slavin, a seventeen-year-old junior at Harold Davis High School, either fell or was pushed from the roof of her downtown apartment house early yesterday

evening. The girl, who kept a pigeon coop on the roof, had gone up with a sack of feed, according to her mother.

“Police said an unidentified woman in a neighboring development had seen three young boys running across the roof at 6:45 P.M., just minutes after the girl’s body (continued page 3—”

“Jim, was she one of yours?”

But he could only look at her mutely.

Two weeks later, Simmons met him in the hall after the lunch bell with a folder in his hand, and Jim felt a terrible sinking in his belly.

“New student,” he said flatly to Simmons. “Living with Lit.”

Sim’s eyebrows went up. “How did you know that?”

Jim shrugged and held his hand out for the folder.

“Got to run,” Simmons said. “Department heads are meeting on course evaluations. You look a little run-down. Feeling okay?”

That’s right, a little run-down. Like Billy Stearns.

“Sure,” he said.

“That’s the stuff,” Simmons said, and clapped him on the back.

When he was gone, Jim opened the folder to the picture, wincing in advance, like a man about to be hit.

But the face wasn’t instantly familiar. Just a kid’s face. Maybe he’d seen it before, maybe not. The kid, David Garcia, was a hulking, dark-haired boy with rather negroid lips and dark, slumbering eyes. The yellow sheet said he was also from Milford High and that he had spent two years in Granville Reformatory. Car theft.

Jim closed the folder with hands that trembled slightly.

“Sally?”

She looked up from her ironing. He had been staring at a TV basketball game without really seeing it.

“Nothing,” he said. “Forgot what I was going to say.”

“Must have been a lie.”

He smiled mechanically and looked at the TV again. It had been on the tip of his tongue to spill everything. But how could he? It was worse than crazy. Where would you start? The dream? The breakdown? The appearance of Robert Lawson?

No. With Wayne—your brother.

But he had never told anyone about that, not even in analysis. His thoughts turned to David Garcia, and the dreamy terror that had washed over him when they had looked at each other in the hall. Of course, he had only looked vaguely familiar in the picture. Pictures don't move ... or twitch.

Garcia had been standing with Lawson and Chip Osway, and when he looked up and saw Jim Norman, he smiled and his eyelids began to jitter up and down and voices spoke in Jim's mind with unearthly clarity:

Come on, kid, how much you got?

F-four cents.

You fuckin' liar ... look, Vinnie, he wet himself!”

“Jim? Did you say something?”

“No.” But he wasn't sure if he had or not. He was getting very scared.

*

One day after school in early February there was a knock on the teachers'-room door, and when Jim opened it, Chip Osway stood there. He looked frightened. Jim was alone; it was ten after four and the last of the teachers had gone home an hour before. He was correcting a batch of American Lit themes.

"Chip?" he said evenly.

Chip shuffled his feet. "Can I talk to you for a minute, Mr. Norman?"

"Sure. But if it's about that test, you're wasting your—"

"It's not about that. Uh, can I smoke in here?"

"Go ahead."

He lit his cigarette with a hand that trembled slightly. He didn't speak for perhaps as long as a minute. It seemed that he couldn't. His lips twitched, his hands came together, and his eyes slitted, as if some inner self was struggling to find expression.

He suddenly burst out: "If they do it, I want you to know I wasn't in on it! I don't like those guys! They're creeps!"

"What guys, Chip?"

"Lawson and that Garcia creep."

"Are they planning to get me?" The old dreamy terror was on him, and he knew the answer.

"I liked them at first," Chip said. "We went out and had a few beers. I started bitchin' about you and that test. About how I was gonna get you. But that was just talk! I swear it!"

"What happened?"

"They took me right up on it. Asked what time you left school, what kind of car you drove, all that stuff. I said what have you got against

him and Garcia said they knew you a long time ago ... hey, are you all right?"

"The cigarette," he said thickly. "Haven't ever gotten used to the smoke."

Chip ground it out. "I asked them when they knew you and Bob Lawson said I was still pissin' my didies then. But they're seventeen, the same as me."

"Then what?"

"Well, Garcia leans over the table and says you can't want to get him very bad if you don't even know when he leaves the fuckin' school. What was you gonna do? So I says I was gonna matchstick your tires and leave you with four flats." He looked at Jim with pleading eyes. "I wasn't even gonna do that. I said it because ..."

"You were scared?" Jim asked quietly.

"Yeah, and I'm still scared."

"What did they think of your idea?"

Chip shuddered. "Bob Lawson says, is that what you was gonna do, you cheap prick? And I said, tryin' to be tough, what was you gonna do, off him? And Garcia—his eyelids start to go up and down—he takes something out of his pocket and clicked it open and it's a switchknife. That's when I took off."

"When was this, Chip?"

"Yesterday. I'm scared to sit with those guys now, Mr. Norman."

"Okay," Jim said. "Okay." He looked down at the papers he had been correcting without seeing them.

"What are you going to do?"

“I don’t know,” Jim said. “I really don’t.”

On Monday morning he still didn’t know. His first thought had been to tell Sally everything, starting with his brother’s murder sixteen years ago. But it was impossible. She would be sympathetic but frightened and unbelieving.

Simmons? Also impossible. Simmons would think he was mad. And maybe he was. A man in a group encounter session he had attended had said having a breakdown was like breaking a vase and then gluing it back together. You could never trust yourself to handle that vase again with any surety. You couldn’t put a flower in it because flowers need water and water might dissolve the glue.

Am I crazy, then?

If he was, Chip Osway was, too. That thought came to him as he was getting into his car, and a bolt of excitement went through him.

Of course! Lawson and Garcia had threatened him in Chip Osway’s presence. That might not stand up in court, but it would get the two of them suspended if he could get Chip to repeat his story in Fenton’s office. And he was almost sure he could get Chip to do that. Chip had his own reasons for wanting them far away.

He was driving into the parking lot when he thought about what had happened to Billy Stearns and Kathy Slavin.

During his free period, he went up to the office and leaned over the registration secretary’s desk. She was doing the absence list.

“Chip Osway here today?” he asked casually.

“Chip ... ?” She looked at him doubtfully.

“Charles Osway,” Jim amended. “Chip’s a nickname.”

She leafed through a pile of slips, glanced at one, and pulled it out. “He’s absent, Mr. Norman.”

“Can you get me his phone number?”

She pushed her pencil into her hair and said, “Certainly.” She dug it out of the O file and handed it to him. Jim dialed the number on an office phone.

The phone rang a dozen times and he was about to hang up when a rough, sleep-blurred voice said, “Yeah?”

“Mr. Osway?”

“Barry Osway’s been dead six years. I’m Gary Denkinger.”

“Are you Chip Osway’s stepfather?”

“What’d he do?”

“Pardon?”

“He’s run off. I want to know what he did.”

“So far as I know, nothing. I just wanted to talk with him. Do you have any idea where he might be?”

“Naw, I work nights. I don’t know none of his friends.”

“Any idea at a—”

“Nope. He took the old suitcase and fifty bucks he saved up from stealin’ car parts or sellin’ dope or whatever these kids do for money. Gone to San Francisco to be a hippie for all I know.”

“If you hear from him, will you call me at school? Jim Norman, English wing.”

“Sure will.”

Jim put the phone down. The registration secretary looked up and offered a quick meaningless smile. Jim didn’t smile back.

Two days later, the words “left school” appeared after Chip Osway’s name on the morning attendance slip. Jim began to wait for Simmons to show up with a new folder. A week later he did.

He looked dully down at the picture. No question about this one. The crew cut had been replaced by long hair, but it was still blond. And the face was the same, Vincent Corey. Vinnie, to his friends and intimates. He stared up at Jim from the picture, an insolent grin on his lips.

When he approached his period-seven class, his heart was thudding gravely in his chest. Lawson and Garcia and Vinnie Corey were standing by the bulletin board outside the door—they all straightened when he came toward them.

Vinnie smiled his insolent smile, but his eyes were as cold and dead as ice floes. “You must be Mr. Norman. Hi, Norm.”

Lawson and Garcia tittered.

“I’m Mr. Norman,” Jim said, ignoring the hand that Vinnie had put out. “You’ll remember that?”

“Sure, I’ll remember it. How’s your brother?”

Jim froze. He felt his bladder loosen, and as if from far away, from down a long corridor somewhere in his cranium, he heard a ghostly voice: Look, Vinnie, he wet himself!

“What do you know about my brother?” he asked thickly.

“Nothin’,” Vinnie said. “Nothin’ much.” They smiled at him with their empty dangerous smiles.

The bell rang and they sauntered inside.

Drugstore phone booth, ten o’clock that night.

“Operator, I want to call the police station in Stratford, Connecticut. No, I don’t know the number.”

Clickings on the line. Conferences.

The policeman had been Mr. Nell. In those days he had been white-haired, perhaps in his mid-fifties. Hard to tell when you were just a kid. Their father was dead, and somehow Mr. Nell had known that.

Call me Mr. Nell, boys.

Jim and his brother met at lunchtime every day and they went into the Stratford Diner to eat their bag lunches. Mom gave them each a nickel to buy milk—that was before school milk programs started. And sometimes Mr. Nell would come in, his leather belt creaking with the weight of his belly and his .38 revolver, and buy them each a pie a la mode.

Where were you when they stabbed my brother, Mr. Nell?

A connection was made. The phone rang once.

“Stratford Police.”

“Hello. My name is James Norman, Officer. I’m calling long-distance.” He named the city. “I want to know if you can give me a line on a man who would have been on the force around 1957.”

“Hold the line a moment, Mr. Norman.”

A pause, then a new voice.

“I’m Sergeant Morton Livingston, Mr. Norman. Who are you trying to locate?”

“Well,” Jim said, “us kids just called him Mr. Nell. Does that—”

“Hell, yes! Don Nell’s retired now. He’s seventy-three or -four.”

“Does he still live in Stratford?”

“Yes, over on Barnum Avenue. Would you like the address?”

“And the phone number, if you have it.”

“Okay. Did you know Don?”

“He used to buy my brother and me apple pie a la mode down at the Stratford Diner.”

“Christ, that’s been gone ten years. Wait a minute.” He came back on the phone and read an address and a phone number. Jim jotted them down, thanked Livingston, and hung up.

He dialed O again, gave the number, and waited. When the phone began to ring, a sudden hot tension filled him and he leaned forward, turning instinctively away from the drugstore soda fountain, although there was no one there but a plump teen-age girl reading a magazine.

The phone was picked up and a rich, masculine voice, sounding not at all old, said, “Hello?” That single word set off a dusty chain reaction of memories and emotions, as startling as the Pavlovian reaction that can be set off by hearing an old record on the radio.

“Mr. Nell? Donald Nell?”

“Yes.”

“My name is James Norman, Mr. Nell. Do you remember me, by any chance?”

“Yes,” the voice responded immediately. “Pie a la mode. Your brother was killed ... knifed. A shame. He was a lovely boy.”

Jim collapsed against one of the booth’s glass walls. The tension’s sudden departure left him as weak as a stuffed toy. He found himself

on the verge of spilling everything, and he bit the urge back desperately.

“Mr. Nell, those boys were never caught.”

“No,” Nell said. “We did have suspects. As I recall, we had a lineup at a Bridgeport police station.”

“Were those suspects identified to me by name?”

“No. The procedure at a police showup was to address the participants by number. What’s your interest in this now, Mr. Norman?”

“Let me throw some names at you,” Jim said. “I want to know if they ring a bell in connection with the case.”

“Son, I wouldn’t—”

“You might,” Jim said, beginning to feel a trifle desperate. “Robert Lawson, David Garcia, Vincent Corey. Do any of those—”

“Corey,” Mr. Nell said flatly. “I remember him. Vinnie the Viper. Yes, we had him up on that. His mother alibied him. I don’t get anything from Robert Lawson. That could be anyone’s name. But Garcia ... that rings a bell. I’m not sure why. Hell. I’m old.” He sounded disgusted.

“Mr. Nell, is there any way you could check on those boys?”

“Well, of course, they wouldn’t be boys anymore.”

Oh, yeah?

“Listen, Jimmy. Has one of those boys popped up and started harassing you?”

“I don’t know. Some strange things have been happening. Things connected with the stabbing of my brother.”

“What things?”

“Mr. Nell, I can’t tell you. You’d think I was crazy.”

His reply, quick, firm, interested: “Are you?”

Jim paused. “No,” he said.

“Okay, I can check the names through Stratford R&I. Where can I get in touch?”

Jim gave his home number. “You’d be most likely to catch me on Tuesday night.” He was in almost every night, but on Tuesday evenings Sally went to her pottery class.

“What are you doing these days, Jimmy?”

“Teaching school.”

“Good. This might take a few days, you know. I’m retired now.”

“You sound just the same.”

“Ah, but if you could see me!” He chuckled. “D’you still like a good piece of pie a la mode, Jimmy?”

“Sure,” Jim said. It was a lie. He hated pie a la mode.

“I’m glad to hear that. Well, if there’s nothing else, I’ll—”

“There is one more thing. Is there a Milford High in Stratford?”

“Not that I know of.”

“That’s what I—”

“Only thing name of Milford around here is Milford Cemetery out on the Ash Heights Road. And no one ever graduated from there.” He

chuckled dryly, and to Jim's ears it sounded like the sudden rattle of bones in a pit.

"Thank you," he heard himself saying. "Goodbye."

Mr. Nell was gone. The operator asked him to deposit sixty cents, and he put it in automatically. He turned, and stared into a horrid, squashed face plastered up against the glass, framed in two spread hands, the splayed fingers flattened white against the glass, as was the tip of the nose.

It was Vinnie, grinning at him.

Jim screamed.

Class again.

Living with Lit was doing a composition, and most of them were bent sweatily over their papers, putting their thoughts grimly down on the page, as if chopping wood. All but three. Robert Lawson, sitting in Billy Stearns's seat, David Garcia in Kathy Slavin's, Vinnie Corey in Chip Osway's. They sat with their blank papers in front of them, watching him.

A moment before the bell, Jim said softly, "I want to talk to you for a minute after class, Mr. Corey."

"Sure, Norm."

Lawson and Garcia tittered noisily, but the rest of the class did not. When the bell rang, they passed in their papers and fairly bolted through the door. Lawson and Garcia lingered, and Jim felt his belly tighten.

Is it going to be now?

Then Lawson nodded at Vinnie. "See you later."

"Yeah."

They left. Lawson closed the door, and from beyond the frosted glass, David Garcia suddenly yelled hoarsely, "Norm eats it!" Vinnie looked at the door, then back at Jim. He smiled.

He said, "I was wondering if you'd ever get down to it."

"Really?" Jim said.

"Scared you the other night in the phone booth, right, dad?"

"No one says dad anymore, Vinnie. It's not cool. Like cool's not cool. It's as dead as Buddy Holly."

"I talk the way I want," Vinnie said.

"Where's the other one? The guy with the funny red hair."

"Split, man." But under his studied unconcern, Jim sensed a wariness.

"He's alive, isn't he? That's why he's not here. He's alive and he's thirty-two or -three, the way you would be if—"

"Bleach was always a drag. He's nothin'." Vinnie sat up behind his desk and put his hands down flat on the old graffiti. His eyes glittered. "Man, I remember you at that lineup. You looked ready to piss your little old corduroy pants. I seen you lookin' at me and Davie. I put the hex on you."

"I suppose you did," Jim said. "You gave me sixteen years of bad dreams. Wasn't that enough? Why now? Why me?"

Vinnie looked puzzled, and then smiled again. "Because you're unfinished business, man. You got to be cleaned up."

"Where were you?" Jim asked. "Before."

Vinnie's lips thinned. "We ain't talkin' about that. Dig?"

“They dug you a hole, didn’t they, Vinnie? Six feet deep. Right in the Milford Cemetery. Six feet of—”

“You shut up!”

He was on his feet. The desk fell over in the aisle.

“It’s not going to be easy,” Jim said. “I’m not going to make it easy for you.”

“We’re gonna kill you, dad. You’ll find out about that hole.”

“Get out of here.”

“Maybe that little wifey of yours, too.”

“You goddamn punk, if you touch her—” He started forward blindly, feeling violated and terrified by the mention of Sally.

Vinnie grinned and started for the door. “Just be cool. Cool as a fool.” He tittered.

“If you touch my wife, I’ll kill you.”

Vinnie’s grin widened. “Kill me? Man, I thought you knew, I’m already dead.”

He left. His footfalls echoed in the corridor for a long time.

“What are you reading, hon?”

Jim held the binding of the book, *Raising Demons*, out for her to read.

“Yuck.” She turned back to the mirror to check her hair.

“Will you take a taxi home?” he asked.

“It’s only four blocks. Besides, the walk is good for my figure.”

“Someone grabbed one of my girls over on Summer Street,” he lied. “She thinks the object was rape.”

“Really? Who?”

“Dianne Snow,” he said, making a name up at random. “She’s a levelheaded girl. Treat yourself to a taxi, okay?”

“Okay,” she said. She stopped at his chair, knelt, put her hands on his cheeks and looked into his eyes. “What’s the matter, Jim?”

“Nothing.”

“Yes. Something is.”

“Nothing I can’t handle.”

“Is it something ... about your brother?”

A draft of terror blew over him, as if an inner door had been opened. “Why do you say that?”

“You were moaning his name in your sleep last night. Wayne, Wayne, you were saying. Run, Wayne.”

“It’s nothing.”

But it wasn’t. They both knew it. He watched her go.

Mr. Nell called at quarter past eight. “You don’t have to worry about those guys,” he said. “They’re all dead.”

“Is that so?” He was holding his place in Raising Demons with his index finger as he talked.

“Car smash. Six months after your brother was killed. A cop was chasing them. Frank Simon was the cop, as a matter of fact. He works out at Sikorsky now. Probably makes a lot more money.”

“And they crashed.”

“The car left the road at more than a hundred miles an hour and hit a main power pole. When they finally got the power shut off and scraped them out, they were cooked medium rare.”

Jim closed his eyes. “You saw the report?”

“Looked at it myself.”

“Anything on the car?”

“It was a hot rod.”

“Any description?”

“Black 1954 Ford sedan with ‘Snake Eyes’ written on the side. Fitting enough. They really crapped out.”

“They had a sidekick, Mr. Nell. I don’t know his name, but his nickname was Bleach.”

“That would be Charlie Sponder,” Mr. Nell said without hesitation.

“He bleached his hair with Clorox one time. I remember that. It went streaky-white, and he tried to dye it back. The streaks went orange.”

“Do you know what he’s doing now?”

“Career army man. Joined up in fifty-eight or -nine, after he got a local girl pregnant.”

“Could I get in touch with him?”

“His mother lives in Stratford. She’d know.”

“Can you give me her address?”

“I won’t, Jimmy. Not until you tell me what’s eating you.”

“I can’t, Mr. Nell. You’d think I was crazy.”

“Try me.”

“I can’t.”

“All right, son.”

“Will you—” But the line was dead.

“You bastard,” Jim said, and put the phone in the cradle. It rang under his hand and he jerked away from it as if it had suddenly burned him. He looked at it, breathing heavily. It rang three times, four. He picked it up. Listened. Closed his eyes.

A cop pulled him over on his way to the hospital, then went ahead of him, siren screaming. There was a young doctor with a toothbrush mustache in the emergency room. He looked at Jim with dark, emotionless eyes.

“Excuse me, I’m James Norman and—”

“I’m sorry, Mr. Norman. She died at 9:04 P.M.

He was going to faint. The world went far away and swimmy, and there was a high buzzing in his ears. His eyes wandered without purpose, seeing green tiled walls, a wheeled stretcher glittering under the overhead fluorescents, a nurse with her cap on crooked. Time to freshen up, honey. An orderly was leaning against the wall outside Emergency Room No. 1. Wearing dirty whites with a few drops of drying blood splattered across the front. Cleaning his fingernails with a knife. The orderly looked up and grinned into Jim’s eyes. The orderly was David Garcia.

Jim fainted.

Funeral. Like a dance in three acts. The house. The funeral parlor. The graveyard. Faces coming out of nowhere, whirling close, whirling off into the darkness again. Sally’s mother, her eyes

streaming tears behind a black veil. Her father, looking shocked and old. Simmons. Others. They introduced themselves and shook his hand. He nodded, not remembering their names. Some of the women brought food, and one lady brought an apple pie and someone ate a piece and when he went out in the kitchen he saw it sitting on the counter, cut wide open and drooling juice into the pie plate like amber blood and he thought: Should have a big scoop of vanilla ice cream right on top.

He felt his hands and legs trembling, wanting to go across to the counter and throw the pie against the wall.

And then they were going and he was watching himself, the way you watch yourself in a home movie, as he shook hands and nodded and said: Thank you ... Yes, I will... Thank you ... I'm sure she is ... Thank you ...

When they were gone, the house was his again. He went over to the mantel. It was cluttered with souvenirs of their marriage. A stuffed dog with jeweled eyes that she had won at Coney Island on their honeymoon. Two leather folders—his diploma from B.U. and hers from U. Mass. A giant pair of styrofoam dice she had given him as a gag after he had dropped sixteen dollars in Pinky Silverstein's poker game a year or so before. A thin china cup she had bought in a Cleveland junk shop last year. In the middle of the mantel, their wedding picture. He turned it over and then sat down in his chair and looked at the blank TV set. An idea began to form behind his eyes.

An hour later the phone rang, jolting him out of a light doze. He groped for it.

"You're next, Norm."

"Vinnie?"

"Man, she was like one of those clay pigeons in a shooting gallery. Wham and splatter."

“I’ll be at the school tonight, Vinnie. Room 33. I’ll leave the lights off. It’ll be just like the overpass that day. I think I can even provide the train.”

“Just want to end it all, is that right?”

“That’s right,” Jim said. “You be there.”

“Maybe.”

“You’ll be there,” Jim said, and hung up.

It was almost dark when he got to the school. He parked in his usual slot, opened the back door with his passkey, and went first to the English Department office on the second floor. He let himself in, opened the record cabinet, and began to flip through the records. He paused about halfway through the stack and took out one called Hi-Fi Sound Effects. He turned it over. The third cut on the A side was “Freight Train: 3:04.” He put the album on top of the department’s portable stereo and took *Raising Demons* out of his overcoat pocket. He turned to a marked passage, read something, and nodded. He turned out the lights.

Room 33.

He set up the stereo system, stretching the speakers to their widest separation, and then put on the freight-train cut. The sound came swelling up out of nothing until it filled the whole room with the harsh clash of diesel engines and steel on steel.

With his eyes closed, he could almost believe he was under the Broad Street trestle, driven to his knees, watching as the savage little drama worked to its inevitable conclusion ...

He opened his eyes, rejected the record, then reset it. He sat behind his desk and opened *Raising Demons* to a chapter entitled “Malefic Spirits and How to Call Them.” His lips moved as he read, and he

paused at intervals to take objects out of his pocket and lay them on his desk.

First, an old and creased Kodak of him and his brother, standing on the lawn in front of the Broad Street apartment house where they had lived. They both had identical crew cuts, and both of them were smiling shyly into the camera. Second, a small bottle of blood. He had caught a stray alley cat and slit its throat with his pocketknife. Third, the pocketknife itself. Last, a sweatband ripped from the lining of an old Little League baseball cap. Wayne's cap. Jim had kept it in secret hopes that someday he and Sally would have a son to wear it.

He got up, went to the window, looked out. The parking lot was empty.

He began to push the school desks toward the walls, leaving a rough circle in the middle of the room. When that was done he got chalk from his desk drawer and, following the diagram in the book exactly and using a yardstick, he drew a pentagram on the floor.

His breath was coming harder now. He turned off the lights, gathered his objects in one hand, and began to recite.

"Dark Father, hear me for my soul's sake. I am one who promises sacrifice. I am one who begs a dark boon for sacrifice. I am one who seeks vengeance of the left hand. I bring blood in promise of sacrifice."

He screwed the cap off the jar, which had originally held peanut butter, and splashed it within the pentagram.

Something happened in the darkened schoolroom. It was not possible to say exactly what, but the air became heavier. There was a thickness in it that seemed to fill the throat and the belly with gray steel. The deep silence grew, swelled with something unseen.

He did as the old rites instructed.

Now there was a feeling in the air that reminded Jim of the time he had taken a class to visit a huge power station—a feeling that the very air was crammed with electric potential and was vibrating. And then a voice, curiously low and unpleasant, spoke to him.

“What do you require?”

He could not tell if he was actually hearing it or only thinking that he did. He spoke two sentences.

“It is a small boon. What do you offer?”

Jim spoke two words.

“Both,” the voice whispered. “Right and left. Agreed?”

“Yes.”

“Then give me what is mine.”

He opened his pocketknife, turned to his desk, laid his right hand down flat, and hacked off his right index finger with four hard chops. Blood flew across the blotter in dark patterns. It didn't hurt at all. He brushed the finger aside and switched the pocketknife to his right hand. Cutting off the left finger was harder. His right hand felt awkward and alien with the missing finger, and the knife kept slipping. At last, with an impatient grunt, he threw the knife away, snapped the bone, and ripped the finger free. He picked them both up like breadsticks and threw them into the pentagram. There was a bright flash of light, like an old-fashioned photographer's flashpowder. No smoke, he noted. No smell of brimstone.

“What objects have you brought?”

“A photograph. A band of cloth that has been dipped in his sweat.”

“Sweat is precious,” the voice remarked, and there was a cold greed in the tone that made Jim shiver. “Give them to me.”

Jim threw them into the pentagram. The light flashed.

“It is good,” the voice said.

“If they come,” Jim said.

There was no response. The voice was gone—if it had ever been there. He leaned closer to the pentagram. The picture was still there, but blackened and charred. The sweatband was gone.

In the street there was a noise, faint at first, then swelling. A hot rod equipped with glasspack mufflers, first turning onto Davis Street, then approaching. Jim sat down, listening to hear if it would go by or turn in.

It turned in.

Footfalls on the stairs, echoing.

Robert Lawson’s high-pitched giggle, then someone going “Shhhhh!” and then Lawson’s giggle again. The footfalls came closer, lost their echo, and then the glass door at the head of the stairs banged open.

“Yoo-hoo, Normie!” David Garcia called, falsetto.

“You there, Normie?” Lawson whispered, and then giggled. “Vas you dere, Cholly?”

Vinnie didn’t speak, but as they advanced up the hall, Jim could see their shadows. Vinnie’s was the tallest, and he was holding a long object in one hand. There was a light snick of sound, and the long object became longer still.

They were standing by the door, Vinnie in the middle. They were all holding knives.

“Here we come, man,” Vinnie said softly. “Here we come for your ass.”

Jim turned on the record player.

“Jesus!” Garcia called out, jumping. “What’s that?”

The freight train was coming closer. You could almost feel the walls thrumming with it.

The sound no longer seemed to be coming out of the speakers but from down the hall, from down tracks someplace far away in time as well as space.

“I don’t like this, man,” Lawson said.

“It’s too late,” Vinnie said. He stepped forward and gestured with the knife. “Give us your money, dad.”

... let us go ...

Garcia recoiled. “What the hell—”

But Vinnie never hesitated. He motioned the others to spread out, and the thing in his eyes might have been relief.

“Come on, kid, how much you got?” Garcia asked suddenly.

“Four cents,” Jim said. It was true. He had picked them out of the penny jar in the bedroom. The most recent date was 1956.

“You fuckin’ liar.”

... leave him alone ...

Lawson glanced over his shoulder and his eyes widened. The walls had become misty, insubstantial. The freight train wailed. The light from the parking-lot streetlamp had reddened, like the neon Burrets Building Company sign, stuttering against the twilight sky.

Something was walking out of the pentagram, something with the face of a small boy perhaps twelve years old. A boy with a crew cut.

Garcia darted forward and punched Jim in the mouth. He could smell mixed garlic and pepperoni on his breath. It was all slow and painless.

Jim felt a sudden heaviness, like lead, in his groin, and his bladder let go. He looked down and saw a dark patch appear and spread on his pants.

“Look, Vinnie, he wet himself!” Lawson cried out. The tone was right, but the expression on his face was one of horror—the expression of a puppet that has come to life only to find itself on strings.

“Let him alone,” the Wayne-thing said, but it was not Wayne’s voice—it was the cold, greedy voice of the thing from the pentagram. “Run, Jimmy! Run! Run! Run!”

Jim slipped to his knees and a hand slapped down on his back, groping for purchase, and found none.

He looked up and saw Vinnie, his face stretched into a caricature of hatred, drive his knife into the Wayne-thing just below the breastbone ... and then scream, his face collapsing in on itself, charring, blackening, becoming awful.

Then he was gone.

Garcia and Lawson struck a moment later, writhed, charred, and disappeared.

Jim lay on the floor, breathing harshly. The sound of the freight train faded.

His brother was looking down at him.

“Wayne?” he breathed.

And the face changed. It seemed to melt and run together. The eyes went yellow, and a horrible, grinning malignancy looked out at him.

“I’ll come back, Jim,” the cold voice whispered.

And it was gone.

He got up slowly and turned off the record player with one mangled hand. He touched his mouth. It was bleeding from Garcia’s punch. He went over and turned on the lights. The room was empty. He looked out into the parking lot and that was empty, too, except for one hubcap that reflected the moon in idiot pantomime. The classroom air smelled old and stale—the atmosphere of tombs. He erased the pentagram on the floor and then began to straighten up the desks for the substitute the next day. His fingers hurt very badly—what fingers? He would have to see a doctor. He closed the door and went downstairs slowly, holding his hands to his chest. Halfway down, something—a shadow, or perhaps only an intuition—made him whirl around.

Something unseen seemed to leap back.

Jim remembered the warning in *Raising Demons*—the danger involved. You could perhaps summon them, perhaps cause them to do your work. You could even get rid of them.

But sometimes they come back.

He walked down the stairs again, wondering if the nightmare was over after all.

NIGHTMARES & DREAMSCAPES
SORRY, RIGHT NUMBER...



SORRY, RIGHT NUMBER

Stephen King

AUTHOR'S NOTE: Screenplay abbreviations are simple and exist, in this author's opinion, mostly to make those who write screenplays feel like lodge brothers. In any case, you should be aware that CU means close-up; ECU means extreme close-up; INT. means interior; EXT means exterior; B.G. means background; POV means point of view. Probably most of you knew all that stuff to begin with, right?

Act I

FADE IN ON:

KATIE WEIDERMAN'S MOUTH, ECU

She's speaking into the telephone. Pretty mouth; in a few seconds we'll see that the rest of her is just as pretty.

KATIE

Bill? Oh, he says he doesn't feel very well, but he's always like that between books ... can't sleep, thinks every headache is the first symptom of a brain tumor ... once he gets going on something new, he'll be fine.

SOUND, B.G.: THE TELEVISION.

THE CAMERA DRAWS BACK. KATIE is sitting in the kitchen phone nook, having a good gab with her sister while she idles through some catalogues. We should notice one not-quite-ordinary thing about the phone she's on: it's the sort with two lines. There are LIGHTED BUTTONS to show which ones are engaged. Right now only one—KATIE'S—is. AS KATIE CONTINUES HER CONVERSATION, THE CAMERA SWINGS AWAY FROM HER, TRACKS ACROSS THE KITCHEN, and through the arched doorway that leads into the family room.

KATIE (voice, fading)

Oh, I saw Janie Charlton today ... yes! Big as a house! ...

She fades. The TV gets louder. There are three kids: JEFF eight, CONNIE, ten, and DENNIS, thirteen. Wheel of Fortune is on, but they're not watching. Instead they're engaged in that great pastime, Fighting About What Comes On Later.

JEFF

Come onnn! It was his first book!

CONNIE

His first gross book.

DENNIS

We're gonna watch Cheers and Wings, just like we do every week, Jeff.

DENNIS speaks with the utter finality only a big brother can manage. "Wanna talk about it some more and see how much pain I can inflict on your scrawny body, Jeff?" his face says.

JEFF

Could we at least tape it?

CONNIE

We're taping CNN for Mom. She said she might be on the phone with Aunt Lois for quite awhile.

JEFF

How can you tape CNN, for God's sake? It never stops!

DENNIS

That's what she likes about it.

CONNIE

And don't say God's sake, Jeffie—you're not old enough to talk about God except in church.

JEFF

Then don't call me Jeffie.

CONNIE

Jeffie, Jeffie, Jeffie.

JEFF gets up, walks to the window, and looks out into the dark. He's really upset. DENNIS and CONNIE, in the grand tradition of older brothers and sisters, are delighted to see it.

DENNIS

Poor Jeffie.

CONNIE

I think he's gonna commit suicide.

JEFF (turns to them)

It was his first book! Don't you guys even care?

CONNIE

Rent it down at the Video Stop tomorrow, if you want to see it so bad.

JEFF

They don't rent R-rated pictures to little kids and you know it!

CONNIE (dreamily)

Shut up, it's Vanna! I love Vanna!

JEFF

Dennis—

DENNIS

Go ask Dad to tape it on the VCR in his office and quit being such a totally annoying little booger.

JEFF crosses the room, poking his tongue out at Vanna White as he goes. THE CAMERA FOLLOWS as he goes into the kitchen.

KATIE

... so when he asked me if Polly had tested strep positive, I had to remind him she's away at prep school ... and God, Lois, I miss her ...

JEFF is just passing through, on his way to the stairs.

KATIE

Will you kids please be quiet?

JEFF (glum)

They'll be quiet. Now.

He goes up the stairs, a little dejected. KATIE looks after him for a moment, loving and worried.

KATIE

They're squabbling again. Polly used to keep them in line, but now that she's away at school ... I don't know ... maybe sending her to Bolton wasn't such a hot idea. Sometimes when she calls home she sounds so unhappy ...

INT. BELA LUGOSI AS DRACULA, CU

Drac's standing at the door of his Transylvanian castle. Someone has pasted a comic-balloon coming out of his mouth which reads: "Listen! My children of the night! What music they make!" The poster is on a door but we only see this as JEFF opens it and goes into his father's study.

INT. A PHOTOGRAPH OF KATIE, CU

THE CAMERA HOLDS, THEN PANS SLOWLY RIGHT. We pass another photo, this one of POLLY, the daughter away at school. She's a lovely girl of sixteen or so. Past POLLY is DENNIS ... then CONNIE ... then JEFF.

THE CAMERA CONTINUES TO PAN AND ALSO WIDENS OUT so we can see BILL WEIDERMAN, a man of about forty-four. He looks tired. He's peering into the word-processor on his desk, but his mental crystal ball must be taking the night off, because the screen is blank. On the walls we see framed book-covers. All of them are spooky. One of the titles is Ghost Kiss.

JEFF comes up quietly behind his dad. The carpet muffles his feet. BILL sighs and shuts off the word-cruncher. A moment later JEFF claps his hands on his father's shoulders.

JEFF

BOOGA-BOOGA!

BILL

Hi, Jeffie.

He turns in his chair to look at his son, who is disappointed.

JEFF

How come you didn't get scared?

BILL

Scaring is my business. I'm case-hardened. Something wrong?

JEFF

Daddy, can I watch the first hour of Ghost Kiss and you tape the rest? Dennis and Connie are hogging everything.

BILL swivels to look at the book-jacket, bemused.

BILL

You sure you want to watch that, champ? It's pretty—

JEFF

Yes!

INT. KATIE, IN THE PHONE NOOK

In this shot, we clearly see the stairs leading to her husband's study behind her.

KATIE

I really think Jeff needs the orthodontic work but you know Bill—

The other line rings. The other light stutters.

KATIE

That's just the other line, Bill will—

But now we see BILL and JEFF coming downstairs behind her.

BILL

Honey, where're the blank videotapes? I can't find any in the study and—

KATIE (to BILL)

Wait!

(to LOIS)

Gonna put you on hold a sec, Lo.

She does. Now both lines are blinking. She pushes the top one, where the new call has just come in.

KATIE

Hello, Weiderman residence.

SOUND: DESPERATE SOBBING.

SOBBING VOICE (filter)

Take... please take ... t-t—

KATIE

Polly? Is that you? What's wrong?

SOUND: SOBBING. It's awful, heartbreaking.

SOBBING VOICE (filter)

Please—quick—

SOUND: SOBBING ... Then, CLICK! A broken connection.

KATIE

Polly, calm down! Whatever it is can't be that b—

HUM OF AN OPEN LINE

JEFF has wandered toward the TV room, hoping to find a blank tape.

BILL

Who was that?

Without looking at her husband or answering him, KATIE slams the lower button in again.

KATIE

Lois? Listen, I'll call you back. That was Polly, and she sounded very upset. No ... she hung up. Yes. I will. Thanks.

She hangs up.

BILL (concerned)

It was Polly?

KATIE

Crying her head off. It sounded like she was trying to say "Please take me home" ... I knew that damn school was bumming her out ... Why I ever let you talk me into it ...

She's rummaging frantically on her little phone desk. Catalogues go slithering to the floor around her stool.

KATIE

Connie did you take my address book?

CONNIE (voice)

No, Mom.

BILL pulls a battered book out of his back pocket and pages through it.

BILL

I got it. Except—

KATIE

I know, damn dorm phone is always busy. Give it to me.

BILL

Honey, calm down.

KATIE

I'll calm down after I talk to her. She is sixteen, Bill.

Sixteen-year-old girls are prone to depressive interludes. Sometimes they even k ... just give me the damn number!

BILL

617-555-8641.

As she punches the numbers, THE CAMERA SLIDES IN TO CU.

KATIE

Come on, come on ... don't be busy ... just this once...

SOUND: CLICKS. A pause. Then ... the phone starts ringing.

KATIE (eyes closed)

Thank You, God.

VOICE (filter)

Hartshorn Hall, this is Frieda. If you want Christine the Sex Queen, she's still in the shower, Arnie.

KATIE

Could you call Polly to the phone? Polly Weiderman? This is Kate Weiderman. Her mother.

VOICE (filter)

Oh, jeez! Sorry. I thought—hang on, please, Mrs. Weiderman.

SOUND: THE PHONE CLUNKS DOWN.

VOICE (filter, and very faint)

Polly? Pol? ... Phone call! ... It's your mother!

INT. A WIDER ANGLE ON THE PHONE NOOK, WITH BILL.

BILL

Well?

KATIE

Somebody's getting her. I hope.

JEFF comes back in with a tape.

JEFF

I found one, Dad. Dennis hid em. As usual.

BILL

In a minute, Jeff. Go watch the tube.

JEFF

But—

BILL

I won't forget. Now go on.

JEFF goes.

KATIE

Come on, come on, come on ...

BILL

Calm down, Katie.

KATIE (snaps)

If you'd heard her, you wouldn't tell me to calm down! She sounded
—

POLLY (filter, cheery voice)

Hi, Mom!

KATIE

Pol? Honey? Are you all right?

POLLY (happy, bubbling voice)

Am I all right? I aced my bio exam, got a B on my French
Conversational Essay, and Ronnie Hansen asked me to the Harvest
Ball. I'm so all right that if one more good thing happens to me today,
I'll probably blow up like the Hindenburg.

KATIE

You didn't just call me up, crying your head off?

We see by KATE'S face that she already knows the answer to this question.

POLLY (filter)

Heck no!

KATIE

I'm glad about your test and your date, honey. I guess it was someone else. I'll call you back, okay?

POLLY (filter)

'Kay. Say hi to Dad!

KATIE

I will.

INT. THE PHONE NOOK, WIDER

BILL

She okay?

KATIE

Fine. I could have sworn it was Polly, but ... she's walking on air.

BILL

So it was a prank. Or someone who was crying so hard she dialed a wrong number ... "through a shimmering film of tears," as we veteran hacks like to say.

KATIE

It was not a prank and it was not a wrong number! It was someone in my family!

BILL

Honey, you can't know that.

KATIE

No? If Jeffie called up, just crying, would you know it was him?

BILL (struck by this)

Yeah, maybe. I guess I might.

She's not listening. She's punching numbers, fast.

BILL

Who you calling?

She doesn't answer him. SOUND: PHONE RINGS TWICE. Then:

OLDER FEMALE VOICE (filter)

Hello?

KATIE

Mom? Are you ... (She pauses) Did you call just a few seconds ago?

VOICE (filter)

No, dear ... why?

KATIE

Oh... you know these phones. I was talking to Lois and I lost the other call.

VOICE (filter)

Well, it wasn't me. Kate, I saw the prettiest dress in La Boutique today, and—

KATIE

We'll talk about it later, Mom, okay?

VOICE (filter)

Kate, are you all right?

KATIE

I have ... Mom, I think maybe I've got diarrhea. I have to go. 'Bye.

She hangs up. BILL hangs on until she does, then he bursts into wild donkey-brays of LAUGHTER.

BILL

Oh boy ... diarrhea ... I gotta remember that the next time my agent calls ... oh Katie, that was so cool—

KATIE (almost screaming)

This is not funny!

BILL stops laughing.

INT. THE TV ROOM

JEFF and DENNIS have been tussling. They stop. All three kids look toward the kitchen.

INT. THE PHONE NOOK, WITH BILL AND KATIE

KATIE

I tell you it was someone in my family and she sounded—oh, you don't understand. I knew that voice.

BILL

But if Polly's okay and your mom's okay ...

KATIE (positive)

It's Dawn.

BILL

Come on, hon, a minute ago you were sure it was Polly.

KATIE

It had to be Dawn. I was on the phone with Lois and Mom's okay so Dawn's the only other one it could have been. She's the youngest ... I could have mistaken her for Polly ... and she's out there in that farmhouse alone with the baby!

BILL (startled)

What do you mean, alone?

KATIE

Jerry's in Burlington! It's Dawn! Something's happened to Dawn!

CONNIE comes into the kitchen, worried.

CONNIE

Mom? Is Aunt Dawn okay?

BILL

So far as we know, she's fine. Take it easy, doll. Bad to buy trouble before you know it's on sale.

KATIE punches numbers and listens. SOUND: The DAH-DAH-DAH of a busy signal. KATIE hangs up. BILL looks a question at her with raised eyebrows.

KATIE

Busy.

BILL

Katie, are you sure—

KATIE

She's the only one left—it had to be her. Bill, I'm scared. Will you drive me out there?

BILL takes the phone from her.

BILL

What's her number?

KATIE

555-6169.

BILL dials. Gets a busy. Hangs up and punches 0.

OPERATOR (filter)

Operator.

BILL

I'm trying to reach my sister-in-law, operator. The line is busy. I suspect there may be a problem. Can you break into the call, please?

INT. THE DOOR TO THE TV ROOM

All three kids are standing there, silent and worried.

INT. THE PHONE NOOK, WITH BILL AND KATIE

OPERATOR (filter)

What is your name, sir?

BILL

William Weiderman. My number is—

OPERATOR (filter)

Not the William Weiderman that wrote Spider Doom?!

BILL

Yes, that was mine. If—

OPERATOR (filter)

Oh my God, I just loved that book! I love all your books! I—

BILL

I'm delighted you do. But right now my wife is very worried about her sister. If it's possible for you to—

OPERATOR (filter)

Yes, I can do that. Please give me your number, Mr. Weiderman, for the records. (She GIGGLES.) I promise not to give it out.

BILL

It's 555-4408.

OPERATOR (filter)

And the call number?

BILL (looks at KATIE)

Uh...

KATIE

555-6169.

BILL

555-6169.

OPERATOR (filter)

Just a moment, Mr. Weiderman ... Night of the Beast was also great,
by the way. Hold on.

SOUND: TELEPHONIC CLICKS AND CLACKS.

KATIE

Is she—

BILL

Yes. Just ...

There's one final CLICK.

OPERATOR (filter)

I'm sorry, Mr. Weiderman, but that line is not busy. It's off the hook. I wonder if I sent you my copy of Spider Doom—

BILL hangs up the phone.

KATIE

Why did you hang up?

BILL

She can't break in. Phone's not busy. It's off the hook.

They stare at each other bleakly.

EXT. A LOW-SLUNG SPORTS CAR PASSES THE CAMERA
NIGHT

INT. THE CAR, WITH KATIE AND BILL

KATIE'S scared. BILL, at the wheel, doesn't look exactly calm.

KATIE

Hey, Bill—tell me she's all right.

BILL

She's all right.

KATIE

Now tell me what you really think.

BILL

Jeff snuck up behind me tonight and put the old booga-booga on me. He was disappointed as hell when I didn't jump. I told him I was case-hardened. (Pause) I lied.

KATIE

Why did Jerry have to move out there when he's gone half the time?
Just her and that little tiny baby? Why?

BILL

Shh, Kate. We're almost there.

KATIE

Go faster.

EXT. THE CAR

He does. That car is smokin.

INT. THE WEIDERMAN TV ROOM

The tube's still on and the kids are still there, but the horsing around
has stopped.

CONNIE

Dennis, do you think Aunt Dawn's okay?

DENNIS (thinks she's dead, decapitated by a maniac)

Yeah. Sure she is.

INT. THE PHONE, POV FROM THE TV ROOM

Just sitting there on the wall in the phone nook, lights dark, looking
like a snake ready to strike.

FADE OUT

Act II

EXT. AN ISOLATED FARMHOUSE

A long driveway leads up to it. There's one light on in the living room. Car lights sweep up the driveway. The WEIDERMAN car pulls up close to the garage and stops.

INT. THE CAR, WITH BILL AND KATIE

KATIE

I'm scared.

BILL bends down, reaches under his seat, and brings out a pistol.

BILL (solemnly)

Booga-booga.

KATIE (total surprise)

How long have you had that?

BILL

Since last year. I didn't want to scare you or the kids. I've got a licence to carry. Come on.

EXT. BILL AND KATIE

They get out. KATIE stands by the front of the car while BILL goes to the garage and peers in.

BILL

Her car's here.

THE CAMERA TRACKS WITH THEM to the front door. Now we can hear the TV, PLAYING LOUD, BILL pushes the doorbell. We hear it inside. They wait. KATIE pushes it. Still no answer. She pushes it again and doesn't take her finger off. BILL looks down at:

EXT. THE LOCK, BILL'S POV

Big scratches on it.

EXT. BILL AND KATIE

BILL (low)

The lock's been tampered with.

KATIE looks, and whimpers. BILL tries the door. It opens. The TV is louder.

BILL

Stay behind me. Be ready to run if something happens. God, I wish I'd left you home, Kate.

He starts in. KATIE comes after him, terrified, near tears.

INT. DAWN AND JERRY'S LIVING ROOM

From this angle we see only a small section of the room. The TV is much louder. BILL enters the room, gun up. He looks to the right ... and suddenly all the tension goes out of him. He lowers the gun.

KATIE (draws up beside him)

Bill ... what ...

He points.

INT. THE LIVING ROOM, WIDE, BILL AND KATIE'S POV

The place looks like a cyclone hit it ... but it wasn't robbery and murder that caused this mess; only a healthy eighteen-month-old baby. After a strenuous day of trashing the living room, Baby got tired and Mommy got tired and they fell asleep on the couch together. The baby is in DAWN'S lap. There is a pair of Walkman earphones on her head. There are toys—tough plastic Sesame Street and PlaySkool stuff, for the most part—scattered hell to breakfast. The baby has also pulled most of the books out of the bookcase. Had a good munch on one of them, too, by the look. BILL goes over and picks it up. It is Ghost Kiss.

BILL

I've had people say they just eat my books up, but this is ridiculous.

He's amused. KATIE isn't. She walks over to her sister, ready to be mad... but she sees how really exhausted DAWN looks and softens.

INT. DAWN AND THE BABY, KATIE'S POV

Fast asleep and breathing easily, like a Raphael painting of Madonna and Child. THE CAMERA PANS DOWN TO: the Walkman. We can hear the faint strains of Huey Lewis and the News. THE CAMERA PANS A BIT FURTHER TO a Princess telephone on the table by the chair. It's off the cradle. Not much; just enough to break the connection and scare people to death.

INT. KATIE

She sighs, bends down, and replaces the phone. Then she pushes the stop button on the Walkman.

INT. DAWN, BILL, AND KATIE

DAWN wakes up when the music stops. Looks at BILL and KATIE, puzzled.

DAWN (fuzzed out)

Well ... hi.

She realizes she's got the Walkman phones on and removes them.

BILL

Hi, Dawn.

DAWN (still half asleep)

Shoulda called, guys. Place is a mess.

She smiles. She's radiant when she smiles.

KATIE

We tried. The operator told Bill the phone was off the hook. I thought something was wrong. How can you sleep with that music blasting?

DAWN

It's restful.

(Sees the gnawed book BILL'S holding)

Oh my God, Bill, I'm sorry! Justin's teething and—

BILL

There are critics who'd say he picked just the right thing to teethe on. I don't want to scare you, beautiful, but somebody's been at your front door lock with a screwdriver or something. Whoever it was forced it.

DAWN

Gosh, no! That was Jerry, last week. I locked us out by mistake and he didn't have his key and the spare wasn't over the door like it's supposed to be. He was mad because he had to take a whiz real

bad and so he took the screwdriver to it. It didn't work, either—that's one tough lock. (Pause) By the time I found my key he'd already gone in the bushes.

BILL

If it wasn't forced, how come I could just open the door and walk in?

DAWN (guiltily)

Well ... sometimes I forget to lock it.

KATIE

You didn't call me tonight, Dawn?

DAWN

Gee, no! I didn't call anyone! I was too busy chasing Justin around! He kept wanting to eat the fabric softener! Then he got sleepy and I sat down here and thought I'd listen to some tunes while I waited for your movie to come on, Bill, and I fell asleep—

At the mention of the movie BILL starts visibly and looks at the book. Then he glances at his watch.

BILL

I promised to tape it for Jeff. Come on, Katie, we've got time to get back.

KATIE

Just a second.

She picks up the phone and dials.

DAWN

Gee, Bill, do you think Jeffie's old enough to watch something like that?

BILL

It's network. They take out the blood-bags.

DAWN (confused but amiable)

Oh. That's good.

INT. KATIE, CU

DENNIS (filter)

Hello?

KATIE

Just thought you'd like to know your Aunt Dawn's fine.

DENNIS (filter)

Oh! Cool. Thanks, Mom.

INT. THE PHONE NOOK, WITH DENNIS AND THE OTHERS

He looks very relieved.

DENNIS

Aunt Dawn's okay.

INT. THE CAR, WITH BILL AND KATIE

They drive in silence for awhile.

KATIE

You think I'm a hysterical idiot, don't you?

BILL (genuinely surprised)

No! I was scared, too.

KATIE

You sure you're not mad?

BILL

I'm too relieved. (Laughs) She's sort of a scatterbrain, old Dawn, but I love her.

KATIE (leans over and kisses him)

I love you. You're a sweet man.

BILL

I'm the boogeyman!

KATIE

I am not fooled, sweetheart.

EXT. THE CAR

PASSES THE CAMERA AND WE DISSOLVE TO:

INT. JEFF, IN BED

His room is dark. The covers are pulled up to his chin.

JEFF

You promise to tape the rest?

CAMERA WIDENS OUT so we can see BILL, sitting on the bed.

BILL

I promise.

JEFF

I especially liked the part where the dead guy ripped off the punk rocker's head.

BILL

Well ... they used to take out all the blood-bags.

JEFF

What, Dad?

BILL

Nothing. I love you, Jeffie.

JEFF

I love you, too. So does Rambo.

JEFF holds up a stuffed dragon of decidedly unmilitant aspect. BILL kisses the dragon, then JEFF.

BILL

'Night.

JEFF

'Night. (As BILL reaches his door) Glad Aunt Dawn was okay.

BILL

Me too.

He goes out.

INT. TV, CU

A guy who looks like he died in a car crash about two weeks prior to filming (and has since been subjected to a lot of hot weather) is staggering out of a crypt. THE CAMERA WIDENS to show BILL, releasing the VCR PAUSE button.

KATIE (voice)

Booga-booga.

BILL looks around companionably. THE CAMERA WIDENS OUT MORE to show KATIE, wearing a sexy nightgown.

BILL

Same to you. I missed the first forty seconds or so after the break. I had to kiss Rambo.

KATIE

You sure you're not mad at me, Bill?

He goes to her and kisses her.

BILL

Not even a smidge.

KATIE

It's just that I could have sworn it was one of mine. You know what I mean? One of mine?

BILL

Yes.

KATIE

I can still hear those sobs. So lost ... so heartbroken.

BILL

Kate, have you ever thought you recognized someone on the street, and called her, and when she finally turned around it was a total stranger?

KATIE

Yes, once. In Seattle. I was in a mall and I thought I saw my old roommate. I ... oh. I see what you're saying.

BILL

Sure. There are sound-alikes as well as look-alikes.

KATIE

But... you know your own. At least I thought so until tonight.

She puts her cheek on his shoulder, looking troubled.

KATIE

I was so positive it was Polly ...

BILL

Because you've been worried about her getting her feet under her at the new school ... but judging from the stuff she told you tonight, I'd say she's doing just fine in that department. Wouldn't you?

KATIE

Yes... I guess I would.

BILL

Let it go, hon.

KATIE (looks at him closely)

I hate to see you looking so tired. Hurry up and have an idea, you.

BILL

Well, I'm trying.

KATIE

You coming to bed?

BILL

Soon as I finish taping this for Jeff.

KATIE (amused)

Bill, that machine was made by Japanese technicians who think of damned near everything. It'll run on its own.

BILL

Yeah, but it's been a long time since I've seen this one, and ...

KATIE

Okay. Enjoy. I think I'll be awake for a little while. (Pause) I've got a few ideas of my own.

BILL (smiles)

Yeah?

KATIE

Yeah.

She starts out, showing a lot of leg, then turns in the doorway as something else strikes her.

KATIE

If they show that part where the punk's head gets—

BILL (guiltily)

I'll edit it.

KATIE

'Night. And thanks again. For everything.

She leaves. BILL sits in his chair.

INT. TV, CU

A couple is necking in a car. Suddenly the passenger door is ripped open by the dead guy and we DISSOLVE TO:

INT. KATIE, IN BED

It's dark. She's asleep. She wakes up ... sort of.

KATIE (sleepy)

Hey, big guy—

She feels for him, but his side of the bed is empty, the coverlet still pulled up. She sits up. Looks at:

INT. A CLOCK ON THE NIGHT-TABLE, KATIE'S POV

It says 2:03 A.M. Then it flashes to 2:04.

INT. KATIE

Fully awake now. And concerned. She gets up, puts on her robe, and leaves the bedroom.

INT. THE TV SCREEN, CU

Snow.

KATIE (voice, approaching)

Bill? Honey? You okay? Bill? Bi—

INT. KATIE, IN BILL'S STUDY

She's frozen, wide-eyed with horror.

INT. BILL, IN HIS CHAIR

He's slumped to one side, eyes closed, hand inside his shirt. DAWN was sleeping. BILL is not.

EXT. A COFFIN, BEING LOWERED INTO A GRAVE

MINISTER (voice)

And so we commit the earthly remains of William Weiderman to the ground, confident of his spirit and soul. "Be ye not cast down, brethren ..."

EXT. GRAVESIDE

All the WEIDERMANS are ranged here. KATIE and POLLY wear identical black dresses and veils. CONNIE wears a black skirt and white blouse. DENNIS and JEFF wear black suits. JEFF is crying. He has Rambo the Dragon under his arm for a little extra comfort.

CAMERA MOVES IN ON KATIE. Tears course slowly down her cheeks. She bends and gets a handful of earth. Tosses it into the grave.

KATIE

Love you, big guy.

EXT. JEFF

Weeping.

EXT. LOOKING DOWN INTO THE GRAVE

Scattered earth on top of the coffin.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. THE GRAVE

A GROUNDSKEEPER pats the last sod into place.

GROUNDSKEEPER

My wife says she wishes you'd written a couple more before you had your heart attack, mister. (Pause) I like Westerns, m'self.

THE GROUNDSKEEPER walks away, whistling.

DISSOLVE TO:

EXT. A CHURCH DAY

TITLE CARD: FIVE YEARS LATER

THE WEDDING MARCH is playing. POLLY, older and radiant with joy, emerges into a pelting shower of rice. She's in a wedding gown, her new husband by her side.

Celebrants throwing rice line either side of the path. From behind the bride and groom come others. Among them are KATIE, DENNIS, CONNIE, and JEFF ... all five years older. With KATIE is another man. This is HANK. In the interim, KATIE has also taken a husband.

POLLY turns and her mother is there.

POLLY

Thank you, Mom.

KATIE (crying)

Oh doll, you're so welcome.

They embrace. After a moment POLLY draws away and looks at HANK. There is a brief moment of tension, and then POLLY embraces HANK, too.

POLLY

Thank you too, Hank. I'm sorry I was such a creep for so long ...

HANK (easily)

You were never a creep, Pol. A girl only has one father.

CONNIE

Throw it! Throw it!

After a moment, POLLY throws her bouquet.

EXT. THE BOUQUET, CU, SLOW MOTION

Turning and turning through the air.

DISSOLVES TO:

INT. THE STUDY, WITH KATIE NIGHT

The word-processor has been replaced by a wide lamp looming over a stack of blueprints. The book jackets have been replaced by

photos of buildings. Ones that have first been built in HANK'S mind, presumably.

KATIE is looking at the desk, thoughtful and a little sad.

HANK (voice)

Coming to bed, Kate?

She turns and THE CAMERA WIDENS OUT to give us HANK. He's wearing a robe over pajamas. She comes to him and gives him a little hug, smiling. Maybe we notice a few streaks of gray in her hair; her pretty pony has done its fair share of running since BILL died.

KATIE

In a little while. A woman doesn't see her first one get married every day, you know.

HANK

I know.

THE CAMERA FOLLOWS as they walk from the work area of the study to the more informal area. This is much the same as it was in the old days, with a coffee table, stereo, TV, couch, and BILL'S old easy-chair. She looks at this.

HANK

You still miss him, don't you?

KATIE

Some days more than others. You didn't know, and Polly didn't remember.

HANK (gently)

Remember what, doll?

KATIE

Polly got married on the five-year anniversary of Bill's death.

HANK (hugs her)

Come on to bed, why don't you?

KATIE

In a little while.

HANK

Okay. Maybe I'll still be awake.

KATIE

Got a few ideas, do you?

HANK

I might.

KATIE

That's nice.

He kisses her, then leaves, closing the door behind him. KATIE sits in BILL'S old chair. Close by, on the coffee table, is a remote control for the TV and an extension phone. KATIE looks at the blank TV, and THE CAMERA MOVES IN on her face. One tear rims one eye, sparkling like a sapphire.

KATIE

I do still miss you, big guy. Lots and lots. Every day. And you know what? It hurts.

The tear falls. She picks up the TV remote and pushes the on button.

INT. TV, KATIE'S POV

An ad for Ginsu Knives comes to an end and is replaced by a STAR LOGO.

ANNOUNCER (voice)

Now back to Channel 63's Thursday night Star Time Movie... Ghost Kiss.

The logo DISSOLVES INTO a guy who looks like he died in a car crash about two weeks ago and has since been subjected to a lot of hot weather. He comes staggering out of the same old crypt.

INT. KATIE

Terribly startled—almost horrified. She hits the OFF button on the remote control. The TV blinks off.

KATIE'S face begins to work. She struggles against the impending emotional storm, but the coincidence of the movie is just one thing too many on what must have already been one of the most emotionally trying days of her life. The dam breaks and she begins to sob ... terrible heartbroken sobs. She reaches out for the little table by the chair, meaning to put the remote control on it, and knocks the phone onto the floor.

SOUND: THE HUM OF AN OPEN LINE.

Her tear-stained face grows suddenly still as she looks at the telephone. Something begins to fill it ... an idea? an intuition? Hard to tell. And maybe it doesn't matter.

INT. THE TELEPHONE, KATIE'S POV

THE CAMERA MOVES IN TO ECU ... MOVES IN until the dots in the off-the-hook receiver look like chasms.

SOUND OF OPEN-LINE BUZZ UP TO LOUD.

WE GO INTO THE BLACK ... and hear

BILL (voice)

Who are you calling? Who do you want to call? Who would you call, if it wasn't too late?

INT. KATIE

There is now a strange hypnotized look on her face. She reaches down, scoops the telephone up, and punches in numbers, seemingly at random.

SOUND: RINGING PHONE.

KATIE continues to look hypnotized. The look holds until the phone is answered... and she hears herself on the other end of the line.

KATIE (voice, filter)

Hello, Weiderman residence.

KATIE—our present-day KATIE with the streaks of gray in her hair—goes on sobbing, yet an expression of desperate hope is trying to be born on her face. On some level she understands that the depth of her grief has allowed a kind of telephonic time-travel. She's trying to talk, to force the words out.

KATIE (sobbing)

Take... please take ... t-t—

INT. KATIE, IN THE PHONE NOOK, REPRISE

It's five years ago. BILL is standing beside her, looking concerned. JEFF is wandering off to look for a blank tape in the other room.

KATIE

Polly? What's wrong?

INT. KATIE IN THE STUDY

KATIE (sobbing)

Please—quick—

SOUND: CLICK OF A BROKEN CONNECTION

KATIE (screaming)

Take him to the hospital! If you want him to live, take him to the hospital! He's going to have a heart attack! He—

SOUND: HUM OF AN OPEN LINE

Slowly, very slowly, KATIE hangs up the telephone. Then, after a moment, she picks it up again. She speaks aloud with no self-consciousness whatever. Probably doesn't even know she's doing it.

KATIE

I dialed the old number. I dialed—

SLAM CUT TO:

INT. BILL, IN THE PHONE NOOK WITH KATIE BESIDE HIM

He's just taken the phone from KATIE and is speaking to the operator.

OPERATOR (filter, GIGGLES)

I promise not to give it out.

BILL

It's 555—

SLAM CUT TO:

INT. KATIE, IN BILL'S OLD CHAIR, CU

KATIE (finishes)

-4408.

INT. THE PHONE, CU

KATIE'S trembling finger carefully picks out the number, and we hear the corresponding tones: 555-4408.

INT. KATIE, IN BILL'S OLD CHAIR, CU

She closes her eyes as the PHONE BEGINS TO RING. Her face is filled with an agonizing mixture of hope and fear. If only she can have one more chance to pass the vital message on, it says... just one more chance.

KATIE (low)

Please ... please ...

RECORDED VOICE (filter)

You have reached a non-working number. Please hang up and dial again. If you need assistance—

KATIE hangs up again. Tears stream down her cheeks. THE CAMERA PANS AWAY AND DOWN to the telephone.

INT. THE PHONE NOOK, WITH KATIE AND BILL, REPRISÉ

BILL

So it was a prank. Or someone who was crying so hard she dialed a wrong number ... "through a shimmering film of tears," as we veteran hacks like to say.

KATIE

It was not a prank and it was not a wrong number! It was someone in my family!

INT. KATIE (PRESENT DAY) IN BILL'S STUDY

KATIE

Yes. Someone in my family. Someone very close. (Pause) Me.

She suddenly throws the phone across the room. Then she begins to SOB AGAIN and puts her hands over her face. THE CAMERA HOLDS on her for a moment, then DOLLIES ACROSS TO

INT. THE PHONE

It lies on the carpet, looking both bland and somehow ominous. CAMERA MOVES IN TO ECU—the holes in the receiver once more look like huge dark chasms. We HOLD, then

FADE TO BLACK.

SQUAD D

Stephen King

Billy Clewson died all at once, with nine of the ten other members of D Squad on April 8, 1974. It took his mother two years, but she got started right away on the afternoon the telegram announcing her son's death came, in fact. Dale Clewson simply sat on the bench in the front hall for five minutes, the sheet of yellow flimsy paper dangling from his fingers, not sure if he was going to faint or puke or scream or what. When he was able to get up, he went into the living room. He was in time to observe Andrea down the last swallow of the first drink and pour the post-Billy era's second drink. A good many more drinks followed - it was really amazing, how many drinks that small and seemingly frail woman had been able to pack into a two-year period. The written cause - that which appeared on her death certificate - was liver dysfunction and renal failure. Both Dale and the family doctor knew that was formalistic icing on an extremely alcoholic cake - baba au rum, perhaps. But only Dale knew there was a third level. The Viet Cons had killed their son in a place called Ky Doe, and Billy's death had killed his mother.

It was three years - three years almost to the day - after Billy's death on the bridge that Dale Clewson began to believe that he must be going mad.

Nine, he thought. There were nine. There were always nine. Until now.

Were there? His mind replied to itself. Are you sure? Maybe you really counted - the lieutenant's letter said there were nine, and Bortman's letter said there were nine. So just how can you be so sure? Maybe you just assumed.

But he hadn't just assumed, and he could be sure because he knew how many nine was, and there had been nine boys in the D Squad photograph which had come in the mail, along with Lieutenant Anderson's letter.

You could be wrong, his mind insisted with an assurance that was slightly hysterical. You're been through a lot these last couple of

years, what with losing first Billy and then Andrea. You could be wrong.

It was really surprising, he thought, to what insane lengths the human mind would go to protect its own sanity.

He put his finger down on the new figure - a boy of Billy's age, but with blonde crewcut hair, looking no more than sixteen, surely too young to be on the killing ground. He was sitting cross-legged in front of Gibson, who had, according to Billy's letters, played the guitar, and Kimberley, who told lots of dirty Jokes. The boy with the blonde hair was squinting slightly into the sun - so were several of the others, but they had always been there before. The new boy's fatigue shirt was open, his dog tags lying against his hairless chest.

Dale went into the kitchen, sorted through what he and Andrea had always called "the jumble drawers," and came up with an old, scratched magnifying glass. He took it and the picture over the living room window, tilted the picture so there was no glare, and held the glass over the new boy's dog-tags. He couldn't read them. Thought, in fact, that the tags were both turned over and lying face down against the skin.

And yet, a suspicion had dawned in his mind - it ticked there like the clock on the mantle. He had been about to wind that clock when he had noticed the change in the picture. Now he put the picture back in its accustomed place, between a photograph of Andrea and Billy's graduation picture, found the key to the clock. And wound it.

Lieutenant's Anderson's letter had been simple enough. Now Dale found it in his study desk and read it again. Typed lines on Army stationary. The prescribed follow-up to the telegram, Dale had supposed. First: Telegram. Second: Letter of Condolence from Lieutenant. Third: Coffin, One Boy Enclosed. He had noticed then and noticed again now that the typewriter Anderson used had a Flying "o". Clewson kept coming out Clewson.

Andrea had wanted to tear the letter up. Dale insisted that they keep it. Now he was glad.

Billy's squad and two others had been involved in a flank sweep of a jungle quadrant of which Ky Doe was the only village. Enemy contact had been anticipated, Anderson's letter said, but there hadn't been any. The Cong which had been reliably reported to be in the area had simply melted away into the jungle - it was a trick with which the American soldiers had become very familiar over the previous ten years or so.

Dale could imagine them heading back to their base at Homan, happy, relieved. Squads A and C had waded across the Ky River, which was almost dry. Squad D used the bridge. Halfway across, it blew up. Perhaps it had been detonated from downstream. More likely, someone - perhaps even Billy himself - had stepped on the wrong board. All nine of them had been killed. Not a single survivor.

God - if there really is such a being - is usually kinder than that, Dale thought. He put Lieutenant Anderson's letter back and took out Josh Bortman's letter. It had been written on blue-lined paper from what looked like a child's tablet. Bortman's handwriting was nearly illegible, the scrawl made worse by the writing implement - a soft-lead pencil. Obviously blunt to start with, it must have been no more than a nub by the time Bortman signed his name at the bottom. In several places Bortman had borne down hard enough with his instrument to tear the paper.

It had been Bortman, the tenth man, who sent Dale and Andrea the squad picture, already framed, the glass over the photo miraculously unbroken in its long trip from Homan to Saigon to San Francisco and finally to Binghamton, New York.

Bortman's letter was anguished. He called the other nine "the best friends I ever had in my life, I loved them all like they was my brothers."

Dale held the blue-lined paper in his hand and looked blankly through his study door and toward the sound of the ticking clock on the mantelpieces. When the letter came, in early May of 1974, he had been too full of his own anguish to really consider Bortman's. Now he supposed he could understand it - a little, anyway. Bortman had been feeling a deep and inarticulate guilt. Nine letters from his hospital bed on the Homan base, all in that pained scrawl, all probably written with that same soft-lead pencil. The expense of having nine enlargements of the Squad D photograph made, and framed, and mailed off. Rites Of atonement with a soft-lead pencil, Dale thought, folding the letter again and putting it back in the drawer with Anderson's. As if he had killed them by taking their picture. That's really what was between the lines, wasn't it? "Please don't hate me, Mr. Clewson, please don't think I killed your son and the other's by—"

In the other room the mantelpiece clock softly began to chime the hour of five.

Dale went back into the living room, and took the picture down again.

What you're talking about is madness.

Looked at the boy with the short blonde hair again.

I loved them all like they was my brothers.

Turned the picture over.

Please don't think I killed your son - all of your sons - by taking their picture. Please don't hate me because I was in the Homan base hospital with bleeding haemorrhoids instead of on the Ky Doe bridge with the best friends I ever had in my life. Please don't hate me, because I finally caught up, it took me ten years of trying, but I finally caught up.

Written on the back, in the same soft-lead pencil, was this notation:

Jack Bradley Omaha, Neb.

Billy Clewson Binghamton, NY.

Rider Dotson Oneonta, NY

Charlie Gibson Payson, ND

Bobby Kale Henderson, IA

Jack Kimberley Truth or Consequences. NM

Andy Moulton Faraday, LA Staff Sgt. I

Jimmy Oliphant Beson, Del.

Asley St. Thomas Anderson, Ind.

*Josh Bortman Castle Rock, Me.

He had put his own name last, Dale saw - he had seen all of this before, or course, and had noticed it... but had never really noticed it until now, perhaps. He had put his name last, out of alphabetical order, and with an asterisk.

The asterisk means "still alive." The asterisk means "don't hate me."

Ah, but what you're thinking is madness, and you damned well know it.

Nevertheless, he went to the telephone, dialed 0, and ascertained that the area code for Maine was 207. He dialed Maine directory assistance, and ascertained that there was a single Bortman family in Castle Rock.

He thanked the operator, wrote the number down, and looked at the telephone.

You don't really intend to call those people, do you?

No answer - only the sound of the ticking clock. He had put the picture on the sofa and now he looked at it - looked first at his own son, his hair pulled back behind his head, a bravo little moustache trying to grow on his upper lip, frozen forever at the age of twenty-one, and then at the new boy in that old picture, the boy with the short blonds hair, the boy whose dog-tags were twisted so they lay face-down and unreadable against his chest. He thought of the way Josh Bortman had carefully segregated himself from the others, thought of the asterisk, and suddenly his eyes filled with warm tears.

I never hated you, son, he thought. Nor did Andrea, for all her grief. Maybe I should have picked up a pen and dropped you a note saying so, but honest to Christ, the thought never crossed my mind.

He picked up the phone now and dialed the Bortman number in Castle Rock, Maine.

Busy.

He hung up and sat for five minutes, looking out at the street where Billy had learned to ride first a trike, then a bike with trainer wheels, then a two-wheeler. At eighteen he had brought home the final improvement - a Yamaha 500. For just a moment he could see Billy with paralyzing clarity, as if he might walk through the door and sit down.

He dialed the Bortman number again. This time it rang. The voice on the other end managed to convey an unmistakable impression of wariness in just two syllables. "Hello?" At that same moment, Dale's eyes fell on the dial of his wristwatch and read the date - not for the first time that day, but it was the first time it really sunk in. It was April 9th. Billy and the others had died eleven years ago yesterday. They -

"Hello?" the voice repeated sharply. "Answer me, or I'm hanging up! Which one are you?"

Which one are you? He stood in the ticking living room, cold, listening to words croak out of him mouth.

“My name is Dale Clewson, Mr. Bortman. My son—”

“Clewson. Billy Clewson’s father.” Now the voice was flat, inflectionless.

“Yes, that’s—”

“So you say.”

Dale could find no reply. For the first time in his life, he really was tongue-tied.

“And has your picture of Squad D changed, too?”

“Yes.” It came out in a strangled little gasp.

Bortman’s voice remained inflectionless, but it was nonetheless filled with savagery. “You listen to me, and tell the others. There’s going to be tracer equipment on my phone by this afternoon. If it’s some kind of joke, you fellows are going to be laughing all the way to jail, I can assure you.”

“Mr. Bortman—”

“Shut up! First someone calling himself Peter Moulton calls, supposedly from Louisiana, and tells my wife that our boy has suddenly showed up in a picture Josh sent them of Squad D. She’s still having hysterics over that when a woman purporting to be Bobby Kale’s mother calls with the same insane story. Next, Oliphant! Five minutes ago, Rider Dotson’s brother! He says. Now you.”

“But Mr. Bortman—”

“My wife is Upstairs sedated, and if all of this is a case or ‘Have you got Prince Albert in a can,’ I swear to God -”

“You know it isn’t a joke,” Dale whispered. His fingers felt cold and numb - ice cream fingers. He looked across the room at the photograph. At the blonde boy. Smiling, squinting into the camera.

Silence from the other end.

“You know it isn’t a joke, so what happened?”

“My son killed himself yesterday evening,” Bortman said evenly.

“If you didn’t know it.”

“I didn’t. I swear.”

Bortman sighed. “And you really are calling from long distance, aren’t you?”

“From Binghamton, New York.”

“Yes. You can tell the difference—local from long distance, I mean. Long distance has a sound...a...a hum...”

Dale realized, belatedly, that expression had finally crept into that voice. Bortman was crying.

“He was depressed off and on, ever since he got back from Nam, in late 1974,” Bortman said. “it always got worse in the spring, it always peaked around the 8th of April when the other boys ... and your son...”

“Yes,” Dale said.

“This year, it just didn’t ... didn’t peak.”

There was a muffled honk-Bortman using his handkerchief.

“He hung himself in the garage, Mr. Clewson.”

“Christ Jesus,” Dale muttered. He shut his eyes very tightly, trying to ward off the image. He got one which was arguably even worse - that smiling face, the open fatigue shirt, the twisted dog-tags. “I’m sorry.”

“He didn’t want people to know why he wasn’t with the others that day, but of course the story got out.” A long, meditative pause from Bortman’s end. “Stories like that always do.”

“Yes. I suppose they do.”

“Joshua didn’t have many friends when he was growing up, Mr. Clewson. I don’t think he had any real friends until he got to Nam. He loved your son, and the others.”

Now it’s him. comforting me.

“I’m sorry for your loss;” Dale said. “And sorry to have bothered you at a time like this. But you’ll understand ... I had to.”

“Yes. Is he smiling, Mr. Clewson? The others ... they said he was smiling.”

Dale looked toward the picture beside the ticking clock. “He’s smiling.”

“Of course he is. Josh finally caught up with them.”

Dale looked out the window toward the sidewalk where Billy had once ridden a bike with training wheels. He supposed he should say something, but he couldn’t seem to think of a thing. His stomach hurt. His bones were cold.

“I ought to go, Mr. Clewson. In case my wife wakes up.” He paused. “I think I’ll take the phone off the hook.”

“That might not be a bad idea.”

“Goodbye, Mr. Clewson.”

“Goodbye. Once again, my sympathies.”

“And mine, too.”

Click.

Dale crossed the room and picked up the photograph of Squad D. He looked at the smiling blonde boy, who was sitting cross-legged in front of Kimberley and Gibson, sitting casually and comfortably on the ground as if he had never had a haemorrhoid in his life, as if he had never stood atop a stepladder in a shadowy garage and slipped a noose around his neck.

Josh finally caught up with them.

He stood looking fixedly at the photograph for a long time before realizing that the depth of silence in the room had deepened. The clock had stopped.

STEPHEN KING

READ BY
RON McLARTY

STATIONARY BIKE



STATIONARY BIKE

Stephen King

I. Metabolic Workmen

A week after the physical he had put off for a year (he'd actually been putting it off for three years, as his wife would have pointed out if she had still been alive), Richard Sifkitz was invited by Dr. Brady to view and discuss the results. Since the patient could detect nothing overtly ominous in his doctor's voice, he went willingly enough.

The results were rendered as numeric values on a sheet of paper headed METROPOLITAN HOSPITAL, New York City. All the test names and numbers were in black except for one line. This one line was rendered in red, and Sifkitz was not very surprised to see that it was marked CHOLESTEROL. The number, which really stood out in that red ink (as was undoubtedly the intention), read 226.

Sifkitz started to enquire if that was a bad number, then asked himself if he wanted to start off this interview by asking something stupid. It would not have been printed in red, he reasoned, if it had been a good number. The rest of them were undoubtedly good numbers, or at least acceptable numbers, which was why they were printed in black. But he wasn't here to discuss them. Doctors were busy men, disinclined to waste time in head-patting. So instead of something stupid, he asked how bad a number two-twenty-six was.

Dr. Brady leaned back in his chair and laced his fingers together on his damnably skinny chest. "To tell you the truth," he said, "it's not a bad number at all." He raised a finger. "Considering what you eat, that is."

"I know I weigh too much," Sifkitz said humbly. "I've been meaning to do something about it." In fact, he had been meaning to do no such thing.

"To tell you more of the truth," Dr. Brady went on, "your weight is not so bad, either. Again, considering what you eat. And now I want you to listen closely, because this is a conversation I only have with my

patients once. My male patients, that is; when it comes to weight, my female patients would talk my ear off, if I let them. Are you ready?"

"Yes," Sifkitz said, attempting to lace his fingers across his own chest and discovering he could not do it. What he discovered—or rediscovered, more properly put—was that he had a pretty good set of breasts. Not, so far as he was aware, part of the standard equipment for men in their late thirties. He gave up his attempt to lace and folded, instead. In his lap. The sooner the lecture was begun, the sooner it would be done.

"You're six feet tall and thirty-eight years old," Dr. Brady said. "Your weight should be about a hundred and ninety, and your cholesterol should be just about the same. Once upon a time, back in the seventies, you could get away with a cholesterol reading of two-forty, but of course back in the seventies, you could still smoke in the waiting rooms at hospitals." He shook his head. "No, the correlation between high cholesterol and heart disease was simply too clear. The two-forty number consequently went by the boards.

"You are the sort of man who has been blessed with a good metabolism. Not a great one, mind you, but good? Yes. How many times do you eat at McDonald's or Wendy's, Richard? Twice a week?"

"Maybe once," Sifkitz said. He thought the average week actually brought four to six fast-food meals with it. Not counting the occasional weekend trip to Arby's.

Dr. Brady raised a hand as if to say Have it your way ... which was, now that Sifkitz thought of it, the Burger King motto.

"Well, you're certainly eating somewhere, as the scales tell us. You weighed in on the day of your physical at two-twenty-three ... once again, and not coincidentally, very close to your cholesterol number."

He smiled a little at Sifkitz's wince, but at least it was not a smile devoid of sympathy.

“Here is what has happened so far in your adult life,” Brady said. “In it, you have continued to eat as you did when you were a teenager, and to this point your body—thanks to that good-if-not-extraordinary metabolism—has pretty much kept up with you. It helps at this point to think of the metabolic process as a work-crew. Men in chinos and Doc Martens.”

It may help you, Sifkitz thought, it doesn't do a thing for me. Meanwhile, his eyes kept being drawn back to that red number, that 226.

“Their job is to grab the stuff you send down the chute and dispose of it. Some they send on to the various production departments. The rest they burn. If you send them more than they can deal with, you put on weight. Which you have been doing, but at a relatively slow pace. But soon, if you don't make some changes, you're going to see that pace speed up. There are two reasons. The first is that your body's production facilities need less fuel than they used to. The second is that your metabolic crew—those fellows in the chinos with the tattoos on their arms—aren't getting any younger. They're not as efficient as they used to be. They're slower when it comes to separating the stuff to be sent on and the stuff that needs to be burned. And sometimes they bitch.”

“Bitch?” Sifkitz asked.

Dr. Brady, hands still laced across his narrow chest (the chest of a consumptive, Sifkitz decided—certainly no breasts there), nodded his equally narrow head. Sifkitz thought it almost the head of a weasel, sleek and sharp-eyed. “Yes indeed. They say stuff like, ‘Isn't he ever gonna slow down?’ and ‘Who does he think we are, the Marvel Comics superheroes?’ and ‘Cheezis, don't he ever give it a rest?’ And one of them—the malingerer, every work-crew's got one—probably says, ‘What the fuck does he care about us, anyway? He's on top, ain't he?’

“And sooner or later, they'll do what any bunch of working joes will do if they're forced to go on too long and do too much, without so

much as a lousy weekend off, let alone a paid vacation: they'll get sloppy. Start goofing off and lying down on the job. One day one of 'em won't come in at all, and there'll come another—if you live long enough—when one of 'em can't come in, because he'll be lying home dead of a stroke or a heart attack.”

“That's pleasant. Maybe you could take it on the road. Hit the lecture circuit. Oprah, even.”

Dr. Brady unlaced his fingers and leaned forward across his desk. He looked at Richard Sifkitz, unsmiling. “You've got a choice to make and my job is to make you aware of it, that's all. Either you change your habits or you're going to find yourself in my office ten years from now with some serious problems—weight pushing three hundred pounds, maybe, Type Two diabetes, varicose veins, a stomach ulcer, and a cholesterol number to match your weight. At this point you can still turn around without crash-diets, tummy-tucks, or a heart attack to get your attention. Later on doing that'll get harder. Once you're past forty, it gets harder every year. After forty, Richard, the weight sticks to your ass like babyshit sticks to a bedroom wall.”

“Elegant,” Sifkitz said, and burst out laughing. He couldn't help it.

Brady didn't laugh, but he smiled, at least, and leaned back in his chair. “There's nothing elegant about where you're headed. Doctors don't usually talk about it any more than State Troopers talk about the severed head they found in a ditch near the car accident, or the blackened child they found in the closet the day after the Christmas tree lights caught the house on fire, but we know lots about the wonderful world of obesity, from women who grow mold in flaps of fat that haven't been washed all the way to the bottom in years to men who go everywhere in a cloud of stench because they haven't been able to wipe themselves properly in a decade or more.”

Sifkitz winced and made a waving-away gesture.

“I don’t say you’re going there, Richard—most people don’t, they have a kind of built-in limiter, it seems—but there is some truth to that old saying about so-and-so digging his grave with a fork and spoon. Keep it in mind.”

“I will.”

“Good. That’s the speech. Or sermon. Or whatever it is. I won’t tell you to go your way and sin no more, I’ll just say ‘over to you.’”

Although he had filled in the OCCUPATION blank on his income tax return with the words FREELANCE ARTIST for the last twelve years, Sifkitz did not think of himself as a particularly imaginative man, and he hadn’t done a painting (or even a drawing, really) just for himself since the year he graduated from DePaul. He did book jackets, some movie posters, a lot of magazine illustrations, the occasional cover for a trade-show brochure. He’d done one CD cover (for Slobberbone, a group he particularly admired) but would never do another one, he said, because you couldn’t see the detail in the finished product without a magnifying glass. That was as close as he had ever come to what is called “artistic temperament.”

If asked to name his favorite piece of work, he likely would have looked blank. If pressed, he might have said it was the painting of the young blond woman running through the grass that he had done for Downy Fabric Softener, but even that would have been a lie, something told just to make the question go away. In truth, he wasn’t the kind of artist who had (or needed to have) favorites. It had been a long time since he’d picked up a brush to paint anything other than what someone commissioned him to paint, usually from a detailed ad agency memo or from a photograph (as had been the case with the woman running through the grass, evidently overjoyed that she had finally managed to beat static cling).

But, as surely as inspiration strikes the best of us—the Picassos, the Van Goghs, the Salvador Dalis—so it must eventually strike the rest of us, if only once or twice in a lifetime. Sifkitz took the crosstown bus home (he’d not owned a car since college), and as he sat

looking out the window (the medical report with its one line of red type was folded into his back pocket), he found his eye again and again going to the various work-crews and construction gangs the bus rolled past: guys in hardhats tromping across a building site, some with buckets, some with boards balanced on their shoulders; Con Ed guys half-in and half-out of manholes surrounded by yellow tape stamped with the words WORK AREA; three guys erecting a scaffold in front of a department store display window while a fourth talked on his cell phone.

Little by little he realized a picture was forming in his mind, one which demanded its place in the world. When he was back to the SoHo loft that served as both his home and his studio, he crossed to the littered nest beneath the skylight without even bothering to pick the mail up off the floor. He dropped his jacket on top of it, as a matter of fact.

He paused only long enough to look at a number of blank canvases leaning in the corner, and dismiss them. He took a piece of plain white pressboard instead, and set to work with a charcoal pencil. The phone rang twice over the course of the next hour. He let the answering machine pick up both times.

He worked at this picture off and on—but rather more on than off, especially as time passed and he came to realize how good it was—over the next ten days, moving from the pressboard to a piece of canvas that was four feet long and three feet high when it seemed natural to do so. It was the biggest surface he'd worked on in over a decade.

The picture showed four men—workmen in jeans, poplin jackets, and big old workboots—standing at the side of a country road which had just emerged from a deep stand of forest (this he rendered in shades of dark green and streaks of gray, working in a splashy, speedy, exuberant style). Two of the men had shovels; one had a bucket in each hand; the fourth was in the process of pushing his cap back from his forehead in a gesture that perfectly caught his end-of-the-day weariness and his growing realization that the job

would never be done; that there was, in fact, more of the job needing to be done at the end of each day than there had been at the beginning. This fourth guy, wearing a battered old gimme-cap with the word LIPID printed above the bill, was the foreman. He was talking to his wife on his cell phone. Coming home, honey, nah, don't want to go out, not tonight, too tired, want to get an early start in the morning. The guys bitched about that but I brought 'em around. Sifkitz didn't know how he knew all this, but he did. Just as he knew that the man with the buckets was Freddy, and he owned the truck in which the men had come. It was parked just outside the picture on the right; you could see the top of its shadow. One of the shovel guys, Carlos, had a bad back and was seeing a chiropractor.

There was no sign of what job the men had been doing in the picture, that was a little beyond the left side, but you could see how exhausted they were. Sifkitz had always been a detail-man (that green-gray blur of forest was very unlike him), and you could read how weary these men were in every feature of their faces. It was even in the sweat-stains on the collars of their shirts.

Above them, the sky was a queer organic red.

Of course he knew what the picture represented and understood that queer sky perfectly. This was the work-crew of which his doctor had spoken, at the end of their day. In the real world beyond that organic red sky, Richard Sifkitz, their employer, had just eaten his bed-time snack (a left-over piece of cake, maybe, or a carefully hoarded Krispy Kreme) and laid his head down on his pillow. Which meant they were finally free to go home for the day. And would they eat? Yes, but not as much as he did. They would be too tired to eat much, it was on their faces. Instead of eating a big meal they'd put their feet up, these guys who worked for The Lipid Company, and watch TV for a little while. Maybe fall asleep in front of it and then wake up a couple of hours later, with the regular shows gone and Ron Popeil on, showing his latest invention to an adoring studio audience. And they'd turn it off with the remote and shuffle away to bed, shedding clothes as they went without so much as a backward look.

All of this was in the picture, although none of it was in the picture. Sifkitz was not obsessed with it, it did not become his life, but he understood it was something new in his life, something good. He had no idea what he could do with such a thing once it was finished, and didn't really care. For the time being he just liked getting up in the morning and looking at it with one eye open as he picked the cloth of his Big Dog boxers out of the crack of his ass. He supposed when it was done, he would have to name it. So far he had considered and rejected "Quittin' Time," "The Boys Call It a Day," and "Berkowitz Calls It a Day." Berkowitz being the boss, the foreman, the one with the Motorola cell phone, the guy in the LIPID cap. None of those names were quite right, and that was okay. He'd know the right name for the picture when it finally occurred to him. It would make a cling! sound in his head. In the meantime there was no hurry. He wasn't even sure the picture was the point. While painting it, he had lost fifteen pounds. Maybe that was the point.

Or maybe it wasn't.

II. Stationary Bike

Somewhere—maybe at the end of a Salada tea-bag string—he had read that, for the person who aspires to lose weight, the most effective exercise is pushing back from the table. Sifkitz had no doubt this was true, but as time passed he more and more came to believe that losing weight wasn't his goal. Nor was getting buffed up his goal, although both of those things might be side-effects. He kept thinking of Dr. Brady's metabolic working stiffs, ordinary joes who were really trying their best to do their job but getting no help from him. He could hardly not think of them when he was spending an hour or two every day painting them and their workaday world.

He fantasized quite a lot about them. There was Berkowitz, the foreman, who aspired to have his own construction company someday. Freddy, who owned the truck (a Dodge Ram) and fancied himself a fancy carpenter. Carlos, the one with the bad back. And Whelan, who was actually sort of a goldbrick. These were the guys whose job it was to keep him from having a heart attack or a stroke. They had to clean up the shit that kept bombing down from that queer red sky before it blocked the road into the woods.

A week after he began the painting (and about a week before he would finally decide it was done), Sifkitz went to The Fitness Boys on Twenty-ninth Street, and, after considering both a treadmill and a StairMaster (attractive but too expensive), bought a stationary bike. He paid an extra forty dollars to have it assembled and delivered.

“Use this every day for six months and your cholesterol number's down thirty points,” said the salesman, a brawny young fellow in a Fitness Boys T-shirt. “I practically guarantee it.”

The basement of the building where Sifkitz lived was a rambling, multi-room affair, dark and shadowy, bellowing with furnace noise and crammed with tenants' possessions in stalls marked with the various apartment numbers. There was an alcove at the far end,

however, that was almost magically empty. As if it had been waiting for him all along. Sifkitz had the deliverymen set up his new exercise machine on the concrete floor facing a bare beige wall.

“You gonna bring down a TV?” one of them asked.

“I haven’t decided yet,” Sifkitz said, although he had.

He rode the stationary bike in front of one bare beige wall for fifteen minutes or so every day until the painting was finished, knowing that fifteen minutes was probably not enough (although certainly better than nothing) but also knowing it was about all he could stand for the time being. Not because he got tired; fifteen minutes wasn’t enough to tire him out. It was just boring in the basement. The whine of the wheels combined with the steady roar of the furnace quickly got on his nerves. He was all too aware of what he was doing, which was, basically, going nowhere in a basement under two bare lightbulbs that cast his double shadow on the wall in front of him. He also knew that things would improve once the picture upstairs was done and he could start on the one down here.

It was the same picture but he executed it much more quickly. He could do this because there was no need to put Berkowitz, Carlos, Freddy, and Whelan-the-goldbrick in this one. In this one they were gone for the day and he simply painted the country road on the beige wall, using forced perspective so that when he was mounted on the stationary bike, the track seemed to wind away from him and into that dark green and gray blur of forest. Riding the bike became less boring immediately, but after two or three sessions, he realized that he still wasn’t done because what he was doing was still only exercise. He needed to put in the red sky, for one thing, but that was easy, nothing but slop work. He wanted to add more detail to both shoulders of the road “up front,” and some litter, as well, but those things were also easy (and fun). The real problem had nothing to do with the picture at all. With either picture. The problem was that he had no goal, and that had always bugged him about exercise that existed for nothing more than its own sake. That kind of workout might tone you up and improve your health, but it was essentially

meaningless while it was going on. Existential, even. That kind of workout was only about the next thing, for instance some pretty lady from some magazine's art department coming up to you at a party and asking if you'd lost weight. That wasn't even close to real motivation. He wasn't vain enough (or horny enough) for such possibilities to keep him going over the long haul. He'd eventually get bored, and lapse into his old Krispy Kreme ways. No, he had to decide where the road was, and where it was going. Then he could pretend to ride there. The idea excited him. Maybe it was silly—loony, even—but to Sifkitz that excitement, though mild, felt like the real deal. And he didn't have to tell anyone what he was up to, did he? Absolutely not. He could even get a Rand-McNally Road Atlas and mark his daily progress on one of the maps.

He was not an introspective man by nature, but on his walk back from Barnes & Noble with his new book of roadmaps under his arm, he found himself wondering exactly what had galvanized him so. A moderately high cholesterol number? He doubted it. Dr. Brady's solemn proclamation that he would find this battle much harder to fight once he was post-forty? That might have had something to do with it, but probably not all that much. Was he just ready for a change? That felt like getting warmer.

Trudy had died of a particularly ravenous blood-cancer, and Sifkitz had been with her, in her hospital room, when she passed on. He remembered how deep her last breath had been, how her sad and wasted bosom had heaved upward as she drew it in. As if she had known this was it, this was the one for the ages. He remembered how she'd let it out, and the sound it had made—shaaaah! And how after that her chest had just stayed where it was. In a way he had lived the last four years in just that sort of breathless hiatus. Only now the wind was blowing again, filling his sails.

Yet there was something else, something even more to the point: the work-crew Brady had summoned up and Sifkitz himself had named. There was Berkowitz, Whelan, Carlos, and Freddy. Dr. Brady hadn't cared about them; for Brady, the metabolic work-crew was just a

metaphor. His job was to make Sifkitz care a little more about what was going on inside him, that was all, his metaphor not much different from the mommy who tells her toddler that “little men” are working to heal the skin on his scraped knee.

Sifkitz’s focus, though ...

Not on myself at all, he thought, shaking out the key that opened the lobby door. Never was. I cared about those guys, stuck doing a never-ending clean-up job. And the road. Why should they work so hard to keep it clear? Where did it go?

He decided it went to Herkimer, which was a small town up by the Canadian border. He found a skinny and unmarked blue line on the roadmap of upstate New York that rambled there all the way from Poughkeepsie, which was south of the state capital. Two, maybe three hundred miles. He got a more detailed plat map of upstate New York and thumbtacked the square where this road began on the wall beside his hasty ... his hasty what-would-you-call-it? Mural wasn’t right. He settled on “projection.”

And that day when he mounted the stationary bike, he imagined that Poughkeepsie was behind him, not the stored television from 2-G, the stack of trunks from 3-F, the tarped dirt-bike from 4-A, but Po’-town. Ahead of him stretched the country road, just a blue squiggle to Monsieur Rand McNally, but the Old Rhinebeck Road according to the more detailed plat map. He zeroed the odometer on the bike, fixed his eyes firmly on the dirt that started where the concrete floor met the wall, and thought: It’s really the road to good health. If you keep that somewhere in the back of your mind, you won’t have to wonder if maybe a few of your screws got loose since Trudy died.

But his heart was beating a little too fast (as if he’d already started pedaling), and he felt the way he supposed most people did before setting out on a trip to a new place, where one might encounter new people and even new adventures. There was a can-holder above the stationary bike’s rudimentary control panel, and into this he’d slipped a can of Red Bull, which purported to be a power drink. He was

wearing an old Oxford shirt over his exercise shorts, because it had a pocket. Into this he'd placed two oatmeal-raisin cookies. Oatmeal and raisins were both supposed to be lipid-scrubbers.

And, speaking of them, The Lipid Company was gone for the day. Oh, they were still on duty in the painting upstairs—the useless, marketless painting that was so unlike him—but down here they'd piled back into Freddy's Dodge, had headed back to ... to ...

“Back to Poughkeepsie,” he said. “They're listening to Kateem on WPDH and drinking beers out of paper bags. Today they ... what did you do today, boys?”

Put in a couple of culverts, a voice whispered. Spring runoff damn near washed the road out near Priceville. Then we knocked off early.

Good. That was good. He wouldn't have to dismount his bike and walk around the washouts.

Richard Sifkitz fixed his eyes on the wall and began to pedal.

III. On the Road to Herkimer

That was in the fall of 2002, a year after the Twin Towers had fallen into the streets of the Financial District, and life in New York City was returning to a slightly paranoid version of normal ... except in New York, slightly paranoid was normal.

Richard Sifkitz had never felt saner or happier. His life fell into an orderly four-part harmony. In the morning he worked on whatever assignment was currently paying for his room and board, and there were more of these than ever, it seemed. The economy stank, all the newspapers said so, but for Richard Sifkitz, Freelance Commercial Artist, the economy was good.

He still ate lunch at Dugan's on the next block, but now usually a salad instead of a greasy double cheeseburger, and in the afternoon he worked on a new picture for himself: to begin with, a more detailed version of the projection on the wall of the basement alcove. The picture of Berkowitz and his crew had been set aside and covered with an old piece of sheet. He was done with it. Now he wanted a better image of what served him well enough downstairs, which was the road to Herkimer with the work-crew gone. And why shouldn't they be gone? Wasn't he maintaining the road himself these days? He was, and doing a damned good job. He'd gone back to Brady in late October to have his cholesterol re-tested, and the number this time had been written in black instead of red: 179. Brady had been more than respectful; he'd actually been a little jealous.

"This is better than mine," he said. "You really took it to heart, didn't you?"

"I guess I did," Sifkitz agreed.

"And that potbelly of yours is almost gone. Been working out?"

"As much as I can," Sifkitz agreed, and said no more on the subject. By then his workouts had gotten odd. Some people would consider

them odd, anyway.

“Well,” said Brady, “if you got it, flaunt it. That’s my advice.”

Sifkitz smiled at this, but it wasn’t advice he took to heart.

His evenings—the fourth part of an Ordinary Sifkitz Day—he spent either watching TV or reading a book, usually sipping a tomato juice or a V-8 instead of a beer, feeling tired but contented. He was going to bed an hour earlier, too, and the extra rest agreed with him.

The heart of his days was part three, from four until six. Those were the two hours he spent on his stationary bike, riding the blue squiggle between Poughkeepsie and Herkimer. On the plat maps, it changed from the Old Rhinebeck Road to the Cascade Falls Road to the Woods Road; for awhile, north of Penniston, it was even the Dump Road. He could remember how, back at the beginning, even fifteen minutes on the stationary bike had seemed like an eternity. Now he sometimes had to force himself to quit after two hours. He finally got an alarm clock and started setting it for six P.M. The thing’s aggressive bray was just about enough to ... well ...

*

It was just enough to wake him up.

Sifkitz found it hard to believe that he was falling asleep down in the alcove while riding the stationary bike at a steady fifteen miles per hour, but he didn’t like the alternative, which was to think that he had gone a little crazy on the road to Herkimer. Or in his SoHo basement, if you liked that better. That he was having delusions.

One night while channel-surfing, he came across a program about hypnosis on A&E. The fellow being interviewed, a hypnotist who styled himself Joe Saturn, was saying that everyone practiced self-hypnosis every day. We used it to enter a work-oriented frame of mind in the morning; we used it to help us “get into the story” when reading novels or watching movies; we used it to get to sleep at

night. This last was Joe Saturn's favorite example, and he talked at length about the patterns "successful sleepers" followed every night: checking the locks on the doors and windows, maybe, drawing a glass of water, maybe saying a little prayer or indulging in a spot of meditation. He likened these to the passes a hypnotist makes in front of his subject, and to his line of patter—counting back from ten to zero, for instance, or assuring the subject that he or she was "getting very sleepy." Sifkitz seized on this gratefully, deciding on the spot that he was spending his daily two hours on the stationary bike in a state of light to medium hypnosis.

Because, by the third week in front of the wall-projection, he was no longer spending those two hours in the basement alcove. By the third week, he was actually spending them on the road to Herkimer.

He would pedal contentedly enough along the packed dirt track that wound through the forest, smelling the odor of pine, hearing the cries of the crows or the crackle of leaves when he rolled through occasional drifts of them. The stationary bike became the three-speed Raleigh he'd owned as a twelve-year-old in suburban Manchester, New Hampshire. By no means the only bike he'd had before getting his driver's license at seventeen, but inarguably the best bike. The plastic cup-holder became a clumsily made but effective hand-welded ring of metal jutting over the bike-basket, and instead of Red Bull it contained a can of Lipton iced tea. Unsweetened.

On the road to Herkimer, it was always late October and just an hour before sunset. Although he rode two hours (both the alarm clock and the stationary bike's odometer confirmed this each time he finished), the sun never changed its position; it always laid the same long shadows across the dirt road and flickered at him through the trees from the same quadrant of the sky as he traveled along with the manufactured wind of his passage blowing the hair back from his brow.

Sometimes there were signs nailed to trees where other roads crossed the one he was on. CASCADE ROAD, one said.

HERKIMER, 120 MI., read another, this one pocked with old bullet-holes. The signs always corresponded to the information on the plat map currently tacked to the alcove wall. He had already decided that, once he reached Herkimer, he'd push on into the Canadian wilderness without even a stop to buy souvenirs. The road stopped there, but that was no problem; he'd already gotten a book titled Plat Maps of Eastern Canada. He would simply draw his own road on the plats, using a fine blue pencil and putting in lots of squiggles. Squiggles added miles.

He could go all the way to the Arctic Circle, if he wanted to.

One evening, after the alarm went off and startled him out of his trance, he approached the projection and looked at it for several long, considering moments, head cocked to one side. Anyone else would have seen very little; up that close the picture's trick of forced perspective ceased working and to the untrained eye the woodland scene collapsed into nothing but blobs of color—the light brown of the road's surface, the darker brown that was a shallow drift of leaves, the blue-and gray-streaked green of the firs, the bright yellow-white of the westering sun to the far left, perilously close to the door into the furnace-room. Sifkitz, however, still saw the picture perfectly. It was fixed firmly in his mind now and never changed. Unless he was riding, of course, but even then he was aware of an underlying sameness. Which was good. That essential sameness was a kind of touchstone, a way of assuring himself this was still no more than an elaborate mind-game, something plugged into his subconscious that he could unplug whenever he wanted.

He had brought down a box of colors for the occasional touch-up, and now, without thinking too much about it, he added several blobs of brown to the road, mixing them with black to make them darker than the drifted leaves. He stepped back, looked at the new addition, and nodded. It was a small change but in its way, perfect.

The following day, as he rode his three-speed Raleigh through the woods (he was less than sixty miles from Herkimer now and only eighty from the Canadian border), he came around a bend and there

was a good-sized buck deer standing in the middle of the road, looking at him with startled dark velvet eyes. It flipped up the white flag of its tail, dropped a pile of scat, and was then off into the woods again. Sifkitz saw another flip of its tail and then the deer was gone. He rode on, giving the deer-shit a miss, not wanting it in the treads of his tires.

That night he silenced the alarm and approached the painting on the wall, wiping sweat from his forehead with a bandanna he took from the back pocket of his jeans. He looked at the projection critically, hands on hips. Then, moving with his usual confident speed—he'd been doing this sort of work for almost twenty years, after all—he painted the scat out of the picture, replacing it with a clutch of rusty beer cans undoubtedly left by some upstate hunter in search of pheasant or turkey.

“You missed those, Berkowitz,” he said that night as he sat drinking a beer instead of a V-8 juice. “I’ll pick ‘em up myself tomorrow, but don’t let it happen again.”

Except when he went down the next day, there was no need to paint the beer cans out of the picture; they were already gone. For a moment he felt real fright prod his belly like a blunt stick—what had he done, sleepwalked down here in the middle of the night, picked up his trusty can of turp and a brush?—and then put it out of his mind. He mounted the stationary bike and was soon riding his old Raleigh, smelling the clean smells of the forest, relishing the way the wind blew his hair back from his forehead. And yet wasn't that the day things began to change? The day he sensed he might not be alone on the road to Herkimer? One thing was beyond doubt: it was the day after the disappearing beer cans that he had the really terrible dream and then drew the picture of Carlos's garage.

IV. Man with Shotgun

It was the most vivid dream he'd had since the age of fourteen, when three or four brilliant wet-dreams had ushered him into physical manhood. It was the most horrible dream ever, hands down, nothing else even close. What made it horrible was the sense of impending doom that ran through it like a red thread. This was true even though the dream had a weird thinness: he knew he was dreaming but could not quite escape it. He felt as if he'd been wrapped in some terrible gauze. He knew his bed was near and he was in it—struggling—but he couldn't quite break through to the Richard Sifkitz who lay there, trembling and sweaty in his Big Dog sleep-shorts.

He saw a pillow and a beige telephone with a crack in the case. Then a hallway filled with pictures that he knew were of his wife and three daughters. Then a kitchen, the microwave oven flashing 4:16. A bowl of bananas (they filled him with grief and horror) on the Formica counter. A breezeway. And here lay Pepe the dog with his muzzle on his paws, and Pepe did not raise his head but rolled his eyes up to look at him as he passed, revealing a gruesome, blood-threaded crescent of white, and that was when Sifkitz began to weep in the dream, understanding that all was lost.

Now he was in the garage. He could smell oil. He could smell old sweet grass. The LawnBoy stood in the corner like a suburban god. He could see the vise clamped to the work-table, old and dark and flecked with tiny splinters of wood. Next, a closet. His girls' ice-skates were piled on the floor, their laces as white as vanilla ice cream. His tools hung from pegs on the walls, arranged neatly, mostly yard-tools, a bear for working in his yard was

(Carlos. I am Carlos.)

On the top shelf, far out of the girls' reach, was a .410 shotgun, not used for years, nearly forgotten, and a box of shells so dark you could barely read the word Winchester on the side, only you could

read it, just enough, and that was when Sifkitz came to understand that he was being carried along in the brain of a potential suicide. He struggled furiously to either stop Carlos or escape him and could do neither, even though he sensed his bed so near, just on the other side of the gauze that wrapped him from head to foot.

Now he was at the vise again, and the .410 was clamped in the vise, and the box of shells was on the work-table beside the vise, and here was a hacksaw, he was hacksawing off the barrel of the shotgun because that would make it easier to do what he had to do, and when he opened the box of shells there were two dozen of them, fat green buggers with brass bottoms, and the sound the gun made when Carlos snapped it closed wasn't cling! but CLACK! and the taste in his mouth was oily and dusty, oily on his tongue and dusty on the insides of his cheeks and his teeth, and his back hurt, it hurt LAMF, that was how they had tagged abandoned buildings (and sometimes ones that weren't abandoned) when he was a teenager and running with the Deacons in Po'-town, stood for LIKE A MOTHERFUCKER, and that was how his back hurt, but now that he was laid off the benefits were gone, Jimmy Berkowitz could no longer afford the bennies and so Carlos Martinez could no longer afford the drugs that made the pain a little less, could no longer afford the chiropractor that made the pain a little less, and the house-payments—ay, caramba, they used to say, joking, but he sure wasn't joking now, ay, caramba they were going to lose the house, less than five years from the finish-line but they were going to lose it, si-si, senior, and it was all that fuck Sifkitz's fault, him with his fucking road-maintenance hobby, and the curve of the trigger underneath his finger was like a crescent, like the unspeakable crescent of his dog's peering eye.

That was when Sifkitz woke up, sobbing and shaking, legs still in bed, head out and almost touching the floor, hair hanging. He crawled all the way out of the bedroom and started crawling across the main room to the easel under the skylight. Halfway there he found himself able to walk.

The picture of the empty road was still on the easel, the better and more complete version of the one downstairs on the alcove wall. He flung it away without a second look and set up a piece of two-foot-by-two pressboard in its place. He seized the nearest implement which would make a mark (this happened to be a UniBall Vision Elite pen) and began to draw. He drew for hours. At one point (he remembered this only vaguely) he needed to piss and could feel it running hot down his leg. The tears didn't stop until the picture was finished. Then, thankfully dry-eyed at last, he stood back and looked at what he had done.

It was Carlos's garage on an October afternoon. The dog, Pepe, stood in front of it with his ears raised. The dog had been drawn by the sound of the gunshot. There was no sign of Carlos in the picture, but Sifkitz knew exactly where the body lay, on the left, beside the work-table with the vise clamped to the edge. If his wife was home, she would have heard the shot. If she was out—perhaps shopping, more likely at work—it might be another hour or two before she came home and found him.

Beneath the image he had scrawled the words MAN WITH SHOTGUN. He couldn't remember doing this, but it was his printing and the right name for the picture. There was no man visible in it, no shotgun, either, but it was the right title.

Sifkitz went to his couch, sat down on it, and put his head in his hands. His right hand ached fiercely from clutching the unfamiliar, too-small drawing implement. He tried to tell himself he'd just had a bad dream, the picture the result of that dream. That there had never been any Carlos, never any Lipid Company, both of them were figments of his own imagination, drawn from Dr. Brady's careless metaphor.

But dreams faded, and these images—the phone with the crack in its beige case, the microwave, the bowl of bananas, the dog's eye—were as clear as ever. Clearer, even.

One thing was sure, he told himself. He was done with the goddam stationary bike. This was just a little too close to lunacy. If he kept on this way, soon he'd be cutting off his ear and mailing it not to his girlfriend (he didn't have one) but to Dr. Brady, who was surely responsible for this.

"Done with the bike," he said, with his head still in his hands. "Maybe I'll get a membership down at Fitness Boys, something like that, but I'm done with that fucking stationary bike."

Only he didn't get a membership at The Fitness Boys, and after a week without real exercise (he walked, but it wasn't the same—there were too many people on the sidewalks and he longed for the peace of the Herkimer Road), he could no longer stand it. He was behind on his latest project, which was an illustration a la Norman Rockwell for Fritos Corn Chips, and he'd had a call from both his agent and the guy in charge of the Fritos account at the ad agency. This had never happened to him before.

Worse, he wasn't sleeping.

The urgency of the dream had faded a little, and he decided it was only the picture of Carlos's garage, glaring at him from the corner of the room, that kept bringing it back, refreshing the dream the way a squirt of water from a mister may refresh a thirsty plant. He couldn't bring himself to destroy the picture (it was too damned good), but he turned it around so that the image faced nothing but the wall.

That afternoon he rode the elevator down to the basement and remounted the stationary bike. It turned into the old three-speed Raleigh almost as soon as he'd fixed his eyes on the wall-projection, and he resumed his ride north. He tried to tell himself that his sense of being followed was bogus, just something left over from his dream and the frenzied hours at the easel afterward. For a little while this actually did the job even though he knew better. He had reasons to make it do the job. The chief ones were that he was sleeping through the night again and had resumed working on his current assignment.

He finished the painting of the boys sharing a bag of Fritos on an idyllic suburban pitcher's mound, shipped it off by messenger, and the following day a check for ten thousand, two hundred dollars came with a note from Barry Casselman, his agent. You scared me a little, hon, the note said, and Sifkitz thought: You're not the only one. Hon.

Every now and then during the following week it occurred to him that he should tell someone about his adventures under the red sky, and each time he dismissed the idea. He could have told Trudy, but of course if Trudy had been around, things would never have gotten this far in the first place. The idea of telling Barry was laughable; the idea of telling Dr. Brady actually a little frightening. Dr. Brady would be recommending a good psychiatrist before you could say Minnesota Multiphasic.

The night he got the Fritos check, Sifkitz noticed a change in the basement wall-mural. He paused in the act of setting his alarm and approached the projection (can of Diet Coke in one hand, reliable little Brookstone desk-clock in the other, oatmeal-raisin cookies tucked away safely in the old shirt pocket). Something was up in there, all right, something was different, but at first he was damned if he could tell what it was. He closed his eyes, counted to five (clearing his mind as he did so, an old trick), then sprang them open again, so wide that he looked like a man burlesquing fright. This time he saw the change at once. The bright yellow marquise shape over by the door to the furnace room was as gone as the clutch of beer cans. And the color of the sky above the trees was a deeper, darker red. The sun was either down or almost down. On the road to Herkimer, night was coming.

You have to stop this, Sifkitz thought, and then he thought: Tomorrow. Maybe tomorrow.

With that he mounted up and started riding. In the woods around him, he could hear the sound of birds settling down for the night.

V. The Screwdriver Would Do for a Start

Over the next five or six days, the time Sifkitz spent on the stationary bike (and his childhood three-speed) was both wonderful and terrible. Wonderful because he had never felt better; his body was operating at absolute peak performance levels for a man his age, and he knew it. He supposed that there were pro athletes in better shape than he was, but by thirty-eight they would be approaching the end of their careers, and whatever joy they were able to take in the tuned condition of their bodies would necessarily be tainted by that knowledge. Sifkitz, on the other hand, might go on creating commercial art for another forty years, if he chose to. Hell, another fifty. Five full generations of football players and four of baseball players would come and go while he stood peacefully at his easel, painting book covers, automotive products, and Five New Logos for Pepsi-Cola.

Except ...

Except that wasn't the ending folks familiar with this sort of story would expect, was it? Nor the sort of ending he expected himself.

The sense of being followed grew stronger with every ride, especially after he took down the last of the New York State plat maps and put up the first of the Canadian ones. Using a blue pen (the same one he'd used to create MAN WITH SHOTGUN), he drew an extension of the Herkimer Road on the previously roadless plat, adding lots of squiggles. By now he was pedaling faster, looking over his shoulder often, and finishing his rides covered with sweat, at first too out of breath to dismount the bike and turn off the braying alarm.

That looking-back-over-the-shoulder thing, now—that was interesting. At first when he did it he'd catch a glimpse of the basement alcove, and the doorway leading to the basement's larger rooms with its mazy arrangement of storage stalls. He'd see the Pomona Oranges crate by the door with the Brookstone desk alarm

on it, marking off the minutes between four and six. Then a kind of red blur wiped across everything, and when it drained away he was looking at the road behind him, the autumn-bright trees on both sides (only not so bright now, not with twilight starting to thicken), and the darkening red sky overhead. Later, he didn't see the basement at all when he looked back, not even a flash of it. Just the road leading back to Herkimer, and eventually to Poughkeepsie.

He knew perfectly well what he was looking back over his shoulder for: headlights.

The headlights of Freddy's Dodge Ram, if you wanted to get specific about it. Because for Berkowitz and his crew, bewildered resentment had given way to anger. Carlos's suicide was what had tipped them over the edge. They blamed him and they were after him. And when they caught him, they'd—

What? They'd what?

Kill me, he thought, pedaling grimly on into the twilight. No need to be coy about it. They catch up, they'll kill me. I'm in the serious williwags now, not a town on that whole damn plat map, not so much as a village. I could scream my head off and no one would hear me except Barry the Bear, Debby the Doe, and Rudy the Raccoon. So if I see those headlights (or hear the motor, because Freddy might be running without lights), I would do well to get the hell back to SoHo, alarm or no alarm. I'm crazy to be here in the first place.

But he was having trouble getting back now. When the alarm went off the Raleigh would remain a Raleigh for thirty seconds or more, the road ahead would remain a road instead of reverting to blobs of color on cement, and the alarm itself sounded distant and strangely mellow. He had an idea that eventually he would hear it as the drone of a jet airplane high overhead, an American Airlines 767 out of Kennedy, perhaps, headed over the North Pole to the far side of the world.

He would stop, squeeze his eyes shut, then pop them wide open again. That did the trick, but he had an idea it might not work for long. Then what? A hungry night spent in the woods, looking up at a full moon that looked like a bloodshot eye?

No, they'd catch up to him before then, he reckoned. The question was, did he intend to let that happen? Incredibly, part of him wanted to do just that. Part of him was angry at them. Part of him wanted to confront Berkowitz and the remaining members of his crew, ask them What did you expect me to do, anyway? Just go on the way things were, gobbling Krispy Kreme donuts, paying no attention to the washouts when the culverts plugged up and overflowed? Is that what you wanted?

But there was another part of him that knew such a confrontation would be madness. He was in tiptop shape, yes, but you were still talking three against one, and who was to say Mrs. Carlos hadn't loaned the boys her husband's shotgun, told them yeah, go get the bastard, and be sure to tell him the first one's from me and my girls.

Sifkitz had had a friend who'd beaten a bad cocaine addiction in the eighties, and he remembered this fellow saying the first thing you had to do was get it out of the house. You could always buy more, sure, that shit was everywhere now, on every streetcorner, but that was no excuse for keeping it where you could grab it any time your will weakened. So he'd gathered it all up and flushed it down the toilet. And once it was gone, he'd thrown his works out with the trash. That hadn't been the end of his problem, he'd said, but it had been the beginning of the end.

One night Sifkitz entered the alcove carrying a screwdriver. He had every intention of dismantling the stationary bike, and never mind the fact that he'd set the alarm for six P.M., as he always did, that was just habit. The alarm clock (like the oatmeal-raisin cookies) was part of his works, he supposed; the hypnotic passes he made, the machinery of his dream. And once he was done reducing the bike to unrideable components, he'd put the alarm clock out with the rest of the trash, just as his friend had done with his crack-pipe. He'd feel a

pang, of course—the sturdy little Brookstone certainly wasn't to blame for the idiotic situation into which he'd gotten himself—but he would do it. Cowboy up, they'd told each other as kids; quit whining and just cowboy up.

He saw that the bike was comprised of four main sections, and that he'd also need an adjustable wrench to dismantle the thing completely. That was all right, though; the screwdriver would do for a start. He could use it to take off the pedals. Once that was done he'd borrow the adjustable wrench from the super's toolbox.

He dropped to one knee, slipped the tip of the borrowed tool into the slot of the first screw, and hesitated. He wondered if his friend had smoked one more rock before turning the rest of them down the toilet, just one more rock for old times' sake. He bet the guy had. Being a little stoned had probably stilled the cravings, made the disposal job a little easier. And if he had one more ride, then knelt here to take off the pedals with the endorphins flowing, wouldn't he feel a little less depressed about it? A little less likely to imagine Berkowitz, Freddy, and Whelan retiring to the nearest roadside bar, where they would buy first one pitcher of Rolling Rock and then another, toasting each other and Carlos's memory, congratulating each other on how they had beaten the bastard?

"You're crazy," he murmured to himself, and slipped the tip of the driver back into the notch of the screw. "Do it and be done."

He actually turned the screwdriver once (and it was easy; whoever had put this together in the back room of The Fitness Boys obviously hadn't had his heart in it), but when he did, the oatmeal-raisin cookies shifted a little in his pocket and he thought how good they always tasted when you were riding along. You just took your right hand off the handlebar, dipped it into your pocket, had a couple of bites, then chased it with a swallow of iced tea. It was the perfect combination. It just felt so good to be speeding along, having a little picnic as you went, and those sons of bitches wanted to take it away from him.

A dozen turns of the screw, maybe even less, and the pedal would drop off onto the concrete floor—clunk. Then he could move on to the other one, and then he could move on with his life.

This is not fair, he thought.

One more ride, just for old times' sake, he thought.

And, swinging his leg over the fork and settling his ass (firmer and harder by far than it had been on the day of the red cholesterol number) onto the seat, he thought: This is the way stories like this always go, isn't it? The way they always end, with the poor schmuck saying this is the last time, I'll never do this again.

Absolutely true, he thought, but I'll bet in real life, people get away with it. I bet they get away with it all the time.

Part of him was murmuring that real life had never been like this, what he was doing (and what he was experiencing) bore absolutely no resemblance whatever to real life as he understood it. He pushed the voice away, closed his ears to it.

It was a beautiful evening for a ride in the woods.

VI. Not Quite the Ending Everyone Expected

And still, he got one more chance.

That was the night he heard the revving engine behind him clearly for the first time, and just before the alarm clock went off, the Raleigh he was riding suddenly grew an elongated shadow on the road ahead of him—the sort of shadow that could only have been created by headlights.

Then the alarm did go off, not a bray but a distant purring sound that was almost melodic.

The truck was closing in. He didn't need to turn his head to see it (nor does one ever want to turn and see the frightful fiend that close behind him treads, Sifkitz supposed later that night, lying awake in his bed and still wrapped in the cold-yet-hot sensation of disaster avoided by mere inches or seconds). He could see the shadow, growing longer and darker.

Hurry up, please, gentlemen, it's time, he thought, and squeezed his eyes closed. He could still hear the alarm, but it was still no more than that almost soothing purr, it was certainly no louder; what was louder was the engine, the one inside Freddy's truck. It was almost on him, and suppose they didn't want to waste so much as a New York minute in conversation? Suppose the one currently behind the wheel just mashed the pedal to the metal and ran him down? Turned him into roadkill?

He didn't bother to open his eyes, didn't waste time confirming that it was still the deserted road instead of the basement alcove. Instead he squeezed them even more tightly shut, focused all his attention on the sound of the alarm, and this time turned the polite voice of the barman into an impatient bellow:

HURRY UP PLEASE GENTLEMEN IT'S TIME!

And suddenly, thankfully, it was the sound of the engine that was fading and the sound of the Brookstone alarm that was swelling, taking on its old familiar rough get-up-get-up-get-up bray. And this time when he opened his eyes, he saw the projection of the road instead of the road itself.

But now the sky was black, its organic redness hidden by nightfall. The road was brilliantly lit, the shadow of the bike—a Raleigh—a clear black on the leaf-littered hardpack. He could tell himself he had dismounted the stationary bike and painted those changes while in his nightly trance, but he knew better, and not only because there was no paint on his hands.

This is my last chance, he thought. My last chance to avoid the ending everyone expects in stories like this.

But he was simply too tired, too shaky, to take care of the stationary bike now. He would take care of it tomorrow. Tomorrow morning, in fact, first thing. Right now all he wanted was to get out of this awful place where reality had worn so thin. And with that firmly in mind, Sifkitz staggered to the Pomona crate beside the doorway (rubber-legged, covered with a thin slime of sweat—the smelly kind that comes from fear rather than exertion) and shut the alarm off. Then he went upstairs and lay down on his bed. Some very long time later, sleep came.

The next morning he went down the cellar stairs, eschewing the elevator and walking firmly, with his head up and his lips pressed tightly together, A Man On A Mission. He went directly to the stationary bike, ignoring the alarm clock on the crate, dropped to one knee, picked up the screwdriver. He slipped it once more into the slot of a screw, one of the four that held the left-hand pedal ...

... and the next thing he knew, he was speeding giddily along the road again, with the headlights brightening around him until he felt like a man on a stage that's dark save for one single spotlight. The truck's engine was too loud (something wrong with the muffler or the exhaust system), and it was out of tune, as well. He doubted if old

Freddy had bothered with the last maintenance go-round. No, not with house-payments to make, groceries to buy, the kiddies still needing braces, and no weekly paycheck coming in.

He thought: I had my chance. I had my chance last night and I didn't take it.

He thought: Why did I do this? Why, when I knew better?

He thought: Because they made me, somehow. They made me.

He thought: They're going to run me down and I'll die in the woods.

But the truck did not run him down. It hurtled past him on the right instead, left-side wheels rumbling in the leaf-choked ditch, and then it swung across the road in front of him, blocking the way.

Panicked, Sifkitz forgot the first thing his father had taught him when he brought the three-speed home: When you stop, Richie, reverse the pedals. Brake the bike's rear wheel at the same time you squeeze the handbrake that controls the front wheel. Otherwise—

This was otherwise. In his panic he turned both hands into fists, squeezing the handbrake on the left, locking the front wheel. The bike bucked him off and sent him flying at the truck with LIPID COMPANY printed on the driver's-side door. He threw his hands out and they struck the top of the truck's bed hard enough to numb them. Then he collapsed in a heap, wondering how many bones were broken.

The doors opened above him and he heard the crackle of leaves as men in workboots got out. He didn't look up. He waited for them to grab him and make him get up, but no one did. The smell of the leaves was like old dry cinnamon. The footsteps passed him on either side, and then the crackle abruptly stopped.

Sifkitz sat up and looked at his hands. The palm of the right one was bleeding and the wrist of the left one was already swelling, but he

didn't think it was broken. He looked around and the first thing he saw—red in the glow of the Dodge's taillights—was his Raleigh. It had been beautiful when his Dad brought it home from the bike-shop, but it wasn't beautiful any longer. The front wheel was warped out of true, and the rear tire had come partly off the rim. For the first time he felt something other than fear. This new emotion was anger.

He got shakily to his feet. Beyond the Raleigh, back the way he'd come, was a hole in reality. It was strangely organic, as if he were looking through the hole at the end of some duct in his own body. The edges wavered and bulged and flexed. Beyond it, three men were standing around the stationary bike in the basement alcove, standing in postures he recognized from every work-crew he'd ever seen in his life. These were men with a job to do. They were deciding how to do it.

And suddenly he knew why he'd named them as he had. It was really idiotically simple. The one in the LIPID cap, Berkowitz, was David Berkowitz, the so-called Son of Sam and a New York Post staple the year Sifkitz had come to Manhattan. Freddy was Freddy Albemarle, this kid he'd known in high school—they'd been in a band together, and had become friends for a simple enough reason: they both hated school. And Whelan? An artist he'd met at a conference somewhere. Michael Whelan? Mitchell Whelan? Sifkitz couldn't quite remember, but he knew the guy specialized in fantasy art, dragons and such. They had spent a night in the hotel bar, telling stories about the comic-horrible world of movie-poster art.

Then there was Carlos, who'd committed suicide in his garage. Why, he had been a version of Carlos Delgado, also known as the Big Cat. For years Sifkitz had followed the fortunes of the Toronto Blue Jays, simply because he didn't want to be like every other American League baseball fan in New York and root for the Yankees. The Cat had been one of Toronto's very few stars.

"I made you all," he said in a voice that was little more than a croak. "I created you out of memories and spare parts." Of course he had. Nor had it been for the first time. The boys on the Norman Rockwell

pitcher's mound in the Fritos ad, for instance—the ad agency had, at his request, provided him with photographs of four boys of the correct age, and Sifkitz had simply painted them in. Their mothers had signed the necessary waivers; it had been business as usual.

If they heard him speak, Berkowitz, Freddy, and Whelan gave no sign. They spoke a few words among themselves that Sifkitz could hear but not make out; they seemed to come from a great distance. Whatever they were, they got Whelan moving out of the alcove while Berkowitz knelt by the stationary bike, just as Sifkitz himself had done. Berkowitz picked up the screwdriver and in no time at all the left-hand pedal dropped off onto the concrete—clunk. Sifkitz, still on the deserted road, watched through the queer organic hole as Berkowitz handed the screwdriver to Freddy Albemarle—who, with Richard Sifkitz, had played lousy trumpet in the equally lousy high school band. They had played a hell of a lot better when they were rocking. Somewhere in the Canadian woods an owl hooted, the sound inexpressibly lonely. Freddy went to work unscrewing the other pedal. Whelan, meanwhile, returned with the adjustable wrench in his hand. Sifkitz felt a pang at the sight of it.

Watching them, the thought that went through Sifkitz's mind was: If you want something done right, hire a professional. Certainly Berkowitz and his boys wasted no time. In less than four minutes the stationary bike was nothing but two wheels and three disconnected sections of frame laid on the concrete, and so neatly that the parts looked like one of those diagrams called "exploded schematics."

Berkowitz himself dropped the screws and bolts into the front pockets of his Dickies, where they bulged like handfuls of spare change. He gave Sifkitz a meaningful look as he did this, one that made Sifkitz angry all over again. By the time the work-crew came back through the odd, ductlike hole (dropping their heads as they did so, like men passing through a low doorway), Sifkitz's fists were clenched again, even though doing that made the wrist of the left one throb like hell.

“You know what?” he asked Berkowitz. “I don’t think you can hurt me. I don’t think you can hurt me, because then what happens to you? You’re nothing but a ... a sub-contractor!”

Berkowitz looked at him levelly from beneath the bent bill of his LIPID cap.

“I made you up!” Sifkitz said, and counted them off, poking the index finger out of his right fist and pointing it at each one in turn like the barrel of a gun. “You’re the Son of Sam! You’re nothing but a grown-up version of this kid I played the horn with at Sisters of Mercy High! You couldn’t play E-flat to save your life! And you’re an artist specializing in dragons and enchanted maidens!”

The remaining members of The Lipid Company were singularly unimpressed.

“What does that make you?” Berkowitz asked. “Did you ever think of that? Are you going to tell me there might not be a larger world out there someplace? For all you know, you’re nothing but a random thought going through some unemployed Certified Public Accountant’s head while he sits on the jakes, reading the paper and taking his morning dump.”

Sifkitz opened his mouth to say that was ridiculous, but something in Berkowitz’s eyes made him shut it again. Go on, his eyes said. Ask a question. I’ll tell you more than you ever wanted to know.

What Sifkitz said instead was, “Who are you to tell me I can’t get fit? Do you want me to die at fifty? Jesus Christ, what’s wrong with you?”

Freddy said, “I ain’t no philosopher, Mac. All I know is that my truck needs a tune-up I can’t afford.”

“And I’ve got one kid who needs orthopedic shoes and another one who needs speech therapy,” Whelan added.

“The guys working on the Big Dig in Boston have got a saying,” Berkowitz said. “‘Don’t kill the job, let it die on its own.’ That’s all we’re asking, Sifkitz. Let us dip our beaks. Let us earn our living.”

“This is crazy,” Sifkitz muttered. “Totally—”

“I don’t give a shit how you feel about it, you motherfucker!” Freddy shouted, and Sifkitz realized the man was almost crying. This confrontation was as stressful for them as it was for him. Somehow realizing that was the worst shock of all. “I don’t give a shit about you, you ain’t nothing, you don’t work, you just piddle around and make your little pitchers, but don’t you take the bread out of my kids’ mouths, you hear? Don’t you do it!”

He started forward, hands rolling into fists and coming up in front of his face: an absurd John L. Sullivan boxing pose. Berkowitz put a hand on Freddy’s arm and pulled him back.

“Don’t be a hardass about it, man,” Whelan said. “Live and let live, all right?”

“Let us dip our beaks,” Berkowitz repeated, and of course Sifkitz recognized the phrase; he’d read *The Godfather* and seen all the movies. Could any of these guys use a word or a slang phrase that wasn’t in his own vocabulary? He doubted it. “Let us keep our dignity, man. You think we can go to work drawing pictures, like you?” He laughed. “Yeah, right. If I draw a cat, I gotta write CAT underneath so people know what it is.”

“You killed Carlos,” Whelan said, and if there had been accusation in his voice, Sifkitz had an idea he might have been angry all over again. But all he heard was sorrow. “We told him, ‘Hold on, man, it’ll get better,’ but he wasn’t strong. He could never, you know, look ahead. He lost all his hope.” Whelan paused, looked up at the dark sky. Not far off, Freddy’s Dodge rumbled roughly. “He never had much to start with. Some people don’t, you know.”

Sifkitz turned to Berkowitz. "Let me get this straight. What you want —"

"Just don't kill the job," Berkowitz said. "That's all we want. Let the job die on its own."

Sifkitz realized he could probably do as this man was asking. It might even be easy. Some people, if they ate one Krispy Kreme, they had to go and finish the whole box. If he'd been that type of man, they would have a serious problem here ... but he wasn't.

"Okay," he said. "Why don't we give it a try." And then an idea struck him. "Do you think I could have a company hat?" He pointed to the one Berkowitz was wearing.

Berkowitz gave a smile. It was brief, but more genuine than the laugh when he'd said he couldn't draw a cat without having to write the word under it. "That could be arranged."

Sifkitz had an idea Berkowitz would stick out his hand then, but Berkowitz didn't. He just gave Sifkitz a final measuring glance from beneath the bill of his cap and then started toward the cab of the truck. The other two followed.

"How long before I decide none of this happened?" Sifkitz asked. "That I took the stationary bike apart myself because I just ... I don't know ... just got tired of it?"

Berkowitz paused, hand on the doorhandle, and looked back. "How long do you want it to be?" he asked.

"I don't know," Sifkitz said. "Hey, it's beautiful out here, isn't it?"

"It always was," Berkowitz said. "We always kept it nice." There was an undertone of defensiveness in his voice that Sifkitz chose to ignore. It occurred to him that even a figment of one's imagination could have its pride.

For a few moments they stood there on the road, which Sifkitz had lately come to think of as The Great Trans-Canadian Lost Highway, a pretty grand name for a no-name dirt track through the woods, but also pretty nice. None of them said anything. Somewhere the owl hooted again.

“Indoors, outdoors, it’s all the same to us,” Berkowitz said. Then he opened the door and swung up behind the wheel.

“Take care of yourself,” Freddy said.

“But not too much,” Whelan added.

Sifkitz stood there while the truck made an artful three-point turn on the narrow road and started back the way it came. The ductlike opening was gone, but Sifkitz didn’t worry about that. He didn’t think he’d have any trouble getting back when the time came. Berkowitz made no effort to avoid the Raleigh but ran directly over it, finishing a job that was already finished. There were sproinks and goinks as the spokes in the wheels broke. The taillights dwindled, then disappeared around a curve. Sifkitz could hear the thump of the motor for quite awhile, but that faded, too.

He sat down on the road, then lay down on his back, cradling his throbbing left wrist against his chest. There were no stars in the sky. He was very tired. Better not go to sleep, he advised himself, something’s likely to come out of the woods—a bear, maybe—and eat you. Then he fell asleep anyway.

When he woke up, he was on the cement floor of the alcove. The dismantled pieces of the stationary bike, now screwless and boltless, lay all around him. The Brookstone alarm clock on the crate read 8:43 P.M. One of them had apparently turned off the alarm.

I took this thing apart myself, he thought. That’s my story, and if I stick to it I’ll believe it soon enough.

He climbed the stairs to the building's lobby and decided he was hungry. He thought maybe he'd go out to Dugan's and get a piece of apple pie. Apple pie wasn't the world's most unhealthy snack, was it? And when he got there, he decided to have it a la mode.

"What the hell," he told the waitress. "You only live once, don't you?"

"Well," she replied, "that's not what the Hindus say, but whatever floats your boat."

Two months later, Sifkitz got a package.

It was waiting for him in the lobby of his building when he got back from having dinner with his agent (Sifkitz had fish and steamed vegetables, but followed it with a creme brulee). There was no postage on it, no Federal Express, Airborne Express, or UPS logo, no stamps. Just his name, printed in ragged block letters: RICHARD SIFKITZ. That's a man who'd have to print CAT underneath his drawing of one, he thought, and had no idea at all why he'd thought it. He took the box upstairs and used an X-Acto knife from his worktable to slice it open. Inside, beneath a big wad of tissue paper, was a brand-new gimme cap, the kind with the plastic adjustable band in back. The tag inside read Made In Bangladesh. Printed above the bill in a dark red that made him think of arterial blood was one word: LIPID.

"What's that?" he asked the empty studio, turning the cap over and over in his hands. "Some kind of blood component, isn't it?"

He tried the hat on. At first it was too small, but when he adjusted the band at the back, the fit was perfect. He looked at it in his bedroom mirror and still didn't quite like it. He took it off, bent the bill into a curve, and tried it again. Now it was almost right. It would look better still when he got out of his going-to-lunch clothes and into a pair of paint-splattered jeans. He'd look like a real working stiff ... which he was, in spite of what some people might think.

Wearing the LIPID cap while he painted eventually became a habit with him, like allowing himself seconds on days of the week that started with S, and having pie a la mode at Dugan's on Thursday nights. Despite whatever the Hindu philosophy might be, Richard Sifkitz believed you only went around once. That being the case, maybe you should allow yourself a little bit of everything.

THE STRANGER

Stephen King

Kelso Black laughed.

He laughed until his sides were splitting and the bottle of cheap whiskey he held clenched in his hands sloped on the floor.

Dumb cops! It had been so easy. And now he had fifty grand in his pockets. The guard was dead - but it was his fault! He got in the way

With a laugh, Kelso Black raised the bottle to his lips. That was when he heard it. Footsteps on the stairs that led to the attic where he was holed up.

He drew his pistol. The door swung open.

The stranger wore a black coat and a hat pulled over his eyes.

“Hello, hello.” he said. “Kelso, I’ve been watching you. You please me immensely.” The stranger laughed and it sent a thrill of horror through him.

“Who are you?”

The man laughed again. “You know me. I know you. We made a pact about an hour ago, the moment you shot that guard.”

“Get out!” Black’s voice rose shrilly. “Get out!” Get out!”

“It’s time for you to come, Kelso” the stranger said softly “After all - we have a long way to go.”

The stranger took off his coat and hat. Kelso Black looked into that Face.

He screamed.

Kelso Black screamed and screamed and screamed.

But the stranger just laughed and in a moment, the room was silent.
And empty.

But it smelled strongly of brimstone.



STRAWBERRY SPRING
FROM A STORY BY STEPHEN KING

COMING
2011

STRAWBERRY SPRING

Stephen King

Springheel Jack ...

I saw those two words in the paper this morning and my God, how they take me back. All that was eight years ago, almost to the day. Once, while it was going on, I saw myself on nationwide TV—the Walter Cronkite Report. Just a hurrying face in the general background behind the reporter, but my folks picked me out right away. They called long-distance. My dad wanted my analysis of the situation; he was all bluff and hearty and man-to-man. My mother just wanted me to come home. But I didn't want to come home. I was enchanted.

Enchanted by that dark and mist-blown strawberry spring, and by the shadow of violent death that walked through it on those nights eight years ago. The shadow of Springheel Jack.

In New England they call it a strawberry spring. No one knows why; it's just a phrase the old-timers use. They say it happens once every eight or ten years. What happened at New Sharon Teachers' College that particular strawberry spring ... there may be a cycle for that, too, but if anyone has figured it out, they've never said.

At New Sharon, the strawberry spring began on March 16, 1968. The coldest winter in twenty years broke on that day. It rained and you could smell the sea twenty miles west of the beaches. The snow, which had been thirty-five inches deep in places, began to melt and the campus walks ran with slush. The Winter Carnival snow sculptures, which had been kept sharp and clearcut for two months by the subzero temperatures, at last began to sag and slouch. The caricature of Lyndon Johnson in front of the Tep fraternity house cried melted tears. The dove in front of Prashner Hall lost its frozen feathers and its plywood skeleton showed sadly through in places.

And when night came the fog came with it, moving silent and white along the narrow college avenues and thoroughfares. The pines on the mall poked through it like counting fingers and it drifted, slow as cigarette smoke, under the little bridge down by the Civil War

cannons. It made things seem out of joint, strange, magical. The unwary traveler would step out of the juke-thumping, brightly lit confusion of the Grinder, expecting the hard clear starriness of winter to clutch him ... and instead he would suddenly find himself in a silent, muffled world of white drifting fog, the only sound his own footsteps and the soft drip of water from the ancient gutters. You half expected to see Gollum or Frodo and Sam go hurrying past, or to turn and see that the Grinder was gone, vanished, replaced by a foggy panorama of moors and yew trees and perhaps a Druid-circle or a sparkling fairy ring.

The jukebox played “Love Is Blue” that year. It played “Hey, Jude” endlessly, endlessly. It played “Scarborough Fair.”

And at ten minutes after eleven on that night a junior named John Dancey on his way back to his dormitory began screaming into the fog, dropping books on and between the sprawled legs of the dead girl lying in a shadowy corner of the Animal Sciences parking lot, her throat cut from ear to ear but her eyes open and almost seeming to sparkle as if she had just successfully pulled off the funniest joke of her young life—Dancey, an education major and a speech minor, screamed and screamed and screamed.

The next day was overcast and sullen, and we went to classes with questions eager in our mouths—who? why? when do you think they’ll get him? And always the final thrilled question: Did you know her? Did you know her?

Yes, I had an art class with her.

Yes, one of my roommate’s friends dated her last term.

Yes, she asked me for a light once in the Grinder. She was at the next table.

Yes,

Yes, I

Yes ... yes ... oh yes, I

We all knew her. Her name was Gale Cerman (pronounced Kerrman), and she was an art major. She wore granny glasses and had a good figure. She was well liked but her roommates had hated her. She had never gone out much even though she was one of the most promiscuous girls on campus. She was ugly but cute. She had been a vivacious girl who talked little and smiled seldom. She had been pregnant and she had had leukemia. She was a lesbian who had been murdered by her boyfriend. It was strawberry spring, and on the morning of March 17 we all knew Gale Cerman.

Half a dozen State Police cars crawled onto the campus, most of them parked in front of Judith Franklin Hall, where the Cerman girl had lived. On my way past there to my ten o'clock class I was asked to show my student ID. I was clever. I showed him the one without the fangs.

"Do you carry a knife?" the policeman asked cunningly.

"Is it about Gale Cerman?" I asked, after I told him that the most lethal thing on my person was a rabbit's-foot key chain.

"What makes you ask?" He pounced.

I was five minutes late to class.

It was strawberry spring and no one walked by themselves through the half-academical, half-fantastical campus that night. The fog had come again, smelling of the sea, quiet and deep.

Around nine o'clock my roommate burst into our room, where I had been busting my brains on a Milton essay since seven. "They caught him," he said. "I heard it over at the Grinder."

"From who?"

“I don’t know. Some guy. Her boyfriend did it. His name is Carl Amalara.”

I settled back, relieved and disappointed. With a name like that it had to be true. A lethal and sordid little crime of passion.

“Okay,” I said. “That’s good.”

He left the room to spread the news down the hall. I reread my Milton essay, couldn’t figure out what I had been trying to say, tore it up and started again.

It was in the papers the next day. There was an incongruously neat picture of Amalara—probably a high-school graduation picture—and it showed a rather sad-looking boy with an olive complexion and dark eyes and pockmarks on his nose. The boy had not confessed yet, but the evidence against him was strong. He and Gale Cerman had argued a great deal in the last month or so, and had broken up the week before. Amalara’s roomie said he had been “despondent.” In a foot-locker under his bed, police had found a seven-inch hunting knife from L. L. Bean’s and a picture of the girl that had apparently been cut up with a pair of shears.

Beside Amalara’s picture was one of Gale Cerman. It blurrily showed a dog, a peeling lawn flamingo, and a rather mousy blond girl wearing spectacles. An uncomfortable smile had turned her lips up and her eyes were squinted. One hand was on the dog’s head. It was true then. It had to be true.

The fog came again that night, not on little cat’s feet but in an improper silent sprawl. I walked that night. I had a headache and I walked for air, smelling the wet, misty smell of the spring that was slowly wiping away the reluctant snow, leaving lifeless patches of last year’s grass bare and uncovered, like the head of a sighing old grandmother.

For me, that was one of the most beautiful nights I can remember. The people I passed under the haloed streetlights were murmuring

shadows, and all of them seemed to be lovers, walking with hands and eyes linked. The melting snow dripped and ran, dripped and ran, and from every dark storm drain the sound of the sea drifted up, a dark winter sea now strongly ebbing.

I walked until nearly midnight, until I was thoroughly mildewed, and I passed many shadows, heard many footfalls clicking dreamily off down the winding paths. Who is to say that one of those shadows was not the man or the thing that came to be known as Springheel Jack? Not I, for I passed many shadows but in the fog I saw no faces.

The next morning the clamor in the hall woke me. I blundered out to see who had been drafted, combing my hair with both hands and running the fuzzy caterpillar that had craftily replaced my tongue across the dry roof of my mouth.

“He got another one,” someone said to me, his face pallid with excitement. “They had to let him go.”

“Who go?”

“Amalara!” someone else said gleefully. “He was sitting in jail when it happened.”

“When what happened?” I asked patiently. Sooner or later I would get it. I was sure of that.

“The guy killed somebody else last night. And now they’re hunting all over for it.”

“For what?”

The pallid face wavered in front of me again. “Her head. Whoever killed her took her head with him.”

New Sharon isn’t a big school now, and was even smaller then—the kind of institution the public relations people chummily refer to as a

“community college.” And it really was like a small community, at least in those days; between you and your friends, you probably had at least a nodding acquaintance with everybody else and their friends. Gale Cerman had been the type of girl you just nodded to, thinking vaguely that you had seen her around.

We all knew Ann Bray. She had been the first runner-up in the Miss New England pageant the year before, her talent performance consisting of twirling a flaming baton to the tune of “Hey, Look Me Over.” She was brainy, too; until the time of her death she had been editor of the school newspaper (a once-weekly rag with a lot of political cartoons and bombastic letters), a member of the student dramatics society, and president of the National Service Sorority, New Sharon Branch. In the hot, fierce bubblings of my freshman youth I had submitted a column idea to the paper and asked for a date—turned down on both counts.

And now she was dead ... worse than dead.

I walked to my afternoon classes like everyone else, nodding to people I knew and saying hi with a little more force than usual, as if that would make up for the close way I studied their faces. Which was the same way they were studying mine. There was someone dark among us, as dark as the paths which twisted across the mall or wound among the hundred-year-old oaks on the quad in back of the gymnasium. As dark as the hulking Civil War cannons seen through a drifting membrane of fog. We looked into each other’s faces and tried to read the darkness behind one of them.

This time the police arrested no one. The blue beetles patrolled the campus ceaselessly on the foggy spring nights of the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth, and spotlights stabbed into dark nooks and crannies with erratic eagerness. The administration imposed a mandatory nine o’clock curfew. A foolhardy couple discovered necking in the landscaped bushes north of the Tate Alumni Building were taken to the New Sharon police station and grilled unmercifully for three hours.

There was a hysterical false alarm on the twentieth when a boy was found unconscious in the same parking lot where the body of Gale Cerman had been found. A gibbering campus cop loaded him into the back of his cruiser and put a map of the county over his face without bothering to hunt for a pulse and started toward the local hospital, siren wailing across the deserted campus like a seminar of banshees.

Halfway there the corpse in the back seat had risen and asked hollowly, "Where the hell am I?" The cop shrieked and ran off the road. The corpse turned out to be an undergrad named Donald Morris who had been in bed the last two days with a pretty lively case of flu—was it Asian that year? I can't remember. Anyway, he fainted in the parking lot on his way to the Grinder for a bowl of soup and some toast.

The days continued warm and overcast. People clustered in small groups that had a tendency to break up and re-form with surprising speed. Looking at the same set of faces for too long gave you funny ideas about some of them. And the speed with which rumors swept from one end of the campus to the other began to approach the speed of light; a well-liked history professor had been overheard laughing and weeping down by the small bridge; Gale Cerman had left a cryptic two-word message written in her own blood on the blacktop of the Animal Sciences parking lot; both murders were actually political crimes, ritual murders that had been performed by an offshoot of the SDS to protest the war. This was really laughable. The New Sharon SDS had seven members. One fair-sized offshoot would have bankrupted the whole organization. This fact brought an even more sinister embellishment from the campus right-wingers: outside agitators. So during those queer, warm days we all kept our eyes peeled for them.

The press, always fickle, ignored the strong resemblance our murderer bore to Jack the Ripper and dug further back—all the way to 1819. Ann Bray had been found on a soggy path of ground some twelve feet from the nearest sidewalk, and yet there were no

footprints, not even her own. An enterprising New Hampshire newsman with a passion for the arcane christened the killer Springheel Jack, after the infamous Dr. John Hawkins of Bristol, who did five of his wives to death with odd pharmaceutical knickknacks. And the name, probably because of that soggy yet unmarked ground, stuck.

On the twenty-first it rained again, and the mall and quadrangle became quagmires. The police announced that they were salting plainclothes detectives, men and women, about, and took half the police cars off duty.

The campus newspaper published a strongly indignant, if slightly incoherent, editorial protesting this. The upshot of it seemed to be that, with all sorts of cops masquerading as students, it would be impossible to tell a real outside agitator from a false one.

Twilight came and the fog with it, drifting up the tree-lined avenues slowly, almost thoughtfully, blotting out the buildings one by one. It was soft, insubstantial stuff, but somehow implacable and frightening. Springheel Jack was a man, no one seemed to doubt that, but the fog was his accomplice and it was female ... or so it seemed to me. It was as if our little school was caught between them, squeezed in some crazy lovers' embrace, part of a marriage that had been consummated in blood. I sat and smoked and watched the lights come on in the growing darkness and wondered if it was all over. My roommate came in and shut the door quietly behind him.

"It's going to snow soon," he said.

I turned around and looked at him. "Does the radio say that?"

"No," he said. "Who needs a weatherman? Have you ever heard of strawberry spring?"

"Maybe," I said. "A long time ago. Something grandmothers talk about, isn't it?"

He stood beside me, looking out at the creeping dark.

“Strawberry spring is like Indian summer,” he said, “only much more rare. You get a good Indian summer in this part of the country once every two or three years. A spell of weather like we’ve been having is supposed to come only every eight or ten. It’s a false spring, a lying spring, like Indian summer is a false summer. My own grandmother used to say strawberry spring means the worst norther of the winter is still on the way—and the longer this lasts, the harder the storm.

“Folk tales,” I said. “Never believe a word.” I looked at him. “But I’m nervous. Are you?”

He smiled benevolently and stole one of my cigarettes from the open pack on the window ledge. “I suspect everyone but me and thee,” he said, and then the smile faded a little. “And sometimes I wonder about thee. Want to go over to the Union and shoot some eight-ball? I’ll spot you ten.”

“Trig prelim next week. I’m going to settle down with a magic marker and a hot pile of notes.”

For a long time after he was gone, I could only look out the window. And even after I had opened my book and started in, part of me was still out there, walking in the shadows where something dark was now in charge.

That night Adelle Parkins was killed. Six police cars and seventeen collegiate-looking plainclothesmen (eight of them were women imported all the way from Boston) patrolled the campus. But Springheel Jack killed her just the same, going unerringly for one of our own. The false spring, the lying spring, aided and abetted him—he killed her and left her propped behind the wheel of her 1964 Dodge to be found the next morning and they found part of her in the back seat and part of her in the trunk. And written in blood on the windshield—this time fact instead of rumor—were two words: HA! HA!

The campus went slightly mad after that; all of us and none of us had known Adelle Parkins. She was one of those nameless, harried women who worked the break-back shift in the Grinder from six to eleven at night, facing hordes of hamburger-happy students on study break from the library across the way. She must have had it relatively easy those last three foggy nights of her life; the curfew was being rigidly observed, and after nine the Grinder's only patrons were hungry cops and happy janitors—the empty buildings had improved their habitual bad temper considerably.

There is little left to tell. The police, as prone to hysteria as any of us and driven against the wall, arrested an innocuous homosexual sociology graduate student named Hanson Gray, who claimed he “could not remember” where he had spent several of the lethal evenings. They charged him, arraigned him, and let him go to scamper hurriedly back to his native New Hampshire town after the last unspeakable night of strawberry spring when Marsha Curran was slaughtered on the mall.

Why she had been out and alone is forever beyond knowing—she was a fat, sadly pretty thing who lived in an apartment in town with three other girls. She had slipped on campus as silently and as easily as Springheel Jack himself. What brought her? Perhaps her need was as deep and as ungovernable as her killer's, and just as far beyond understanding. Maybe a need for one desperate and passionate romance with the warm night, the warm fog, the smell of the sea, and the cold knife.

That was on the twenty-third. On the twenty-fourth the president of the college announced that spring break would be moved up a week, and we scattered, not joyfully but like frightened sheep before a storm, leaving the campus empty and haunted by the police and one dark specter.

I had my own car on campus, and I took six people down-state with me, their luggage crammed in helter-skelter. It wasn't a pleasant ride. For all any of us knew, Springheel Jack might have been in the car with us.

That night the thermometer dropped fifteen degrees, and the whole northern New England area was belted by a shrieking norther that began in sleet and ended in a foot of snow. The usual number of old duffers had heart attacks shoveling it away—and then, like magic, it was April. Clean showers and starry nights.

They called it strawberry spring, God knows why, and it's an evil, lying time that only comes once every eight or ten years. Springheel Jack left with the fog, and by early June, campus conversation had turned to a series of draft protests and a sit-in at the building where a well-known napalm manufacturer was holding job interviews. By June, the subject of Springheel Jack was almost unanimously avoided—at least aloud. I suspect there were many who turned it over and over privately, looking for the one crack in the seamless egg of madness that would make sense of it all.

That was the year I graduated, and the next year was the year I married. A good job in a local publishing house. In 1971 we had a child, and now he's almost school age. A fine and questing boy with my eyes and her mouth.

Then, today's paper.

Of course I knew it was here. I knew it yesterday morning when I got up and heard the mysterious sound of snowmelt running down the gutters, and smelled the salt tang of the ocean from our front porch, nine miles from the nearest beach. I knew strawberry spring had come again when I started home from work last night and had to turn on my headlights against the mist that was already beginning to creep out of the fields and hollows, blurring the lines of the buildings and putting fairy haloes around the streetlamps.

This morning's paper says a girl was killed on the New Sharon campus near the Civil War cannons. She was killed last night and found in a melting snowbank. She was not ... she was not all there.

My wife is upset. She wants to know where I was last night. I can't tell her because I don't remember. I remember starting home from

work, and I remember putting my headlights on to search my way through the lovely creeping fog, but that's all I remember.

I've been thinking about that foggy night when I had a headache and walked for air and passed all the lovely shadows without shape or substance. And I've been thinking about the trunk of my car—such an ugly word, trunk—and wondering why in the world I should be afraid to open it.

I can hear my wife as I write this, in the next room, crying. She thinks I was with another woman last night.

And oh dear God, I think so too.

stephen king's
Suffer
the Little Children



SUFFER THE LITTLE CHILDREN

Stephen King

Miss Sidley was her name, and teaching was her game.

She was a small woman who had to stretch to write on the highest level of the blackboard, which she was doing now. Behind her, none of the children giggled or whispered or munched on secret sweets held in cupped hands. They knew Miss Sidley's deadly instincts too well. Miss Sidley could always tell who was chewing gum at the back of the room, who had a beanshooter in his pocket, who wanted to go to the bathroom to trade baseball cards rather than use the facilities. Like God, she seemed to know everything all at once.

She was graying, and the brace she wore to support her failing back was limned clearly against her print dress. Small, constantly suffering, gimlet-eyed woman. But they feared her. Her tongue was a schoolyard legend. The eyes, when focused on a giggler or a whisperer, could turn the stoutest knees to water.

Now, writing the day's list of spelling words on the board, she reflected that the success of her long teaching career could be summed and checked and proven by this one everyday action: she could turn her back on her pupils with confidence.

"Vacation," she said, pronouncing the word as she wrote it in her firm, no-nonsense script. "Edward, please use the word vacation in a sentence."

"I went on a vacation to New York City," Edward piped. Then, as Miss Sidley had taught, he repeated the word carefully. "Vay-cay-shun."

"Very good, Edward." She began on the next word.

She had her little tricks, of course; success, she firmly believed, depended as much on the little things as on the big ones. She applied the principle constantly in the classroom, and it never failed.

"Jane," she said quietly.

Jane, who had been furtively perusing her Reader, looked up guiltily.

“Close that book right now, please.” The book shut; Jane looked with pale, hating eyes at Miss Sidley’s back. “And you will remain at your desk for fifteen minutes after the final bell.”

Jane’s lips trembled. “Yes, Miss Sidley.”

One of her little tricks was the careful use of her glasses. The whole class was reflected in their thick lenses and she had always been thinly amused by their guilty, frightened faces when she caught them at their nasty little games. Now she saw a phantomish, distorted Robert in the first row wrinkle his nose. She did not speak. Not yet. Robert would hang himself if given just a little more rope.

“Tomorrow,” she pronounced clearly. “Robert, you will please use the word tomorrow in a sentence.”

Robert frowned over the problem. The classroom was hushed and sleepy in the late-September sun. The electric clock over the door buzzed a rumor of three o’clock dismissal just a half-hour away, and the only thing that kept young heads from drowsing over their spellers was the silent, ominous threat of Miss Sidley’s back.

“I am waiting, Robert.”

“Tomorrow a bad thing will happen,” Robert said. The words were perfectly innocuous, but Miss Sidley, with the seventh sense that all strict disciplinarians have, didn’t like them a bit. “Too-mor-row,” Robert finished. His hands were folded neatly on the desk, and he wrinkled his nose again. He also smiled a tiny side-of-the-mouth smile. Miss Sidley was suddenly, unaccountably sure Robert knew about her little trick with the glasses.

All right; very well.

She began to write the next word with no word of commendation for Robert, letting her straight body speak its own message. She

watched carefully with one eye. Soon Robert would stick out his tongue or make that disgusting finger-gesture they all knew (even the girls seemed to know it these days), just to see if she really knew what he was doing. Then he would be punished.

The reflection was small, ghostly, and distorted. And she had all but the barest corner of her eye on the word she was writing.

Robert changed.

She caught just a flicker of it, just a frightening glimpse of Robert's face changing into something ... different.

She whirled around, face white, barely noticing the protesting stab of pain in her back.

Robert looked at her blandly, questioningly. His hands were neatly folded. The first signs of an afternoon cowlick showed at the back of his head. He did not look frightened.

I imagined it, she thought. I was looking for something, and when there was nothing, my mind just made something up. Very cooperative of it. However—

“Robert?” She meant to be authoritative; meant for her voice to make the unspoken demand for confession. It did not come out that way.

“Yes, Miss Sidley?” His eyes were a very dark brown, like the mud at the bottom of a slow-running stream.

“Nothing.”

She turned back to the board. A little whisper ran through the class.

“Be quiet!” she snapped, and turned again to face them. “One more sound and we will all stay after school with Jane!” She addressed the whole class, but looked most directly at Robert. He looked back with childlike innocence: Who, me? Not me, Miss Sidley.

She turned to the board and began to write, not looking out of the corners of her glasses. The last half-hour dragged, and it seemed that Robert gave her a strange look on the way out. A look that said, We have a secret, don't we?

The look wouldn't leave her mind. It was stuck there, like a tiny string of roast beef between two molars—a small thing, actually, but feeling as big as a cinderblock.

She sat down to her solitary dinner at five (poached eggs on toast) still thinking about it. She knew she was getting older and accepted the knowledge calmly. She was not going to be one of those old-maid schoolmarms dragged kicking and screaming from their classes at the age of retirement. They reminded her of gamblers unable to leave the tables while they were losing. But she was not losing. She had always been a winner.

She looked down at her poached eggs.

Hadn't she?

She thought of the well-scrubbed faces in her third-grade classroom, and found Robert's face most prominent among them.

She got up and switched on another light.

Later, just before she dropped off to sleep, Robert's face floated in front of her, smiling unpleasantly in the darkness behind her lids. The face began to change—

But before she saw exactly what it was changing into, darkness overtook her.

*

Miss Sidley spent an unrestful night and consequently the next day her temper was short. She waited, almost hoping for a whisperer, a giggler, perhaps a note-passer. But the class was quiet—very quiet.

They all stared at her unresponsively, and it seemed that she could feel the weight of their eyes on her like blind, crawling ants.

Stop that! she told herself sternly. You're acting like a skittish girl just out of teachers college!

Again the day seemed to drag, and she believed she was more relieved than the children when the last bell rang. The children lined up in orderly rows at the door, boys and girls by height, hands dutifully linked.

"Dismissed," she said, and listened sourly as they shrieked their way down the hall and into the bright sunlight.

What was it I saw when he changed? Something bulbous. Something that shimmered. Something that stared at me, yes, stared and grinned and wasn't a child at all. It was old and it was evil and—

"Miss Sidley?"

Her head jerked up and a little Oh! hiccupped involuntarily from her throat.

It was Mr. Manning. He smiled apologetically. "Didn't mean to disturb you."

"Quite all right," she said, more curtly than she had intended. What had she been thinking? What was wrong with her?

"Would you mind checking the paper towels in the girls' lav?"

"Surely." She got up, placing her hands against the small of her back. Mr. Manning looked at her sympathetically. Save it, she thought. The old maid is not amused. Or even interested.

She brushed by Mr. Manning and started down the hall to the girls' lavatory. A snigger of boys carrying scratched and pitted baseball equipment grew silent at the sight of her and leaked guiltily out the door, where their cries began again.

Miss Sidley frowned after them, reflecting that children had been different in her day. Not more polite—children have never had time for that—and not exactly more respectful of their elders; it was a kind of hypocrisy that had never been there before. A smiling quietness around adults that had never been there before. A kind of quiet contempt that was upsetting and unnerving. As if they were ...

Hiding behind masks? Is that it?

She pushed the thought away and went into the lavatory. It was a small, L-shaped room. The toilets were ranged along one side of the longer bar, the sinks along both sides of the shorter one.

As she checked the paper-towel containers, she caught a glimpse of her face in one of the mirrors and was startled into looking at it closely. She didn't care for what she saw—not a bit. There was a look that hadn't been there two days before, a frightened, watching look. With sudden shock she realized that the blurred reflection in her glasses of Robert's pale, respectful face had gotten inside her and was festering.

The door opened and she heard two girls come in, giggling secretly about something. She was about to turn the corner and walk out past them when she heard her own name. She turned back to the washbowls and began checking the towel holders again.

“And then he—”

Soft giggles.

“She knows, but—”

More giggles, soft and sticky as melting soap.

“Miss Sidley is—”

Stop it! Stop that noise!

By moving slightly she could see their shadows, made fuzzy and ill-defined by the diffuse light filtering through the frosted windows, holding onto each other with girlish glee.

Another thought crawled up out of her mind.

They knew she was there.

Yes. Yes they did. The little bitches knew.

She would shake them. Shake them until their teeth rattled and their giggles turned to wails, she would thump their heads against the tile walls and she would make them admit that they knew.

That was when the shadows changed. They seemed to elongate, to flow like dripping tallow, taking on strange hunched shapes that made Miss Sidley cringe back against the porcelain washstands, her heart swelling in her chest.

But they went on giggling.

The voices changed, no longer girlish, now sexless and soulless, and quite, quite evil. A slow, turgid sound of mindless humor that flowed around the corner to her like sewage.

She stared at the hunched shadows and suddenly screamed at them. The scream went on and on, swelling in her head until it attained a pitch of lunacy. And then she fainted. The giggling, like the laughter of demons, followed her down into darkness.

*

She could not, of course, tell them the truth.

Miss Sidley knew this even as she opened her eyes and looked up at the anxious faces of Mr. Hanning and Mrs. Crossen. Mrs. Crossen was holding the bottle of smelling salts from the gymnasium first-aid kit under her nose. Mr. Hanning turned around and told the two little

girls who were looking curiously at Miss Sidley to go home now, please.

They both smiled at her—slow, we-have-a-secret smiles—and went out.

Very well, she would keep their secret. For awhile. She would not have people thinking her insane, or that the first feelers of senility had touched her early. She would play their game. Until she could expose their nastiness and rip it out by the roots.

“I’m afraid I slipped,” she said calmly, sitting up and ignoring the excruciating pain in her back. “A patch of wetness.”

“This is awful,” Mr. Hanning said. “Terrible. Are you—”

“Did the fall hurt your back, Emily?” Mrs. Crossen interrupted. Mr. Hanning looked at her gratefully.

Miss Sidley got up, her spine screaming in her body.

“No,” she said. “In fact, the fall seems to have worked some minor chiropractic miracle. My back hasn’t felt this well in years.”

“We can send for a doctor—” Mr. Hanning began.

“Not necessary.” Miss Sidley smiled at him coolly.

“I’ll call you a taxi from the office.”

“You’ll do no such thing,” Miss Sidley said, walking to the door of the girls’ lav and opening it. “I always take the bus.”

Mr. Hanning sighed and looked at Mrs. Crossen. Mrs. Crossen rolled her eyes and said nothing.

*

The next day Miss Sidley kept Robert after school. He did nothing to warrant the punishment, so she simply accused him falsely. She felt no qualms; he was a monster, not a little boy. She must make him admit it.

Her back was in agony. She realized Robert knew; he expected that would help him. But it wouldn't. That was another of her little advantages. Her back had been a constant pain to her for the last twelve years, and there had been many times when it had been this bad—well, almost this bad.

She closed the door, shutting the two of them in.

For a moment she stood still, training her gaze on Robert. She waited for him to drop his eyes. He didn't. He looked back at her, and presently a little smile began to play around the corners of his mouth.

"Why are you smiling, Robert?" she asked softly.

"I don't know," Robert said, and went on smiling.

"Tell me, please."

Robert said nothing.

And went on smiling.

The outside sounds of children at play were distant, dreamy. Only the hypnotic buzz of the wall clock was real.

"There's quite a few of us," Robert said suddenly, as if he were commenting on the weather.

It was Miss Sidley's turn to be silent.

"Eleven right here in this school."

Quite evil, she thought, amazed. Very, incredibly evil.

“Little boys who tell stories go to hell,” she said clearly. “I know many parents no longer make their ... their spawn ... aware of that fact, but I assure you that it is a true fact, Robert. Little boys who tell stories go to hell. Little girls too, for that matter.”

Robert’s smile grew wider; it became vulpine. “Do you want to see me change, Miss Sidley? Do you want a really good look?”

Miss Sidley felt her back prickle. “Go away,” she said curtly. “And bring your mother or your father to school with you tomorrow. We’ll get this business straightened out.” There. On solid ground again. She waited for his face to crumple, waited for the tears.

Instead, Robert’s smile grew wider—wide enough to show his teeth. “It will be just like Show and Tell, won’t it, Miss Sidley? Robert—the other Robert—he liked Show and Tell. He’s still hiding way, way down in my head.” The smile curled at the corners of his mouth like charring paper. “Sometimes he runs around ... it itches. He wants me to let him out.”

“Go away,” Miss Sidley said numbly. The buzzing of the clock seemed very loud.

Robert changed.

His face suddenly ran together like melting wax, the eyes flattening and spreading like knife-struck egg yolks, nose widening and yawning, mouth disappearing. The head elongated, and the hair was suddenly not hair but straggling, twitching growths.

Robert began to chuckle.

The slow, cavernous sound came from what had been his nose, but the nose was eating into the lower half of his face, nostrils meeting and merging into a central blackness like a huge, shouting mouth.

Robert got up, still chuckling, and behind it all she could see the last shattered remains of the other Robert, the real little boy this alien

thing had usurped, howling in maniac terror, screeching to be let out.

She ran.

She fled screaming down the corridor, and the few late-leaving pupils turned to look at her with large and uncomprehending eyes. Mr. Hanning jerked open his door and looked out just as she plunged through the wide glass front doors, a wild, waving scarecrow silhouetted against the bright September sky.

He ran after her, Adam's apple bobbing. "Miss Sidley! Miss Sidley!"

Robert came out of the classroom and watched curiously.

Miss Sidley neither heard nor saw. She clattered down the steps and across the sidewalk and into the street with her screams trailing behind her. There was a huge, blatting horn and then the bus was looming over her, the bus driver's face a plaster mask of fear. Air brakes whined and hissed like angry dragons.

Miss Sidley fell, and the huge wheels shuddered to a smoking stop just eight inches from her frail, brace-armored body. She lay shuddering on the pavement, hearing the crowd gather around her.

She turned over and the children were staring down at her. They were ringed in a tight little circle, like mourners around an open grave. And at the head of the grave was Robert, a small sober sexton ready to shovel the first spade of dirt into her face.

From far away, the bus driver's shaken babble: "... crazy or somethin... my God, another half a foot ..."

Miss Sidley stared at the children. Their shadows covered her. Their faces were impassive. Some of them were smiling little secret smiles, and Miss Sidley knew that soon she would begin to scream again.

Then Mr. Hanning broke their tight noose, shooed them away, and Miss Sidley began to sob weakly.

*

She didn't go back to her third grade for a month. She told Mr. Hanning calmly that she had not been feeling herself, and Mr. Hanning suggested that she see a reputable doctor and discuss the matter with him. Miss Sidley agreed that this was the only sensible and rational course. She also said that if the school board wished for her resignation she would tender it immediately although doing so would hurt her very much. Mr. Hanning, looking uncomfortable, said he doubted if that would be necessary. The upshot was that Miss Sidley came back in late October, once again ready to play the game and now knowing how to play it.

For the first week she let things go on as ever. It seemed the whole class now regarded her with hostile, shielded eyes. Robert smiled distantly at her from his front-row seat, and she did not have the courage to take him to task.

Once, while she was on playground duty, Robert walked over to her, holding a dodgem ball, smiling. "There's so many of us now you wouldn't believe it," he said. "And neither would anyone else." He stunned her by dropping a wink of infinite slyness. "If you, you know, tried to tell em."

A girl on the swings looked across the playground into Miss Sidley's eyes and laughed at her.

Miss Sidley smiled serenely down at Robert. "Why, Robert, whatever do you mean?"

But Robert only continued smiling as he went back to his game.

*

Miss Sidley brought the gun to school in her handbag. It had been her brother's. He had taken it from a dead German shortly after the Battle of the Bulge. Jim had been gone ten years now. She hadn't opened the box that held the gun in at least five, but when she did it was still there, gleaming dully. The clips of ammunition were still there, too, and she loaded the gun carefully, just as Jim had shown her.

She smiled pleasantly at her class; at Robert in particular. Robert smiled back and she could see the murky alienness swimming just below his skin, muddy, full of filth.

She had no idea what was now living inside Robert's skin, and she didn't care; she only hoped that the real little boy was entirely gone by now. She did not wish to be a murderess. She decided the real Robert must have died or gone insane, living inside the dirty, crawling thing that had chuckled at her in the classroom and sent her screaming into the street. So even if he was still alive, putting him out of his misery would be a mercy.

"Today we're going to have a Test," Miss Sidley said.

The class did not groan or shift apprehensively; they merely looked at her. She could feel their eyes, like weights. Heavy, smothering.

"It's a very special Test. I will call you down to the mimeograph room one by one and give it to you. Then you may have a candy and go home for the day. Won't that be nice?"

They smiled empty smiles and said nothing.

"Robert, will you come first?"

Robert got up, smiling his little smile. He wrinkled his nose quite openly at her. "Yes, Miss Sidley."

Miss Sidley took her bag and they went down the empty, echoing corridor together, past the sleepy drone of classes reciting behind

closed doors. The mimeograph room was at the far end of the hall, past the lavatories. It had been soundproofed two years ago; the big machine was very old and very noisy.

Miss Sidley closed the door behind them and locked it.

“No one can hear you,” she said calmly. She took the gun from her bag. “You or this.”

Robert smiled innocently. “There are lots of us, though. Lots more than here.” He put one small scrubbed hand on the paper-tray of the mimeograph machine. “Would you like to see me change again?”

Before she could speak, Robert’s face began to shimmer into the grotesqueness beneath and Miss Sidley shot him. Once. In the head. He fell back against the paper-lined shelves and slid down to the floor, a little dead boy with a round black hole above his right eye.

He looked very pathetic.

Miss Sidley stood over him, panting. Her cheeks were pale.

The huddled figure didn’t move.

It was human.

It was Robert.

No!

It was all in your mind, Emily. All in your mind.

No! No, no, no!

She went back up to the room and began to lead them down, one by one. She killed twelve of them and would have killed them all if Mrs. Crossen hadn’t come down for a package of composition paper.

Mrs. Crossen's eyes got very big; one hand crept up and clutched her mouth. She began to scream and she was still screaming when Miss Sidley reached her and put a hand on her shoulder. "It had to be done, Margaret," she told the screaming Mrs. Crossen. "It's terrible, but it had to. They are all monsters."

Mrs. Crossen stared at the gaily clothed little bodies scattered around the mimeograph and continued to scream. The little girl whose hand Miss Sidley was holding began to cry steadily and monotonously: "Waahhh ... waahhhh ... waahhhh."

"Change," Miss Sidley said. "Change for Mrs. Crossen. Show her it had to be done."

The girl continued to weep uncomprehendingly.

"Damn you, change!" Miss Sidley screamed. "Dirty bitch, dirty crawling, filthy unnatural bitch! Change! God damn you, change!" She raised the gun. The little girl cringed, and then Mrs. Crossen was on her like a cat, and Miss Sidley's back gave way.

*

No trial.

The papers screamed for one, bereaved parents swore hysterical oaths against Miss Sidley, and the city sat back on its haunches in numb shock, but in the end, cooler heads prevailed and there was no trial. The State Legislature called for more stringent teacher exams, Summer Street School closed for a week of mourning, and Miss Sidley went quietly to Juniper Hill in Augusta. She was put in deep analysis, given the most modern drugs, introduced into daily work-therapy sessions. A year later, under strictly controlled conditions, Miss Sidley was put in an experimental encounter-therapy situation.

*

Buddy Jenkins was his name, psychiatry was his game.

He sat behind a one-way glass with a clipboard, looking into a room which had been outfitted as a nursery. On the far wall, the cow was jumping over the moon and the mouse ran up the clock. Miss Sidley sat in her wheelchair with a story book, surrounded by a group of trusting, drooling, smiling, cataclysmically retarded children. They smiled at her and drooled and touched her with small wet fingers while attendants at the next window watched for the first sign of an aggressive move.

For a time Buddy thought she responded well. She read aloud, stroked a girl's head, consoled a small boy when he fell over a toy block. Then she seemed to see something which disturbed her; a frown creased her brow and she looked away from the children.

"Take me away, please," Miss Sidley said, softly and tonelessly, to no one in particular.

And so they took her away. Buddy Jenkins watched the children watch her go, their eyes wide and empty, but somehow deep. One smiled, and another put his fingers in his mouth slyly. Two little girls clutched each other and giggled.

That night Miss Sidley cut her throat with a bit of broken mirror-glass, and after that Buddy Jenkins began to watch the children more and more. In the end, he was hardly able to take his eyes off them.

SURVIVOR TYPE



STEPHEN KING

ADAPTED AND ILLUSTRATED BY MAX MILLER

SURVIVOR TYPE

Stephen King

Sooner or later the question comes up in every medical student's career. How much shock-trauma can the patient stand? Different instructors answer the question in different ways, but cut to its base level, the answer is always another question: How badly does the patient want to survive?

January 26

Two days since the storm washed me up. I paced the island off just this morning. Some island! It is 190 paces wide at its thickest point, and 267 paces long from tip to tip.

So far as I can tell, there is nothing on it to eat.

My name is Richard Pine. This is my diary. If I'm found (when), I can destroy this easily enough. There is no shortage of matches. Matches and heroin. Plenty of both. Neither of them worth doodlysquat here, ha-ha. So I will write. It will pass the time, anyway.

If I'm to tell the whole truth—and why not? I sure have the time!—I'll have to start by saying I was born Richard Pinzetti, in New York's Little Italy. My father was an Old World guinea. I wanted to be a surgeon. My father would laugh, call me crazy, and tell me to get him another glass of wine. He died of cancer when he was forty-six. I was glad.

I played football in high school. I was the best damn football player my school ever produced. Quarterback. I made All-City my last two years. I hated football. But if you're a poor wop from the projects and you want to go to college, sports are your only ticket. So I played, and I got my athletic scholarship.

In college I only played ball until my grades were good enough to get a full academic scholarship. Pre-med. My father died six weeks before graduation. Good deal. Do you think I wanted to walk across

that stage and get my diploma and look down and see that fat greaseball sitting there? Does a hen want a flag? I got into a fraternity, too. It wasn't one of the good ones, not with a name like Pinzetti, but a fraternity all the same.

Why am I writing this? It's almost funny. No, I take that back. It is funny. The great Dr. Pine, sitting on a rock in his pajama bottoms and a T-shirt, sitting on an island almost small enough to spit across, writing his life story. Am I hungry! Never mind, I'll write my goddam life story if I want to. At least it keeps my mind off my stomach. Sort of.

I changed my name to Pine before I started med school. My mother said I was breaking her heart. What heart? The day after my old man was in the ground, she was out hustling that Jew grocer down at the end of the block. For someone who loved the name so much, she was in one hell of a hurry to change her copy of it to Steinbrunner.

Surgery was all I ever wanted. Ever since high school. Even then I was wrapping my hands before every game and soaking them afterward. If you want to be a surgeon, you have to take care of your hands. Some of the kids used to rag me about it, call me chickenshit. I never fought them. Playing football was risk enough. But there were ways. The one that got on my case the most was Howie Plotsky, a big dumb bohunk with zits all over his face. I had a paper route, and I was selling the numbers along with the papers. I had a little coming in lots of ways. You get to know people, you listen, you make connections. You have to, when you're hustling the street. Any asshole knows how to die. The thing to learn is how to survive, you know what I mean? So I paid the biggest kid in school, Ricky Brazzi, ten bucks to make Howie Plotsky's mouth disappear. Make it disappear, I said. I will pay you a dollar for every tooth you bring me. Rico brought me three teeth wrapped up in a paper towel. He dislocated two of his knuckles doing the job, so you see the kind of trouble I could have got into.

In med school while the other suckers were running themselves ragged trying to bone up—no pun intended, ha-ha—between waiting

tables or selling neckties or buffing floors, I kept the rackets going. Football pools, basketball pools, a little policy. I stayed on good terms with the old neighborhood. And I got through school just fine.

I didn't get into pushing until I was doing my residency. I was working in one of the biggest hospitals in New York City. At first it was just prescription blanks. I'd sell a tablet of a hundred blanks to some guy from the neighborhood, and he'd forge the names of forty or fifty different doctors on them, using writing samples I'd also sell him. The guy would turn around and peddle the blanks on the street for ten or twenty dollars apiece. The speed freaks and the nodders loved it.

And after a while I found out just how much of a balls-up the hospital drug room was in. Nobody knew what was coming in or going out. There were people lugging the goodies out by the double handfuls. Not me. I was always careful. I never got into trouble until I got careless—and unlucky. But I'm going to land on my feet. I always do.

Can't write any more now. My wrist's tired and the pencil's dull. I don't know why I'm bothering, anyway. Somebody'll probably pick me up soon.

January 27

The boat drifted away last night and sank in about ten feet of water off the north side of the island. Who gives a rip? The bottom was like Swiss cheese after coming over the reef anyway. I'd already taken off anything that was worth taking. Four gallons of water. A sewing kit. A first-aid kit. This book I'm writing in, which is supposed to be a lifeboat inspection log. That's a laugh. Whoever heard of a lifeboat with no FOOD on it? The last report written in here is August 8, 1970. Oh, yes, two knives, one dull and one fairly sharp, one combination fork and spoon. I'll use them when I eat my supper tonight. Roast rock. Ha-ha. Well, I did get my pencil sharpened.

When I get off this pile of guano-splattered rock, I'm going to sue the bloody hell out of Paradise Lines, Inc. That alone is worth living for.

And I am going to live. I'm going to get out of this. Make no mistake about it. I am going to get out of this.

(later)

When I was making my inventory, I forgot one thing: two kilos of pure heroin, worth about \$350,000, New York street value. Here it's worth el zilcho. Sort of funny, isn't it? Ha-ha!

January 28

Well, I've eaten—if you want to call that eating. There was a gull perched on one of the rocks at the center of the island. The rocks are all jumbled up into a kind of mini-mountain there—all covered with birdshit, too. I got a chunk of stone that just fitted into my hand and climbed up as close to it as I dared. It just stood there on its rock, watching me with its bright black eyes. I'm surprised that the rumbling of my stomach didn't scare it off.

I threw the rock as hard as I could and hit it broadside. It let out a loud squawk and tried to fly away, but I'd broken its right wing. I scrambled up after it and it hopped away. I could see the blood trickling over its white feathers. The son of a bitch led me a merry chase; once, on the other side of the central rockpile, I got my foot caught in a hole between two rocks and nearly fractured my ankle.

It began to tire at last, and I finally caught it on the east side of the island. It was actually trying to get into the water and paddle away. I caught a handful of its tailfeathers and it turned around and pecked me. Then I had one hand around its feet. I got my other hand on its miserable neck and broke it. The sound gave me great satisfaction. Lunch is served, you know? Ha! Ha!

I carried it back to my "camp," but even before I plucked and gutted it, I used iodine to swab the laceration its beak had made. Birds carry all sorts of germs, and the last thing I need now is an infection.

The operation on the gull went quite smoothly. I could not cook it, alas. Absolutely no vegetation or driftwood on the island and the boat has sunk. So I ate it raw. My stomach wanted to regurgitate it immediately. I sympathized but could not allow it. I counted backward until the nausea passed. It almost always works.

Can you imagine that bird, almost breaking my ankle and then pecking me? If I catch another one tomorrow, I'll torture it. I let this one off too easily. Even as I write, I am able to glance down at its severed head on the sand. Its black eyes, even with the death-glaze on them, seem to be mocking me.

Do gulls have brains in any quantity?

Are they edible?

January 29

No chow today. One gull landed near the top of the rockpile but flew off before I could get close enough to "throw it a forward pass," ha-ha! I've started a beard. Itches like hell. If the gull comes back and I get it, I'm going to cut its eyes out before I kill it.

I was one hell of a surgeon, as I believe I may have said. They drummed me out. It's a laugh, really; they all do it, and they're so bloody sanctimonious when someone gets caught at it. Screw you, Jack, I got mine. The Second Oath of Hippocrates and Hypocrites.

I had enough socked away from my adventures as an intern and a resident (that's supposed to be like an officer and a gentleman according to the Oath of Hypocrites, but don't you believe it) to set myself up in practice on Park Avenue. A good thing for me, too; I had no rich daddy or established patron, as so many of my "colleagues" did. By the time my shingle was out, my father was nine years in his pauper's grave. My mother died the year before my license to practice was revoked.

It was a kickback thing. I had a deal going with half a dozen East Side pharmacists, with two drug supply houses, and with at least twenty other doctors. Patients were sent to me and I sent patients. I performed operations and prescribed the correct post-op drugs. Not all the operations were necessary, but I never performed one against a patient's will. And I never had a patient look down at what was written on the prescrip blank and say, "I don't want this." Listen: they'd have a hysterectomy in 1965 or a partial thyroid in 1970, and still be taking painkillers five or ten years later, if you'd let them. Sometimes I did. I wasn't the only one, you know. They could afford the habit. And sometimes a patient would have trouble sleeping after minor surgery. Or trouble getting diet pills. Or Librium. It could all be arranged. Ha! Yes! If they hadn't gotten it from me, they would have gotten it from someone else.

Then the tax people got to Lowenthal. That sheep. They waved five years in his face and he coughed up half a dozen names. One of them was mine. They watched me for a while, and by the time they landed, I was worth a lot more than five years. There were a few other deals, including the prescription blanks, which -I hadn't given up entirely. It's funny, I didn't really need that stuff anymore, but it was a habit. Hard to give up that extra sugar.

Well, I knew some people. I pulled some strings. And I threw a couple of people to the wolves. Nobody I liked, though. Everyone I gave to the feds was a real son of a bitch.

Christ, I'm hungry.

January 30

No gulls today. Reminds me of the signs you'd sometimes see on the pushcarts back in the neighborhood. NO TOMATOES TODAY. I walked out into the water up to my waist with the sharp knife in my hand. I stood completely still in that one place with the sun beating down on me for four hours. Twice I thought I was going to faint, but I counted backward until it passed. I didn't see one fish. Not one.

January 31

Killed another gull, the same way I did the first. I was too hungry to torture it the way I had been promising myself. I gutted and ate it. Squeezed the tripe and then ate them, too. It's strange how you can feel your vitality surge back. I was beginning to get scared there, for a while. Lying in the shade of the big central rockpile, I'd think I was hearing voices. My father. My mother. My ex-wife. And worst of all the big Chink who sold me the heroin in Saigon. He had a lisp, possibly from a partially cleft palate.

"Go ahead," his voice came out of nowhere. "Go ahead and thnort a little. You won't notith how hungry you are then. It'h beautiful ..." But I've never done dope, not even sleeping pills.

Lowenthal killed himself, did I tell you that? That sheep. He hanged himself in what used to be his office. The way I look at it, he did the world a favor.

I wanted my shingle back. Some of the people I talked to said it could be done—but it would cost big money. More grease than I'd ever dreamed of. I had \$40,000 in a safe-deposit box. I decided I'd have to take a chance and try to turn it over. Double or triple it.

So I went to see Ronnie Hanelli. Ronnie and I played football together in college, and when his kid brother decided on internal med, I helped him get a residency. Ronnie himself was in pre-law, how's that for funny? On the block when we were growing up we called him Ronnie the Enforcer because he umped all the stickball games and reffed the hockey. If you didn't like his calls, you had your choice—you could keep your mouth shut or you could eat knuckles. The Puerto Ricans called him Ronniewop. All one word like that. Ronniewop. Used to tickle him. And that guy went to college, and then to law school, and he breezed through his bar exam the first time he took it, and then he set up shop in the old neighborhood, right over the Fish Bowl Bar. I close my eyes and I can still see him cruising down the block in that white Continental of his. The biggest fucking loan shark in the city.

I knew Ronnie would have something for me. "It's dangerous," he said. "But you could always take care of yourself. And if you can get the stuff back in, I'll introduce you to a couple of fellows. One of them is a state representative."

He gave me two names over there. One of them was the big Chink, Henry Li-Tsu. The other was a Vietnamese named Solom Ngo. A chemist. For a fee he would test the Chink's product. The Chink was known to play "jokes" from time to time. The "jokes" were plastic bags filled with talcum powder, with drain cleaner, with cornstarch. Ronnie said that one day Li-Tsu's little jokes would get him killed.

February 1

There was a plane. It flew right across the island. I tried to climb to the top of the rockpile and wave to it. My foot went into a hole. The same damn hole I got it stuck in the day I killed the first bird, I think. I've fractured my ankle, compound fracture. It went like a gunshot. The pain was unbelievable. I screamed and lost my balance, pinwheeling my arms like a madman, but I went down and hit my head and everything went black. I didn't wake up until dusk. I lost some blood where I hit my head. My ankle had swelled up like a tire, and I'd got myself a very nasty sunburn. I think if there had been another hour of sun, it would have blistered.

Dragged myself back here and spent last night shivering and crying with frustration. I disinfected the head wound, which is just above the right temporal lobe, and bandaged it as well as I could. Just a superficial scalp wound plus minor concussion, I think, but my ankle ... it's a bad break, involved in two places, possibly three.

How will I chase the birds now?

It had to be a plane looking for survivors from the Callas. In the dark and the storm, the lifeboat must have carried miles from where it sank. They may not be back this way.

God, my ankle hurts so bad.

February 2

I made a sign on the small white shingle of a beach on the island's south side, where the lifeboat grounded. It took me all day, with pauses to rest in the shade. Even so, I fainted twice. At a guess, I'd say I've lost 25 lbs, mostly from dehydration. But now, from where I sit, I can see the four letters it took me all day to spell out; dark rocks against the white sand, they say HELP in characters four feet high. Another plane won't miss me.

If there is another plane.

My foot throbs constantly. There is swelling still and ominous discoloration around the double break. Discoloration seems to have advanced. Binding it tightly with my shirt alleviates the worst of the pain, but it's still bad enough so that I faint rather than sleep.

I have begun to think I may have to amputate.

February 3

Swelling and discoloration worse still. I'll wait until tomorrow. If the operation does become necessary, I believe I can carry it through. I have matches for sterilizing the sharp knife, I have needle and thread from the sewing kit. My shirt for a bandage.

I even have two kilos of "painkiller," although hardly of the type I used to prescribe. But they would have taken it if they could have gotten it. You bet. Those old blue-haired ladies would have snorted Glade air freshener if they thought it would have gotten them high. Believe it!

February 4

I've decided to amputate my foot. No food four days now. If I wait any longer, I run the risk of fainting from combined shock and hunger in the middle of the operation and bleeding to death. And as wretched as I am, I still want to live. I remember what Mockridge

used to say in Basic Anatomy. Old Mockie, we used to call him. Sooner or later, he'd say, the question comes up in every medical student's career: How much shock-trauma can the patient stand? And he'd whack his pointer at his chart of the human body, hitting the liver, the kidneys, the heart, the spleen, the intestines. Cut to its base level, gentlemen, he'd say, the answer is always another question: How badly does the patient want to survive?

I think I can bring it off.

I really do.

I suppose I'm writing to put off the inevitable, but it did occur to me that I haven't finished the story of how I came to be here. Perhaps I should tie up that loose end in case the operation does go badly. It will only take a few minutes, and I'm sure there will be enough daylight left for the operation, for, according to my Pulsar, it's only nine past nine in the morning. Ha!

I flew to Saigon as a tourist. Does that sound strange? It shouldn't. There are still thousands of people who visit there every year in spite of Nixon's war. There are people who go to see car wrecks and cockfights, too.

My Chinese friend had the merchandise. I took it to Ngo, who pronounced it very high-grade stuff. He told me that Li-Tsu had played one of his jokes four months ago and that his wife had been blown up when she turned on the ignition of her Opel. Since then there had been no more jokes.

I stayed in Saigon for three weeks; I had booked passage back to San Francisco on a cruise ship, the Callas. First cabin. Getting on board with the merchandise was no trouble; for a fee Ngo arranged for two customs officials to simply wave me on after running through my suitcases. The merchandise was in an airline flight bag, which they never even looked at.

“Getting through U.S. customs will be much more difficult,” Ngo told me. “That, however, is your problem.”

I had no intention of taking the merchandise through U.S. customs. Ronnie Hanelli had arranged for a skin diver who would do a certain rather tricky job for \$3,000. I was to meet him (two days ago, now that I think of it) in a San Francisco flophouse called the St. Regis Hotel. The plan was to put the merchandise in a waterproof can. Attached to the top was a timer and a packet of red dye. Just before we docked, the canister was to be thrown overboard—but not by me, of course.

I was still looking for a cook or a steward who could use a little extra cash and who was smart enough—or stupid enough—to keep his mouth closed afterward, when the Callas sank.

I don't know how or why. It was storming, but the ship seemed to be handling that well enough. Around eight o'clock on the evening of the 23rd, there was an explosion somewhere belowdecks. I was in the lounge at the time, and the Callas began to list almost immediately. To the left ... do they call that “port” or “starboard”?

People were screaming and running in every direction. Bottles were falling off the backbar and shattering on the floor. A man staggered up from one of the lower levels, his shirt burned off, his skin barbecued. The loudspeaker started telling people to go to the lifeboat stations they had been assigned during the drill at the beginning of the cruise. The passengers went right on running hither and yon. Very few of them had bothered to show up during the lifeboat drill. I not only showed up, I came early—I wanted to be in the front row, you see, so I would have an unobstructed view of everything. I always pay close attention when the matter concerns my own skin.

I went down to my stateroom, got the heroin bags, and put one in each of my front pockets. Then I went to Lifeboat Station 8. As I went up the stairwell to the main deck there were two more explosions and the boat began to list even more severely.

Topside, everything was confusion. I saw a screeching woman with a baby in her arms run past me, gaining speed as she sprinted down the slippery, canting deck. She hit the rail with her thighs, and flipped outward. I saw her do two midair somersaults and part of a third before I lost sight of her. There was a middle-aged man sitting in the center of the shuffleboard court and pulling his hair. Another man in cook's whites, horribly burned about his face and hands, was stumbling from place to place and screaming, "HELP ME! CAN'T SEE! HELP ME! CAN'T SEE!"

The panic was almost total: it had run from the passengers to the crew like a disease. You must remember that the time elapsed from the first explosion to the actual sinking of the Callas was only about twenty minutes. Some of the lifeboat stations were clogged with screaming passengers, while others were absolutely empty. Mine, on the listing side of the ship, was almost deserted. There was no one there but myself and a common sailor with a pimply, pallid face.

"Let's get this buckety-bottomed old whore in the water," he said, his eyes rolling crazily in their sockets. "This bloody tub is going straight to the bottom."

The lifeboat gear is simple enough to operate, but in his fumbling nervousness, he got his side of the block and tackle tangled. The boat dropped six feet and then hung up, the bow two feet lower than the stem.

I was coming around to help him when he began to scream. He'd succeeded in untangling the snarl and had gotten his hand caught at the same time. The whizzing rope smoked over his open palm, flaying off skin, and he was jerked over the side.

I tossed the rope ladder overboard, hurried down it, and unclipped the lifeboat from the lowering ropes. Then I rowed, something I had occasionally done for pleasure on trips to my friends' summer houses, something I was now doing for my life. I knew that if I didn't get far enough away from the dying Callas before she sank, she would pull me down with her.

Just five minutes later she went. I hadn't escaped the suction entirely; I had to row madly just to stay in the same place. She went under very quickly. There were still people clinging to the rail of her bow and screaming. They looked like a bunch of monkeys.

The storm worsened. I lost one oar but managed to keep the other. I spent that whole night in a kind of dream, first bailing, then grabbing the oar and paddling wildly to get the boat's prow into the next bulking wave.

Sometime before dawn on the 24th, the waves began to strengthen behind me. The boat rushed forward. It was terrifying but at the same time exhilarating. Suddenly most of the planking was ripped out from under my feet, but before the lifeboat could sink it was dumped on this godforsaken pile of rocks. I don't even know where I am; have no idea at all. Navigation not my strong point, ha-ha.

But I know what I have to do. This may be the last entry, but somehow I think I'll make it. Haven't I always? And they are really doing marvelous things with prosthetics these days. I can get along with one foot quite nicely.

It's time to see if I'm as good as I think I am. Luck.

February 5

Did it.

The pain was the part I was most worried about. I can stand pain, but I thought that in my weakened condition, a combination of hunger and agony might force unconsciousness before I could finish.

But the heroin solved that quite nicely.

I opened one of the bags and sniffed two healthy pinches from the surface of a flat rock—first the right nostril, then the left. It was like sniffing up some beautifully numbing ice that spread through the brain from the bottom up. I aspirated the heroin as soon as I finished

writing in this diary yesterday—that was at 9:45. The next time I checked my watch the shadows had moved, leaving me partially in the sun, and the time was 12:41. I had nodded off. I had never dreamed that it could be so beautiful, and I can't understand why I was so scornful before. The pain, the terror, the misery ... they all disappear, leaving only a calm euphoria.

It was in this state that I operated.

There was, indeed, a great deal of pain, most of it in the early part of the operation. But the pain seemed disconnected from me, like somebody else's pain. It bothered me, but it was also quite interesting. Can you understand that? If you've used a strong morphine-based drug yourself, perhaps you can. It does more than dull pain. It induces a state of mind. A serenity. I can understand why people get hooked on it, although "hooked" seems an awfully strong word, used most commonly, of course, by those who have never tried it.

About halfway through, the pain started to become a more personal thing. Waves of faintness washed over me. I looked longingly at the open bag of white powder, but forced myself to look away. If I went on the nod again, I'd bleed to death as surely as if I'd fainted. I counted backward from a hundred instead.

Loss of blood was the most critical factor. As a surgeon, I was vitally aware of that. Not a drop could be spilled unnecessarily. If a patient hemorrhages during an operation in a hospital, you can give him blood. I had no such supplies. What was lost—and by the time I had finished, the sand beneath my leg was dark with it—was lost until my own internal factory could resupply. I had no clamps, no hemostats, no surgical thread.

I began the operation at exactly 12:45. I finished at 1:50, and immediately dosed myself with heroin, a bigger dose than before. I nodded into a gray, painless world and remained there until nearly five o'clock. When I came out of it, the sun was nearing the western horizon, beating a track of gold across the blue Pacific toward me.

I've never seen anything so beautiful ... all the pain was paid for in that one instant. An hour later I snorted a bit more, so as to fully enjoy and appreciate the sunset.

Shortly after dark I—

I—

Wait. Haven't I told you I'd had nothing to eat for four days? And that the only help I could look to in the matter of replenishing my sapped vitality was my own body? Above all, haven't I told you, over and over, that survival is a business of the mind? The superior mind? I won't justify myself by saying you would have done the same thing. First of all, you're probably not a surgeon. Even if you knew the mechanics of amputation, you might have botched the job so badly you would have bled to death anyway. And even if you had lived through the operation and the shock-trauma, the thought might never have entered your preconditioned head. Never mind. No one has to know. My last act before leaving the island will be to destroy this book.

I was very careful.

I washed it thoroughly before I ate it.

February 7

Pain from the stump has been bad—excruciating from time to time. But I think the deep-seated itch as the healing process begins has been worse. I've been thinking this afternoon of all the patients that have babbled to me that they couldn't stand the horrible, unscratchable itch of mending flesh. And I would smile and tell them they would feel better tomorrow, privately thinking what whiners they were, what jellyfish, what ungrateful babies. Now I understand. Several times I've come close to ripping the shirt bandage off the stump and scratching at it, digging my fingers into the soft raw flesh, pulling out the rough stitches, letting the blood gout onto the sand, anything, anything, to be rid of that maddening horrible itch.

At those times I count backward from one hundred. And snort heroin.

I have no idea how much I've taken into my system, but I do know I've been "stoned" almost continually since the operation. It depresses hunger, you know. I'm hardly aware of being hungry at all. There is a faint, faraway gnawing in my belly, and that's all. It could easily be ignored. I can't do that, though. Heroin has no measurable caloric value. I've been testing myself, crawling from place to place, measuring my energy. It's ebbing.

Dear God, I hope not, but ... another operation may be necessary.

(later)

Another plane flew over. Too high to do me any good; all I could see was the contrail etching itself across the sky. I waved anyway. Waved and screamed at it. When it was gone I wept.

Getting too dark to see now. Food. I've been thinking about all kinds of food. My mother's lasagna. Garlic bread. Escargots. Lobster. Prime ribs. Peach melba. London broil. The huge slice of pound cake and the scoop of homemade vanilla ice cream they give you for dessert in Mother Crunch on First Avenue. Hot pretzels baked salmon baked Alaska baked ham with pineapple rings. Onion rings. Onion dip with potato chips cold iced tea in long long sips french fries make you smack your lips.

100, 99, 98, 97, 96, 95, 94

God God God

February 8

Another gull landed on the rockpile this morning. A huge fat one. I was sitting in the shade of my rock, what I think of as my camp, my bandaged stump propped up. I began to salivate as soon as the gull landed. Just like one of Pavlov's dogs. Drooling helplessly, like a baby. Like a baby.

I picked up a chunk of stone large enough to fit my hand nicely and began to crawl toward it. Fourth quarter. We're down by three. Third and long yardage. Pinzetti drops back to pass (Pine, I mean, Pine). I didn't have much hope. I was sure it would fly off. But I had to try. If I could get it, a bird as plump and insolent as that one, I could postpone a second operation indefinitely. I crawled toward it, my stump hitting a rock from time to time and sending stars of pain through my whole body, and waited for it to fly off.

It didn't. It just strutted back and forth, its meaty breast thrown out like some avian general reviewing troops. Every now and then it would look at me with its small, nasty black eyes and I would freeze like a stone and count backward from one hundred until it began to pace back and forth again. Every time it fluttered its wings, my stomach filled up with ice. I continued to drool. I couldn't help it. I was drooling like a baby.

I don't know how long I stalked it. An hour? Two? And the closer I got, the harder my heart pounded and the tastier that gull looked. It almost seemed to be teasing me, and I began to believe that as soon as I got in throwing range it would fly off. My arms and legs were beginning to tremble. My mouth was dry. The stump was twanging viciously. I think now that I must have been having

withdrawal pains. But so soon? I've been using the stuff less than a week!

Never mind. I need it. There's plenty left, plenty. If I have to take the cure later on when I get back to the States, I'll check into the best clinic in California and do it with a smile. That's not the problem right now, is it?

When I did get in range, I didn't want to throw the rock. I became insanely sure that I would miss, probably by feet. I had to get closer. So I continued to crawl up the rockpile, my head thrown back, the sweat pouring off my wasted, scarecrow body. My teeth have begun to rot, did I tell you that? If I were a superstitious man, I'd say it was because I ate—

Ha! We know better, don't we?

I stopped again. I was much closer to it than I had been to either of the other gulls. I still couldn't bring myself to commit. I clutched the rock until my fingers ached and still I couldn't throw it. Because I knew exactly what it would mean if I missed.

I don't care if I use all the merchandise! I'll sue the ass off them! I'll be in clover for the rest of my life! My long long life!

I think I would have crawled right up to it without throwing if it hadn't finally taken wing. I would have crept up and strangled it. But it spread its wings and took off. I screamed at it and reared up on my knees and threw my rock with all my strength. And I hit it!

The bird gave a strangled squawk and fell back on the other side of the rockpile. Gibbering and laughing, unmindful now of striking the stump or opening the wound, I crawled over the top and to the other side. I lost my balance and banged my head. I didn't even notice it, not then, although it has raised a pretty nasty lump. All I could think of was the bird and how I had hit it, fantastic luck, even on the wing I had hit it!

It was flopping down toward the beach on the other side, one wing broken, its underbody red with blood. I crawled as fast as I could, but it crawled faster yet. Race of the cripples! Ha! Ha! I might have gotten it—I was closing the distance—except for my hands. I have to take good care of my hands. I may need them again. In spite of my care, the palms were scraped by the time we reached the narrow shingle of beach, and I'd shattered the face of my Pulsar watch against a rough spine of rock.

The gull flopped into the water, squawking noisomely, and I clutched at it. I got a handful of tailfeathers, which came off in my fist. Then I fell in, inhaling water, snorting and choking.

I crawled in further. I even tried to swim after it. The bandage came off my stump. I began to go under. I just managed to get back to the beach, shaking with exhaustion, racked with pain, weeping and screaming, cursing the gull. It floated there for a long time, always further and further out. I seem to remember begging it to come back at one point. But when it went out over the reef, I think it was dead.

It isn't fair.

It took me almost an hour to crawl back around to my camp. I've snorted a large amount of heroin, but even so I'm bitterly angry at the gull. If I wasn't going to get it, why did it have to tease me so? Why didn't it just fly off?

February 9

I've amputated my left foot and have bandaged it with my pants. Strange. All through the operation I was drooling. Droooling. Just like when I saw the gull. Drooling helplessly. But I made myself wait until after dark. I just counted backward from one hundred ... twenty or thirty times! Ha! Ha!

Then ...

I kept telling myself: Cold roast beef. Cold roast beef. Cold roast beef.

February 11 (?)

Rain the last two days. And high winds. I managed to move some rocks from the central pile, enough to make a hole I could crawl into. Found one small spider. Pinched it between my fingers before he could get away and ate him up. Very nice. Juicy. Thought to myself that the rocks over me might fall and bury me alive. Didn't care.

Spent the whole storm stoned. Maybe it rained three days instead of two. Or only one. But I think it got dark twice. I love to nod off. No pain or itching then. I know I'm going to survive this. It can't be a person can go through something like this for nothing.

There was a priest at Holy Family when I was a kid, a little runty guy, and he used to love to talk about hell and mortal sins. He had a real hobbyhorse on them. You can't get back from a mortal sin, that was his view. I dreamed about him last night, Father Hailley in his black bathrobe, and his whiskey nose, shaking his finger at me and saying, "Shame on you, Richard Pinzetti ... a mortal sin ... damt to hell, boy ... damt to hell ... "

I laughed at him. If this place isn't hell, what is? And the only mortal sin is giving up.

Half of the time I'm delirious; the rest of the time my stumps itch and the dampness makes them ache horribly.

But I won't give up. I swear. Not for nothing. Not all this for nothing.

February 12

Sun is out again, a beautiful day. I hope they're freezing their asses off in the neighborhood.

It's been a good day for me, as good as any day gets on this island. The fever I had while it was storming seems to have dropped. I was weak and shivering when I crawled out of my burrow, but after lying on the hot sand in the sunshine for two or three hours, I began to feel almost human again.

Crawled around to the south side and found several pieces of driftwood cast up by the storm, including several boards from my lifeboat. There was kelp and seaweed on some of the boards. I ate it. Tasted awful. Like eating a vinyl shower curtain. But I felt so much stronger this afternoon.

I pulled the wood up as far as I could so it would dry. I've still got a whole tube of waterproof matches. The wood will make a signal fire if someone comes soon. A cooking fire if not. I'm going to snort up now.

February 13

Found a crab. Killed it and roasted it over a small fire. Tonight I could almost believe in God again.

Feb 14

I just noticed this morning that the storm washed away most of the rocks in my HELP sign. But the storm ended ... three days ago? Have I really been that stoned? I'll have to watch it, cut down the dosage. What if a ship went by while I was nodding?

I made the letters again, but it took me most of the day and now I'm exhausted. Looked for a crab where I found the other, but nothing. Cut my hands on several of the rocks I used for the sign, but disinfected them promptly with iodine in spite of my weariness. Have to take care of my hands. No matter what.

Feb 15

A gull landed on the tip of the rockpile today. Flew away before I could get in range. I wished it into hell, where it could peck out Father Hailley's bloodshot little eyes through eternity.

Ha! Ha!

Ha! Ha!

Ha

Feb 17(?)

Took off my right leg at the knee, but lost a lot of blood. Pain excruciating in spite of heroin. Shock-trauma would have killed a lesser man. Let me answer with a question: How badly does the patient want to survive? How badly does the patient want to live?

Hands trembling. If they are betraying me, I'm through. They have no right to betray me. No right at all. I've taken care of them all their lives. Pampered them. They better not. Or they'll be sorry.

At least I'm not hungry.

One of the boards from the lifeboat had split down the middle. One end came to a point. I used that. I was drooling but I made myself wait. And then I got thinking of ... oh, barbecues we used to have. That place Will Hammersmith had on Long Island, with a barbecue pit big enough to roast a whole pig in. We'd be sitting on the porch in the dusk with big drinks in our hands, talking about surgical techniques or golf scores or something. And the breeze would pick up and drift the sweet smell of roasting pork over to us. Judas Iscariot, the sweet smell of roasting pork.

Feb?

Took the other leg at the knee. Sleepy all day. "Doctor was this operation necessary?" Haha. Shaky hands, like an old man. Hate them. Blood under the fingernails. Scabs. Remember that model in med school with the glass belly? I feel like that. Only I don't want to look. No way no how. I remember Dom used to say that. Waltz up to you on the street corner in his Hiway Outlaws club jacket. You'd say Dom how'd you make out with her? And Dom would say no way no how. Shee. Old Dom. I wish I'd stayed right in the neighborhood. This sucks so bad as Dom would say. haha.

But I understand, you know, that with the proper therapy, and prosthetics, I could be as good as new. I could come back here and tell people "This. Is where it. Happened."

Hahaha!

February 23 (?)

Found a dead fish. Rotten and stinking. Ate it anyway. Wanted to puke, wouldn't let myself. I will survive. So lovely stoned, the sunsets.

February

Don't dare but have to. But how can I tie off the femoral artery that high up? It's as big as a fucking turnpike up there.

Must, somehow. I've marked across the top of the thigh, the part that is still meaty. I made the mark with this pencil.

I wish I could stop drooling.

Fe

You ... deserve ... a break today ... sooo ... get up and get away ...
to McDonald's ... two all-beef patties ... special sauce ... lettuce ...
pickles ... onions ... on a ... sesame seed bun ...

Dee ... deedee ... dundadee ...

Febba

Looked at my face in the water today. Nothing but a skin-covered skull. Am I insane yet? I must be. I'm a monster now, a freak. Nothing left below the groin. Just a freak. A head attached to a torso dragging itself along the sand by the elbows. A crab. A stoned crab. Isn't that what they call themselves now? Hey man I'm just a poor stoned crab can you spare me a dime.

Hahahaha

They say you are what you eat and if so I HAVEN'T CHANGED A BIT! Dear God shock-trauma shock-trauma THERE is NO SUCH THING AS SHOCK-TRAUMA

HA

Fel40?

Dreaming about my father. When he was drunk he lost all his English. Not that he had anything worth saying anyway. Fucking dipstick. I was so glad to get out of your house Daddy you fucking greaseball dipstick nothing cipher zilcho zero. I knew I'd made it. I walked away from you, didn't I? I walked on my hands.

But there's nothing left for them to cut off. Yesterday I took my earlobes

left hand washes the right don't let your left hand know what your right hands doing one potato two potato three potato four we got a refrigerator with a store-more door hahaha.

Who cares, this hand or that. good food good meat good God let's eat.

lady fingers they taste just like lady fingers

*

“Survivor Type”—I got to thinking about cannibalism one day—because that's the sort of thing guys like me sometimes think about—and my muse once more evacuated its magic bowels on my head. I know how gross that sounds, but it's the best metaphor I know, inelegant or not, and believe me when I tell you I'd give that little Fornit Ex-Lax if he wanted it. Anyway, I started to wonder if a person could eat himself, and if so, how much he could eat before the inevitable happened. This idea was so utterly and perfectly revolting that I was too overawed with delight to do more than think about it for days—I was reluctant to write it down because I thought I could only fuck it up. Finally, when my wife asked me what I was laughing at one day when we were eating hamburgers on the back deck, I decided I ought to at least take it for a testdrive.

We were living in Bridgton at the time, and I spent an hour or so talking with Ralph Drews, the retired doctor next door. Although he looked doubtful at first (the year before, in pursuit of another story, I had asked him if he thought it was possible for a man to swallow a cat), he finally agreed that a guy could subsist on himself for quite a while—like everything else which is material, he pointed out, the human body is just stored energy. Ah, I asked him, but what about the repeated shock of the amputations? The answer he gave me is, with very few changes, the first paragraph of the story.

I guess Faulkner never would have written anything like this, huh?
Oh, well.

FROM THE DIRECTOR OF FRIGHTNIGHT & CHILDSPLAY



THE
TEN
CLOCK
PEOPLE

QUITTING IS BAD FOR YOUR HEALTH

THE TEN O'CLOCK PEOPLE

Stephen King

1

Pearson tried to scream but shock robbed his voice and he was able to produce only a low, choked whuffling—the sound of a man moaning in his sleep. He drew in breath to try it again, but before he could get started, a hand seized his left arm just above the elbow in a strong pincers grip and squeezed.

“It’d be a mistake,” the voice that went with the hand said. It was pitched only half a step above a whisper, and it spoke directly into Pearson’s left ear. “A bad one. Believe me, it would.”

Pearson looked around. The thing which had occasioned his desire—no, his need—to scream had disappeared inside the bank now, amazingly unchallenged, and Pearson found he could look around. He had been grabbed by a good-looking young black man in a cream-colored suit. Pearson didn’t know him, but he recognized him; he sight-recognized most of the odd little sub-tribe he’d come to think of as the Ten O’Clock People... as, he supposed, they recognized him.

The good-looking young black man was watching him warily.

“Did you see it?” Pearson asked. The words came out in a high-pitched, nagging whine that was totally unlike his usual confident speaking voice.

The good-looking young black man had let go of Pearson’s arm when he became reasonably convinced that Pearson wasn’t going to shock the plaza in front of The First Mercantile Bank of Boston with a volley of wild screams; Pearson immediately reached out and gripped the young black man’s wrist. It was as if he were not yet capable of living without the comfort of the other man’s touch. The good-looking young black man made no effort to pull away, only glanced down at Pearson’s hand for a moment before looking back up into Pearson’s face.

“I mean, did you see it? Horrible! Even if it was make-up ... or some kind of mask someone put on for a joke ...”

But it hadn't been make-up and it hadn't been a mask. The thing in the dark-gray Andre Cyr suit and five-hundred-dollar shoes had passed very close to Pearson, almost close enough to touch (God forbid, his mind interjected with a helpless cringe of revulsion), and he knew it hadn't been make-up or a mask. Because the flesh on the huge protuberance Pearson supposed was its head had been in motion, different parts moving in different directions, like the bands of exotic gases surrounding some planetary giant.

“Friend,” the good-looking young black man in the cream-colored suit began, “you need—”

“What was it?” Pearson broke in. “I never saw anything like that in my life! It was like something you'd see in a, I don't know, a sideshow ... or ... or ...”

His voice was no longer coming from its usual place inside his head. It seemed to be drifting down from someplace above him, instead—as if he'd fallen into a snare or a crack in the earth and that high-pitched, nagging voice belonged to somebody else, somebody who was speaking down to him.

“Listen, my friend—”

There was something else, too. When Pearson had stepped out through the revolving doors just a few minutes ago with an unlit Marlboro between his fingers, the day had been overcast—threatening rain, in fact. Now everything was not just bright but over-bright. The red skirt on the pretty blonde standing beside the building fifty feet or so farther down (she was smoking a cigarette and reading a paperback) screamed into the day like a firebell; the yellow of a passing delivery boy's shirt stung like the barb of a wasp. People's faces stood out like the faces in his daughter Jenny's beloved Pop-Up books.

And his lips ... he couldn't feel his lips. They had gone numb, the way they sometimes did after a big shot of novocaine.

Pearson turned to the good-looking young man in the cream-colored suit and said, "This is ridiculous, but I think I'm going to faint."

"No, you're not," the young man said, and he spoke with such assurance that Pearson believed him, at least temporarily. The hand gripped his arm above the elbow again, but much more gently this time. "Come on over here—you need to sit down."

There were circular marble islands about three feet high scattered around the broad plaza in front of the bank, each containing its own variety of late summer/early fall flowers. There were Ten O'Clock People sitting on the rims of most of these upscale flower tubs, some reading, some chatting, some looking out at the passing rivers of foot-traffic on the sidewalks of Commercial Street, but all of them also doing the thing that made them Ten O'clock People, the thing Pearson had come downstairs and outside to do himself. The marble island closest to Pearson and his new acquaintance contained asters, their purple miraculously brilliant to Pearson in his heightened state of awareness. Its circular rim was vacant, probably because it was going on for ten past the hour now, and people had begun to drift back inside.

"Sit down," the young black man in the cream-colored suit invited, and although Pearson tried his best, what he ended up doing felt more like falling than sitting. At one moment he was standing beside the reddish-brown marble island, and then somebody pulled the pins in his knees and he landed on his ass. Hard.

"Bend over now," the young man said, sitting down beside him. His face had remained pleasant throughout the entire encounter, but there was nothing pleasant about his eyes; they combed rapidly back and forth across the plaza.

"Why?"

“To get the blood back into your head,” the young black man said. “But don’t make it look like that. Make it look like you’re just smelling the flowers.”

“Look like to who?”

“Just do it, okay?” The smallest tinge of impatience had crept into the young man’s voice.

Pearson leaned his head over and took a deep breath. The flowers didn’t smell as good as they looked, he discovered—they had a weedy, faintly dog-pissy smell. Still, he thought his head might be clearing just a tiny bit.

“Start saying the states,” the black man ordered. He crossed his legs, shook out the fabric of his pants to preserve the crease, and brought a package of Winstons out of an inner pocket. Pearson realized his own cigarette was gone; he must have dropped it in that first shocked moment, when he had seen the monstrous thing in the expensive suit crossing the west side of the plaza.

“The states,” he said blankly.

The young black man nodded, produced a lighter that was probably quite a bit less expensive than it looked at first glance, and lit his cigarette. “Start with this one and work your way west,” he invited.

“Massachusetts ... New York, I suppose ... or Vermont if you start from upstate ... New Jersey ...” Now he straightened up a little and began to speak with greater confidence. “Pennsylvania, West Virginia, Ohio, Illinois—”

The black man raised his eyebrows. “West Virginia, huh? You sure?”

Pearson smiled a little. “Pretty sure, yeah. I might have got Ohio and Illinois bass-ackwards, though.”

The black man shrugged to show it didn't matter, and smiled. "You don't feel like you're going to faint anymore, though—I can see you don't—and that's the important part. Want a butt?"

"Thank you," Pearson said gratefully. He did not just want a butt; he felt that he needed one. "I had one, but I lost it. What's your name?"

The black man poked a fresh Winston between Pearson's lips and snapped a light to it. "Dudley Rhinemann. You can call me Duke."

Pearson dragged deeply on the cigarette and looked toward the revolving doors which gave ingress upon all the gloomy depths and cloudy heights of The First Mercantile. "That wasn't just a hallucination, was it?" he asked. "What I saw ... you saw it, too, right?"

Rhinemann nodded.

"You didn't want him to know I saw him," Pearson said. He spoke slowly, trying to put it together on his own. His voice was back in its usual spot again, and that alone was a big relief.

Rhinemann nodded again.

"But how could I not see him? And how could he not know it?"

"Did you see anyone else getting ready to holler themselves into a stroke like you were?" Rhinemann asked. "See anybody else even looking the way you were? Me, for instance?"

Pearson shook his head slowly. He now felt more than just frightened; he felt totally lost.

"I got between you and him the best I could, and I don't think he saw you, but for a second or two there it was close. You looked like a man who just saw a mouse crawl out of his meatloaf. You're in Collateral Loans, aren't you?"

"Oh yes—Brandon Pearson. Sorry."

“I’m in Computer Services, myself. And it’s okay. Seeing your first batman can do that to you.”

Duke Rhinemann stuck out his hand and Pearson shook it, but most of his mind was one turn back. Seeing your first batman can do that to you, the young man had said, and once Pearson had jettisoned his initial image of the Caped Crusader swinging his way between the art-deco spires of Gotham City, he discovered that wasn’t a bad term at all. He discovered something else, as well, or perhaps rediscovered it: it was good to have a name for something that had frightened you. It didn’t make the fright go away, but it went a long way toward rendering the fright manageable.

Now he deliberately replayed what he had seen, thinking Batman, it was my first batman, as he did.

*

He had come out through the revolving doors thinking of only one thing, the same thing he was always thinking about when he came down at ten—how good that first rush of nicotine was going to feel when it hit his brain. It was what made him a part of the tribe; it was his version of phylacteries or tattooed cheeks.

He had first registered the fact that the day had gotten even darker since he’d come in at eight-forty-five, and had thought: We’ll be puffing our cancer-sticks in the pouring rain this afternoon, the whole damned bunch of us. Not that a little rain would stop them, of course; the Ten O’Clock People were nothing if not persistent.

He remembered sweeping his eyes across the plaza, doing a quick attendance check—so quick it was really almost unconscious. He had seen the girl in the red skirt (and wondered again, as he always did, if anyone who looked that good would be any good in the sack), the young be-bop janitor from the third floor who wore his cap turned around while he was mopping the floors in the john and the snack-bar, the elderly man with the fine white hair and the purple blotches on his cheeks, the young woman with the thick glasses, narrow face,

and long straight black hair. He had seen a number of others he vaguely recognized, as well. One of them, of course, had been the good-looking young black man in the cream-colored suit.

If Timmy Flanders had been around, Pearson probably would have joined him, but he wasn't, and so Pearson had moved toward the center of the plaza instead, meaning to sit on one of the marble islands (the very one he was sitting on now, in fact). Once there he would have been in an excellent position to calculate the length and curves of Little Miss Red Skirt's legs—a cheap thrill, granted, but one made do with the materials at hand. He was a well-married man with a wife he loved and a daughter he adored, he'd never come even close to cheating, but as he approached forty, he had discovered certain imperatives surfacing in his blood like sea-monsters. And he didn't know how any man could help staring at a red skirt like that, wondering just a little if the woman was wearing matching underwear beneath.

He had barely gotten moving when the newcomer had turned the corner of the building and begun mounting the plaza steps. Pearson had caught movement in the corner of his eye, and under ordinary circumstances he would have dismissed it—it was the red skirt he had been concentrating on just then, short, tight, and as bright as the side of a fire engine. But he had looked, because, even seen from the corner of his eye and with other things on his mind, he had registered something wrong with the face and the head that went with the approaching figure. So he had turned and looked, cancelling sleep for God knew how many nights to come.

The shoes were all right; the dark-gray Andre Cyr suit, looking as solid and as dependable as the door of the bank vault in the basement, was even better; the red tie was predictable but not offensive. All of this was fine, typical top-echelon banker's attire for a Monday morning (and who but a top-echelon banker could come in at ten o'clock in the first place?). It wasn't until you got to the head that you realized that you had either gone crazy or were looking at

something for which there was no entry in the World Book Encyclopedia.

But why didn't they run? Pearson wondered now, as a raindrop fell on the back of his hand and another fell on the clean white paper of his half-smoked cigarette. They should have run screaming, the way the people run from the giant bugs in those fifties monster movies. Then he thought, But then ... I didn't run, either.

True enough, but it wasn't the same. He hadn't run because he'd been frozen in place. He had tried to scream, however; it was just that his new friend had stopped him before he could throw his vocal cords back into gear.

Batman. Your first batman.

Above the broad shoulders of this year's most Eminently Acceptable Business Suit and the knot in the red Sulka powertie had loomed a huge grayish-brown head, not round but as misshapen as a baseball that has taken a whole summer's worth of bashing. Black lines—veins, perhaps—pulsed just below the surface of the skull in meaningless roadmap squiggles, and the area that should have been its face but wasn't (not in any human sense, anyway) had been covered with lumps that bulged and quivered like tumors possessed of their own terrible semi-sentient life. Its features were rudimentary and pushed together—flat black eyes, perfectly round, that stared avidly from the middle of its face like the eyes of a shark or some bloated insect; malformed ears with no lobes or pinnae. It hadn't had a nose, at least none that Pearson could recognize, although two tusklike protuberances had jutted from the spiny tangle of hair that grew just below the eyes. Most of the thing's face had been mouth—a huge black crescent ringed with triangular teeth. To a creature with a mouth like that, Pearson had thought later, bolting one's food would be a sacrament.

His very first thought as he stared at this horrible apparition—an apparition carrying a slim Bally briefcase in one beautifully manicured hand—was It's the Elephant Man. But, he now realized,

the creature had been nothing at all like the misshapen but essentially human creature in that old movie. Duke Rhinemann was closer to the mark; those black eyes and that drawn-up mouth were features he associated with furry, squeaking things that spent their nights eating flies and their days hanging head-down in dark places.

But none of that was what had caused him to try that first scream; that need had come when the creature in the Andre Cyr suit walked past him, its bright, buglike eyes already fixed on the revolving doors. It was at its closest in that second or two, and it was then that Pearson had seen its tumorous face somehow moving below the mottles of coarse hair which grew from it. He didn't know how such a thing could possibly be, but it was—he was watching it happen, observing the man's flesh crawling around the lumpy curves of its skull and rippling along the thick canehead shape of its jaw in alternating bands. Between these he caught glimpses of some gruesome raw pink substance that he didn't even want to think about ... yet now that he remembered, it seemed that he could not stop thinking about it.

*

More raindrops splattered on his hands and face. Next to him on the curved lip of marble, Rhinemann took a final drag on his cigarette, pitched it away, and stood up. "Come on," he said. "Starting to rain."

Pearson looked at him with wide eyes, then looked toward the bank. The blonde in the red skirt was just going in, her book now tucked under her arm. She was being closely followed (and closely observed) by the old party with the tycoon's shock of fine white hair.

Pearson flicked his eyes back to Rhinemann and said, "Go in there? Are you serious? That thing went in there!"

"I know."

"You want to hear something totally nuts?" Pearson asked, tossing his own cigarette away. He didn't know where he was going now,

home, he supposed, but he knew one place he was most assuredly not going, and that was back inside The First Mercantile Bank of Boston.

“Sure,” Rhinemann agreed. “Why not?”

“That thing looked quite a lot like our revered Chief Executive Officer, Douglas Keefer ... until you got to the head, that is. Same taste in suits and briefcases.”

“What a surprise,” Duke Rhinemann said.

Pearson measured him with an uneasy eye. “What do you mean?”

“I think you already know, but you’ve had a tough morning and so I’ll spell it out. That was Keefer.”

Pearson smiled uncertainly. Rhinemann didn’t smile back. He got to his feet, gripped Pearson’s arms, and pulled the older man forward until their faces were only inches apart.

“I saved your life just now. Do you believe that, Mr. Pearson?”

Pearson thought about it and discovered that he did. That alien, batlike face with its black eyes and clustered bunches of teeth hung in his mind like a dark flare. “Yes. I guess I do.”

“Okay. Then do me the credit of listening carefully as I tell you three things—will you do that?”

“I... yes, sure.”

“First thing: that was Douglas Keefer, CEO of The First Mercantile Bank of Boston, close friend of the Mayor, and, incidentally, honorary chairman of the current Boston Children’s Hospital fund-drive. Second thing: there are at least three more bats working in the bank, one of them on your floor. Third thing: you are going back in there. If you want to go on living, that is.”

Pearson gaped at him, momentarily incapable of reply—if he'd tried, he would have produced only more of those fuzzy whuffling sounds.

Rhinemann took him by the elbow and pulled him toward the revolving doors. "Come on, buddy," he said, and his voice was oddly gentle. "The rain's really starting to come down. If we stay out here much longer we'll attract attention, and people in our position can't afford to do that."

Pearson went along with Rhinemann at first, then thought of the way the black nests of lines on the thing's head had pulsed and squiggled. The image brought him to a cold stop just outside the revolving doors. The smooth surface of the plaza was now wet enough to reveal another Brandon Pearson below him, a shimmery reflection that hung from his own heels like a bat of a different color. "I ... I don't think I can," he said in a halting, humble voice.

"You can," Rhinemann said. He glanced momentarily down at Pearson's left hand. "Married, I see—with kids?"

"One. A daughter." Pearson was looking into the bank's lobby. The glass panels in the revolving door were polarized, making the big room beyond them look very dark. Like a cave, he thought. A batcave filled with half-blind disease-carriers.

"You want your wife and kid to read in the paper tomorrow that the cops dragged Da-Da out of Boston Harbor with his throat cut?"

Pearson looked at Rhinemann with wide eyes. Raindrops splattered against his cheeks, his forehead.

"They make it look like junkies did it," Rhinemann said, "and it works. It always works. Because they're smart, and because they've got friends in high places. Hell, high places is what they're all about."

"I don't understand you," Pearson said. "I don't understand any of this."

“I know you don’t,” Rhinemann returned. “This is a dangerous time for you, so just do what I tell you. What I’m telling you is to get back to your desk before you’re missed, and roll through the rest of the day with a smile on your face. Hold onto that smile, my friend—don’t let go of it no matter how greasy it gets.” He hesitated, then added: “If you screw up, it’s probably gonna get you killed.”

The rainwater made bright tracks down the young man’s smooth dark face, and Pearson suddenly saw what had been there all along, what he had missed only because of his own shock: this man was terrified, and he had risked a great deal to keep Pearson from stumbling into some awful trap.

“I really can’t stay out here any longer,” Rhinemann said. “It’s dangerous.”

“Okay,” Pearson said, a little astounded to hear his own voice coming out in normal, even measures. “Then let’s go back to work.”

Rhinemann looked relieved. “Good man. And whatever you see the rest of the day, don’t show surprise. You understand?”

“Yes,” Pearson said. He didn’t understand anything.

“Can you clear your desk early and leave around three?”

Pearson considered it, then nodded. “Yeah. I guess I could do that.”

“Good. Meet me around the corner on Milk Street.”

“All right.”

“You’re doin great, man,” Rhinemann said. “You’re going to be fine. See you at three.” He entered the revolving door and gave it a push. Pearson stepped into the segment behind him, feeling as though he had somehow left his mind out there in the plaza ... all of it, that was, except for the part that already wanted another cigarette.

*

The day crawled, but everything was all right until he came back from lunch (and two cigarettes) with Tim Flanders. They stepped out of the elevator on the third floor and the first thing Pearson saw was another batman ... except this one was actually a batwoman wearing black patent-leather heels, black nylon hose, and a formidable silk tweed suit—Samuel Blue was Pearson's guess. The perfect power outfit ... until you got to the head nodding over it like a mutated sunflower, that was.

"Hullo, gents." A sweet contralto voice spoke from somewhere behind the harelippped hole that was its mouth.

It's Suzanne Holding, Pearson thought. It can't be, but it is.

"Hello, Suzy darlin," he heard himself say, and thought: If she comes near me ... tries to touch me ... I'll scream. I won't be able to help it, no matter what the kid told me.

"Are you all right Brand? You look pale."

"A little touch of whatever's going around, I guess," he said, astounded all over again at the natural ease of his voice. "I think I'm getting on top of it, though."

"Good," Suzanne Holding's voice said from behind the bat's face and the strangely motile flesh. "No French kissing until you're all better, though—in fact, don't even breathe on me. I can't afford to be sick with the Japanese coming in on Wednesday."

No problem, sweetheart—no problem, you better believe it.

"I'll try to restrain myself."

"Thanks. Tim, will you come down to my office and look at a couple of spread-sheet summaries?"

Timmy Flanders slipped an arm around the waist of the sexily prim Samuel Blue suit, and before Pearson's wide eyes, he bent and

planted a little kiss on the side of the thing's tumor-raddled, hairy face. That's where Timmy sees her cheek, Pearson thought, and he felt his sanity suddenly slip like greasy cable wound around the drum of a winch. Her smooth, perfumed cheek—that's what he's seeing, all right, and what he thinks he's kissing. Oh my God. Oh my God.

"There!" Timmy exclaimed, and gave the creature a small cavalier's bow. "One kiss and I am your servant, dear lady!"

He tipped Pearson a wink and began walking the monster in the direction of her office. As they passed the drinking fountain, he dropped the arm he had hung about her waist. The short and meaningless little peacock/peahen courting dance—a ritual that had somehow developed over the last ten years or so in business relationships where the boss was female and the aide was male—had now been performed, and they drew away from Pearson as sexual equals, talking nothing but dry numbers.

Marvellous analysis, Brand, Pearson thought distractedly as he turned away from them. You should have been a sociologist. And almost had been—it had been his college minor, after all.

As he entered his office he became aware that his whole body was running with a slow slime of sweat. Pearson forgot sociology and began rooting for three o'clock again.

*

At two-forty-five he steeled himself and poked his head into Suzanne Holding's office. The alien asteroid of her head was tilted toward the blue-gray screen of her computer, but she looked around when he said "Knock-knock," the flesh on her strange face sliding restlessly, her black eyes regarding him with the cold avidity of a shark studying a swimmer's leg.

"I gave Buzz Carstairs the Corporate Fours," Pearson said. "I'm going to take the Individual Form Nines home with me, if that's okay. I've got my backup discs there."

“Is this your coy way of saying you’re going AWOL, my dear?” Suzanne asked. The black veins bulged unspeakably on top of her bald skull; the lumps which surrounded her features quivered, and Pearson realized one of them was leaking a thick pinkish substance that looked like bloodstained shaving cream.

He made himself smile. “You caught me.”

“Well,” Suzanne said, “we’ll just have to have the four o’clock orgy without you today, I guess.”

“Thanks, Suze.” He turned away.

“Brand?”

He turned back, his fear and revulsion threatening to turn into a bright white freeze of panic, suddenly very sure that those avid black eyes had seen through him and that the thing masquerading as Suzanne Holding was going to say, Let’s stop playing games, shall we? Come in and close the door. Let’s see if you taste as good as you look.

Rhinemann would wait awhile, then go on to wherever he was going by himself. Probably, Pearson thought, he’ll know what happened. Probably he’s seen it before.

“Yes?” he asked, trying to smile.

She looked at him appraisingly for a long moment without speaking, the grotesque slab of head looming above the sexy lady exec’s body, and then she said, “You look a little better this afternoon.” The mouth still gaped, the black eyes still stared with all the expression of a Raggedy Ann doll abandoned under a child’s bed, but Pearson knew that anyone else would have seen only Suzanne Holding, smiling prettily at one of her junior executives and exhibiting just the right degree of Type A concern. Not exactly Mother Courage, but still caring and interested.

“Good,” he said, and decided that was probably too limp. “Great!”

“Now if we could only get you to quit smoking.”

“Well, I’m trying,” he said, and laughed weakly. The greasy cable around that mental winch slipped again. Let me go, he thought. Let me go, you horrible bitch, let me get out of here before I do something too nutso to be ignored.

“You’d qualify for an automatic upgrade on your insurance, you know,” the monster said. Now the surface of another of those tumors broke open with a rotten little chup! sound and more of that pink stuff began to ooze out.

“Yeah, I know,” he said. “And I’ll give it serious consideration, Suzanne. Really.”

“You do that,” she said, and swung back toward the glowing computer screen. For a moment he was stunned, unable to grasp his good fortune. The interview was over.

*

By the time Pearson left the building it was pouring, but the Ten O’Clock People—now they were the Three O’Clock People, of course, but there was no essential difference—were out just the same, huddled together like sheep, doing their thing. Little Miss Red Skirt and the janitor who liked to wear his cap turned around backward were sheltering beneath the same sodden section of the Boston Globe. They looked uncomfortable and damp around the edges, but Pearson envied the janitor just the same. Little Miss Red Skirt wore Giorgio; he had smelled it in the elevator on several occasions. And she made little silky rustling noises when she moved, of course.

What the hell are you thinking about? he asked himself sternly, and replied in the same mental breath: Keeping my sanity, thank you very much. Okay by you?

Duke Rhinemann was standing under the awning of the flower shop just around the corner, his shoulders hunched, a cigarette in the corner of his own mouth. Pearson joined him, glanced at his watch, and decided he could wait a little longer. He poked his head forward a little bit just the same, to catch the tang of Rhinemann's cigarette. He did this without being aware of it.

"My boss is one of them," he told Duke. "Unless, of course, Douglas Keefer is the sort of monster who likes to cross-dress."

Rhinemann grinned ferociously and said nothing.

"You said there were three others. Who are the other two?"

"Donald Fine. You probably don't know him—he's in Securities. And Carl Grosbeck."

"Carl... the Chairman of the Board? Jesus!"

"I told you," Rhinemann said. "High places are what these guys're all about—Hey, taxi!"

He dashed out from beneath the awning, flagging the maroon-and-white cab he had spotted cruising miraculously empty through the rainy afternoon. It swerved toward them, spraying fans of standing water. Rhinemann dodged agilely, but Pearson's shoes and pantscuffs were soaked. In his current state, it didn't seem terribly important. He opened the door for Rhinemann, who slid in and scooted across the seat. Pearson followed and slammed the door.

"Gallagher's Pub," Rhinemann said. "It's directly across from—"

"I know where Gallagher's is," the driver said, "but we don't go anywhere until you dispose of the cancer-stick, my friend." He tapped the sign clipped to the taximeter. **SMOKING IS NOT PERMITTED IN THIS LIVERY**, it read.

The two men exchanged a glance. Rhinemann lifted his shoulders in the half-embarrassed, half-surly shrug that has been the principal tribal greeting of the Ten O’Clock People since 1990 or so. Then, without a murmur of protest, he pitched his quarter-smoked Winston out into the driving rain.

*

Pearson began to tell Rhinemann how shocked he had been when the elevator doors had opened and he’d gotten his first good look at the essential Suzanne Holding, but Rhinemann frowned, gave his head a minute shake, and swivelled his thumb toward their driver. “We’ll talk later,” he said.

Pearson subsided into silence, contenting himself with watching the rain-streaked highrises of midtown Boston slip by. He found himself almost exquisitely attuned to the little street-life scenes going on outside the taxicab’s smeary window. He was especially interested in the little clusters of Ten O’Clock People he observed standing in front of every business building they passed. Where there was shelter, they took it; where there wasn’t, they took that, too—simply turned up their collars, hooded their hands protectively over their cigarettes, and smoked anyway. It occurred to Pearson that easily ninety per cent of the posh midtown highrises they were passing were now no-smoking zones, just like the one he and Rhinemann worked in. It occurred to him further (and this thought came with the force of a revelation) that the Ten O’Clock People were not really a new tribe at all but the raggedy-ass remnants of an old one, renegades running before a new broom that intended to sweep their bad old habit clean out the door of American life. Their unifying characteristic was their unwillingness or inability to quit killing themselves; they were junkies in a steadily shrinking twilight zone of acceptability. An exotic social group, he supposed, but not one that was apt to last very long. He guessed that by the year 2020, 2050 at the latest, the Ten O’Clock People would have gone the way of the dodo.

Oh shit, wait a minute, he thought. We’re just the last of the world’s diehard optimists, that’s all—most of us don’t bother with our

seatbelts, either, and we'd love to sit behind home plate at the ballpark if they'd just take down that silly fucking screen.

"What's so funny, Mr. Pearson?" Rhinemann asked him, and Pearson became aware he was wearing a broad grin.

"Nothing," Pearson said. "Nothing important, at least."

"Okay; just don't freak out on me."

"Would you consider it a freak-out if I asked you to call me Brandon?"

"I guess not," Rhinemann said, and appeared to think it over. "As long as you call me Duke and we don't get down to BeeBee or Buster or anything embarrassing like that."

"I think you're safe on that score. Want to know something?"

"Sure."

"This has been the most amazing day of my life."

Duke Rhinemann nodded without returning Pearson's smile. "And it's not over yet," he said.

2

Pearson thought that Gallagher's had been an inspired choice on Duke's part—a clear Boston anomaly, more Gilley's than Cheers, it was the perfect place for two bank employees to discuss matters which would have left their nearest and dearest with serious questions about their sanity. The longest bar Pearson had ever seen outside of a movie curved around a large square of shiny dance-floor on which three couples were currently dry-humping dreamily as Marty Stuart and Travis Tritt harmonized on “This One's Gonna Hurt You.”

In a smaller place the bar proper would have been packed, but the patrons were so well spaced along this amazing length of mahogany-paved racetrack that brass-rail privacy was actually achievable; there was no need for them to search out a booth in the dim nether reaches of the room. Pearson was glad. It would be too easy to imagine one of the batpeople, maybe even a batcouple, sitting (or roosting) in the next booth and listening intently to their conversation.

Isn't that what they call a bunker mentality, old buddy? he thought. Certainly didn't take you long to get there, did it?

No, he supposed not, but for the time being he didn't care. He was just grateful he would be able to see in all directions while they talked ... or, he supposed, while Duke talked.

“Bar's okay?” Duke asked, and Pearson nodded.

It looked like one bar, Pearson reflected as he followed Duke beneath the sign which read SMOKING PERMITTED THIS SECTION ONLY, but it was really two ... the way that, back in the fifties, every lunch-counter below the Mason-Dixon had really been two: one for the white folks and one for the black. And now as then, you could see the difference. A Sony almost the size of a cineplex movie screen overlooked the center of the no-smoking section; in the

nicotine ghetto there was only an elderly Zenith bolted to the wall (a sign beside it read: FEEL FREE TO ASK FOR CREDIT, WE WILL FEEL FREE TO TELL YOU TO F!!K OFF). The surface of the bar itself was dirtier down here—Pearson thought at first that this must be just his imagination, but a second glance confirmed the dingy look of the wood and the faint overlapping rings that were the Ghosts of Schooners Past. And, of course, there was the sallow, yellowish odor of tobacco smoke. He swore it came puffing up from the bar-stool when he sat down, like popcorn farts out of an elderly movie-theater seat. The newscaster on their battered, smoke-bleared TV appeared to be dying of zinc poisoning; the same guy playing to the healthy folks farther down the bar looked ready to run the four-forty and then bench-press his weight in blondes.

Welcome to the back of the bus, Pearson thought, looking at his fellow Ten O'clock People with a species of exasperated amusement. Oh well, mustn't complain; in another ten years smokers won't even be allowed on board.

“Cigarette?” Duke asked, perhaps displaying certain rudimentary mind-reading skills.

Pearson glanced at his watch, then accepted the butt, along with another light from Duke's faux-classy lighter. He drew deep, relishing the way the smoke slid into his pipes, even relishing the slight swimming in his head. Of course the habit was dangerous, potentially lethal; how could anything that got you off like this not be? It was the way of the world, that was all.

“What about you?” he asked as Duke slipped his cigarettes back into his pocket.

“I can wait a little longer,” Duke said, smiling. “I got a couple of puffs before we got in the cab. Also, I have to pay off the extra one I had at lunch.”

“You ration yourself, huh?”

“Yeah. I usually only allow myself one at lunch, but today I had two. You scared the shit out of me, you know.”

“I was pretty scared myself.”

The bartender came over, and Pearson found himself fascinated at the way the man avoided the thin ribbon of smoke rising from his cigarette. I doubt if he even knows he’s doing it... but if I blew some in his face, I bet he’d come over the top and clean my clock for me.

“Help you gentlemen?”

Duke ordered Sam Adamses without consulting Pearson. When the bartender left to get them, Duke turned back and said, “Stretch it out. This’d be a bad time to get drunk. Bad time to even get tight.”

Pearson nodded and dropped a five-dollar bill on the counter when the bartender came back with the beers. He took a deep swallow, then dragged on his cigarette. There were people who thought a cigarette never tasted better than it did after a meal, but Pearson disagreed; he believed in his heart that it wasn’t an apple that had gotten Eve in trouble but a beer and a cigarette.

“So what’d you use?” Duke asked him. “The patch? Hypnosis? Good old American willpower? Looking at you, I’d guess it was the patch.”

If it had been Duke’s humorous effort at a curve-ball, it didn’t work. Pearson had been thinking about smoking a lot this afternoon.

“Yeah, the patch,” he said. “I wore it for two years, starting just after my daughter was born. I took one look at her through the nursery window and made up my mind to quit the habit. It seemed crazy to go on setting fire to forty or fifty cigarettes a day when I’d just taken on an eighteen-year commitment to a brand-new human being.” With whom I had fallen instantly in love, he could have added, but he had an idea Duke already knew that.

“Not to mention your life-long commitment to your wife.”

“Not to mention my wife,” Pearson agreed.

“Plus assorted brothers, sisters-in-law, debt-collectors, ratepayers, and friends of the court.”

Pearson burst out laughing and nodded. “Yeah, you got it.”

“Not as easy as it sounds, though, huh? When it’s four in the morning and you can’t sleep, all that nobility erodes fast.”

Pearson grimaced. “Or when you have to go upstairs and turn a few cartwheels for Grosbeck and Keefer and Fine and the rest of the boys in the boardroom. The first time I had to do that without grabbing a cigarette before I walked in ... man, that was tough.”

“But you did stop completely for at least awhile.”

Pearson looked at Duke, only a trifle surprised at this prescience, and nodded. “For about six months. But I never quit in my mind, do you know what I mean?”

“Of course I know.”

“Finally I started chipping again. That was 1992, right around the time the news stories started coming out about how some people who smoked while they were still wearing the patch had heart attacks. Do you remember those?”

“Uh-huh,” Duke said, and tapped his forehead. “I got a complete file of smoking stories up here, my man, alphabetically arranged. Smoking and Alzheimer’s, smoking and blood-pressure, smoking and cataracts ... you know.”

“So I had my choice,” Pearson said. He was smiling a small, puzzled smile—the smile of a man who knows he has behaved like a horse’s ass, is still behaving like a horse’s ass, but doesn’t really know why. “I could quit chipping or quit wearing the patch. So I—”

“Quit wearing the patch!” they finished together, and then burst into a gust of laughter that caused a smoothbrowed patron in the no-smoking area to glance over at them for a moment, frowning, before returning his attention to the newscast on the tube.

“Life’s one fucked-up proposition, isn’t it?” Duke asked, still laughing, and started to reach inside his cream-colored jacket. He stopped when he saw Pearson holding out his pack of Marlboros with one cigarette popped up. They exchanged another glance, Duke’s surprised and Pearson’s knowing, and then burst into another mingled shout of laughter. The smoothbrowed guy glanced over again, his frown a little deeper this time. Neither man noticed. Duke took the offered cigarette and lit it. The whole thing took less than ten seconds, but it was long enough for the two men to become friends.

*

“I smoked like a chimney from the time I was fifteen right up until I got married back in ‘91,” Duke said. “My mother didn’t like it, but she appreciated the fact that I wasn’t smoking rock or selling it, like half the other kids on my street—I’m talking Roxbury, you know—and so she didn’t say too much.

“Wendy and I went to Hawaii for a week on our honeymoon, and the day we got back, she gave me a present.” Duke dragged deep and then feathered twin jets of blue-gray smoke from his nose. “She found it in the Sharper Image catalogue, I think, or maybe it was one of the other ones. Had some fancy name, but I don’t remember what it was; I just called the goddamned thing Pavlov’s Thumbscrews. Still, I loved her like fire—still do, too, you better believe it—so I rared back and gave it my best shot. It wasn’t as bad as I thought it would be, either. You know the gadget I’m talking about?”

“You bet,” Pearson said. “The beeper. It makes you wait a little longer for each cigarette. Lisabeth—my wife—kept pointing them out to me while she was pregnant with Jenny. About as subtle as a wheelbarrow of cement falling off a scaffold, you know.”

Duke nodded, smiling, and when the bartender drifted by, he pointed at their glasses and told him to do it again. Then he turned back to Pearson. "Except for using Pavlov's Thumbscrews instead of the patch, the rest of my story's the same as yours. I got all the way to the place where the machine plays a shitty little version of the Freedom Chorus, or something, but the habit crept back. It's harder to kill than a snake with two hearts." The bartender brought the fresh beers. Duke paid this time, took a sip of his, and said, "I have to make a telephone call. Take about five minutes."

"Okay," Pearson said. He glanced around, saw the bartender had once more retreated to the relative safety of the no-smoking section (The unions'll have two bartenders in here by 2005, he thought, one for the smokers and one for the non-smokers), and turned back to Duke again. When he spoke this time, he pitched his voice lower. "I thought we were going to talk about the batmen."

Duke appraised him with his dark-brown eyes for a moment and then said, "We have been, my man. We have been."

And before Pearson could say anything else, Duke had disappeared into the dim (but almost entirely smokeless) depths of Gallagher's, bound for wherever the pay phones were hidden away.

*

He was gone closer to ten minutes than to five, and Pearson was wondering if maybe he should go back and check on him when his eye was drawn to the television, where the news anchor was talking about a furor that had been touched off by the Vice President of the United States. The Veep had suggested in a speech to the National Education Association that government-subsidized daycare centers should be re-evaluated and closed wherever possible.

The picture switched to videotape shot earlier that day at some Washington, D.C., convention center, and as the newsclip went from the wide establishing shot and lead-in narration to the close-up of the V.P. at his podium, Pearson gripped the edge of the bar with both

hands, squeezing tightly enough to sink his fingers a little way into the padding. One of the things Duke had said that morning on the plaza came back to him: They've got friends in high places. Hell, high places is what they're all about.

"We have no grudge against America's working mothers," the misshapen batfaced monster standing in front of the podium with the blue Vice Presidential seal on it was saying, "and no grudge against the deserving poor. We do feel, however—"

A hand dropped on Pearson's shoulder, and he had to bite his lips together to keep the scream inside them. He looked around and saw Duke. A change had come over the young man—his eyes were sparkling brightly, and there were fine beads of sweat on his brow. Pearson thought he looked as if he'd just won the Publishers Clearing House sweepstakes.

"Don't ever do that again," Pearson said, and Duke froze in the act of climbing back onto his stool. "I think I just ate my heart."

Duke looked surprised, then glanced up at the TV. Understanding dawned on his face. "Oh," he said. "Jesus, I'm sorry, Brandon. Really. I keep forgetting that you came in on this movie in the middle."

"What about the President?" Pearson asked. He strained to keep his voice level and almost made it. "I guess I can live with this asshole, but what about the President? Is he—"

"No," Duke said. He hesitated, then added: "At least, not yet."

Pearson leaned toward him, aware that the strange numbness was stealing back into his lips again. "What do you mean, not yet? What's happening, Duke? What are they? Where do they come from? What do they do and what do they want?"

"I'll tell you what I know," Duke said, "but first I want to ask you if you can come to a little meeting with me this evening. Around six? You

up for that?”

“Is it about this?”

“Of course it is.”

Pearson ruminated. “All right. I’ll have to call Lisabeth, though.”

Duke looked alarmed. “Don’t say anything about—”

“Of course not. I’ll tell her La Belle Dame sans Merci wants to go over her precious spread-sheets again before she shows them to the Japanese. She’ll buy that; she knows Holding’s all but fudging her frillies about the impending arrival of our friends from the Pacific Rim. Sound okay to you?”

“Yes.”

“It sounds okay to me, too, but it feels a little sleazy.”

“There’s nothing sleazy about wanting to keep as much space as possible between your wife and the bats. I mean, it’s not a massage-parlor I want to take you to, bro.”

“I suppose not. So talk.”

“All right. I guess I better start by telling you about your smoking habits.”

The juke, which had been silent for the last few minutes, now began to emit a tired-sounding version of Billy Ray Cyrus’s golden clunker, “Achy Breaky Heart.” Pearson stared at Duke Rhinemann with confused eyes and opened his mouth to ask what his smoking habits had to do with the price of coffee in San Diego. Only nothing came out. Nothing at all.

*

“You quit ... then you started chipping ... but you were smart enough to know that if you weren’t careful, you’d be right back where you started in a month or two,” Duke said. “Right?”

“Yes, but I don’t see—”

“You will.” Duke took his handkerchief out and mopped his brow. Pearson’s first impression when the man had come back from using the phone had been that Duke was all but blowing his stack with excitement. He stood by that, but now he realized something else: he was also scared to death. “Just bear with me.”

“Okay.”

“Anyway, you’ve worked out an accommodation with your habit. A whatdoyoucallit, *modus vivendi*. You can’t bring yourself to quit, but you’ve discovered that’s not the end of the world—it’s not like being a coke-addict who can’t let go of the rock or a boozehound who can’t stop chugging down the Night Train. Smoking’s a bastard of a habit, but there really is a middle ground between two or three packs a day and total abstinence.”

Pearson was looking at him, wide-eyed, and Duke smiled.

“I’m not reading your mind, if that’s what you think. I mean, we know each other, don’t we?”

“I suppose we do,” Pearson said thoughtfully. “I just forgot for a minute that we’re both Ten O’Clock People.”

“We’re what?”

So Pearson explained a little about the Ten O’Clock People and their tribal gestures (surlly glances when confronted by NO SMOKING signs, surlly shrugs of acquiescence when asked by some accredited authority to Please Put Your Cigarette Out, Sir), their tribal sacraments (gum, hard candies, toothpicks, and, of course, little

Binaca push-button spray cans), and their tribal litanies (I'm quitting for good next year being the most common).

Duke listened, fascinated, and when Pearson had finished he said, "Jesus Christ, Brandon! You've found the Lost Tribe of Israel! Crazy fucks all wandered off following Joe Camel!"

Pearson burst out laughing, earning another annoyed, puzzled look from the smooth-faced fellow over in NoSmo.

"Anyway, it all fits in," Duke told him. "Let me ask you something—do you smoke around your kid?"

"Christ, no!" Pearson exclaimed.

"Your wife?"

"Nope, not anymore."

"When was the last time you had a butt in a restaurant?"

Pearson considered it and discovered a peculiar thing: he couldn't remember. Nowadays he asked to be seated in the no-smoking section even when he was alone, deferring his cigarette until after he'd finished, paid up, and left. And the days when he had actually smoked between courses were long in the past, of course.

"Ten O'Clock People," Duke said in a marvelling voice. "Man, I love that—I love it that we have a name. And it really is like being part of a tribe. It—"

He broke off suddenly, looking out one of the windows. A Boston city cop was walking by, talking to a pretty young woman. She was looking up at him with a sweetly mingled expression of admiration and sex-appeal, totally unaware of the black, appraising eyes and glaring triangular teeth just above her.

"Jesus, would you look at that," Pearson said in a low voice.

“Yeah,” Duke said. “It’s becoming more common, too. More common every day.” He was quiet for a moment, looking into his half-empty beer schooner. Then he seemed to almost physically shake himself out of his reverie. “Whatever else we are,” he told Pearson, “we’re the only people in the whole goddam world who see them.”

“What, just smokers?” Pearson asked incredulously. Of course he should have seen that Duke was leading him here, but still ...

“No,” Duke said patiently. “Smokers don’t see them. Non-smokers don’t see them, either.” He measured Pearson with his eyes. “Only people like us see them, Brandon—people who are neither fish nor fowl.

“Only Ten O’Clock People like us.”

*

When they left Gallagher’s fifteen minutes later (Pearson had first called his wife, told her his manufactured tale of woe, and promised to be home by ten), the rain had slackened to a fine drizzle and Duke proposed they walk awhile. Not all the way to Cambridge, which was where they would end up, but far enough for Duke to fill in the rest of the background. The streets were nearly deserted, and they could finish their conversation without looking back over their shoulders.

“In a bizarre way, it’s sort of like your first orgasm,” Duke was saying as they walked through a gauzy groundmist in the direction of the Charles River. “Once that kicks into gear, becomes a part of your life, it’s just there for you. Same with this. One day the chemicals in your head balance just right and you see one. I’ve wondered, you know, how many people have just dropped dead of fright at that moment. A lot, I bet.”

Pearson looked at the bloody smear of a traffic-light reflection on the shiny black pavement of Boylston Street and remembered the shock of his first encounter. “They’re so awful. So hideous. The way their

flesh seems to move around on their heads ... there's really no way to say it, is there?"

Duke was nodding. "They're ugly motherfuckers, all right. I was on the Red Line, headed back home to Milton, when I saw my first one. He was standing on the downtown platform at Park Street Station. We went right by him. Good thing for me I was in the train and goin away, because I screamed."

"What happened then?"

Duke's smile had become, at least temporarily, a grimace of embarrassment. "People looked at me, then looked away real quick. You know how it is in the city; there's a nut preachin about how Jesus loves Tupperware on every street corner."

Pearson nodded. He knew how it was in the city, all right. Or thought he had, until today.

"This tall redheaded geek with about a trillion freckles on his face sat down in the seat beside me and grabbed my elbow just about the same way I grabbed yours this morning. His name is Robbie Delray. He's a housepainter. You'll meet him tonight at Kate's."

"What's Kate's?"

"Specialty bookstore in Cambridge. Mysteries. We meet there once or twice a week. It's a good place. Good people, too, mostly. You'll see. Anyway, Robbie grabbed my elbow and said, 'You're not crazy, I saw it too. It's real—it's a batman.' That was all, and he could have been spoutin from the top end of some amphetamine high for all I knew ... except I had seen it, and the relief ..."

"Yes," Pearson said, thinking back to that morning. They paused at Storrow Drive, waited for a tanker truck to go by, and then hurried across the puddly street. Pearson was momentarily transfixed by a fading spray-painted graffito on the back of a park bench which

faced the river. THE ALIENS HAVE LANDED, it said. WE ATE 2 AT LEGAL SEAFOOD.

“Good thing for me you were there this morning,” Pearson said. “I was lucky.”

Duke nodded. “Yeah, man, you were. When the bats fuck with a dude, they fuck with him—the cops usually pick up the pieces in a basket after one of their little parties. You hear that?”

Pearson nodded.

“And nobody knows the victims all had one thing in common—they’d cut down their smoking to between five and ten cigarettes a day. I have an idea that sort of similarity’s a little too obscure even for the FBI.”

“But why kill us?” Pearson asked. “I mean, some guy goes running around saying his boss is a Martian, they don’t send out the National Guard; they put the guy in the boobyhatch!”

“Come on, man, get real,” Duke said. “You’ve seen these cuties.”

“They... like to?”

“Yeah, they like to. But that’s getting the cart before the horse. They’re like wolves, Brandon, invisible wolves that keep working their way back and forth through a herd of sheep. Now tell me—what do wolves want with sheep, aside from getting their jollies off every time they kill one?”

“They ... what are you saying?” Pearson’s voice dropped to a whisper. “Are you saying that they eat us?”

“They eat some part of us,” Duke said. “That’s what Robbie Delray believed on the day I met him, and that’s what most of us still believe.”

“Who’s us, Duke?”

“The people I’m taking you to see. We won’t all be there, but this time most of us will be. Something’s come up. Something big.”

“What?”

To that Duke would only shake his head and ask, “You ready for a cab yet? Getting too mildewy?”

Pearson was mildewy, but not ready for a cab. The walk had invigorated him... but not just the walk. He didn’t think he could tell Duke this—at least not yet—but there was a definite upside to this ... a romantic upside. It was as if he had fallen into some weird but exciting boy’s adventure story; he could almost imagine the N. C. Wyeth illustrations. He looked at the nimbuses of white light revolving slowly around the streetlamps which soldiered their way up Storrow Drive and smiled a little. Something big has come up, he thought. Agent X-9 has slipped in with good news from our underground base... we’ve located the batpoison we’ve been looking for!

“The excitement wears off, believe me,” Duke said dryly.

Pearson turned his head, startled.

“Around the time they fish your second friend out of Boston Harbor with half his head gone, you realize Tom Swift isn’t going to show up and help you whitewash the goddam fence.”

“Tom Sawyer,” Pearson muttered, and wiped rainwater out of his eyes. He could feel himself flushing.

“They eat something that our brains make, that’s what Robbie thinks. Maybe an enzyme, he says, maybe some kind of special electrical wave. He says it might be the same thing that lets us—some of us, anyway—see them, and that to them we’re like tomatoes in a farmer’s garden, theirs to take whenever they decide we’re ripe.

“Me, I was raised Baptist and I’m willing to cut right to the chase—none of that Farmer John crap. I think they’re soulsuckers.”

“Really? Are you putting me on, or do you really believe that?”

Duke laughed, shrugged, and looked defiant, all at the same time. “Shit, I don’t know, man. These things came into my life about the same time I decided heaven was a fairytale and hell was other people. Now I’m all fucked up again. But that doesn’t really matter. The important thing, the only thing you have to get straight and keep straight, is that they have plenty of reasons to kill us. First because they’re afraid of us doing just what we’re doing, getting together, organizing, trying to put a hurt on them ...”

He paused, thought it over, shook his head. Now he looked and sounded like a man holding dialogue with himself, trying yet again to answer some question which has held him sleepless over too many nights.

“Afraid? I don’t know if that’s exactly true. But they’re not taking many chances, about that there’s no doubt. And something else there’s no doubt about, either—they hate the fact that some of us can see them. They fucking hate it. We caught one once and it was like catching a hurricane in a bottle. We—”

“Caught one!”

“Yes indeed,” Duke said, and offered him a hard, mirthless grin. “We bagged it at a rest area on I-95, up by Newburyport. There were half a dozen of us—my friend Robbie was in charge. We took it to a farmhouse, and when the boatload of dope we’d shot into it wore off—which it did much too fast—we tried to question it, to get better answers to some of the questions you’ve already asked me. We had it in handcuffs and leg-irons; we had so much nylon rope wrapped around it that it looked like a mummy. You know what I remember best?”

Pearson shook his head. His sense of living between the pages of a boy's adventure story had quite departed.

"How it woke up," Duke said. "There was no in-between. One second it was knocked-out-loaded and the next it was wide-awake, staring at us with those horrible eyes they have. Bat's eyes. They do have eyes, you know—people don't always realize that. That stuff about them being blind must have been the work of a good press-agent.

"It wouldn't talk to us. Not a single word. I think it knew it wasn't going to ever leave that barn, but there was no fear in it. Only hate. Jesus, the hate in its eyes!"

"What happened?"

"It snapped the handcuff-chain like it was tissue-paper. The leg-irons were tougher—and we had it in those special Long John boots you can nail right to the floor—but the nylon boat-rope ... it started to bite through it where it crossed its shoulders. With those teeth—you've seen them—it was like watching a rat gnaw through twine. We all stood there like bumps on a log. Even Robbie. We couldn't believe what we were seeing... or maybe it had us hypnotized. I've wondered about that a lot, you know, if that might not have been possible. Thank God for Lester Olson. We'd used a Ford Econoline van that Robbie and Moira stole, and Lester'd gotten paranoid that it might be visible from the turnpike. He went out to check, and when he came back in and saw that thing almost free except for its feet, he shot it three times in the head. Just pop-pop-pop."

Duke shook his head wonderingly.

"Killed him," Pearson said. "Just pop-pop-pop."

His voice seemed to have risen out of his head again, as it had on the plaza in front of the bank that morning, and a horrid yet persuasive idea suddenly came to him: that there were no batpeople. They were a group hallucination, that was all, not much different from the ones peyote users sometimes had during their

drug-assisted circle jerks. This one, unique to the Ten O’Clock People, was brought on by just the wrong amount of tobacco. The folks Duke was taking him to meet had killed at least one innocent person while under the influence of this mad idea, and might kill more. Certainly would kill more, if given time. And if he didn’t get away from this crazed young banker soon, he might end up being a part of it. He had already seen two of the batpeople ... no, three, counting the cop, and four counting the Vice President. And that just about tore it, the idea that the Vice President of the United States—

The look on Duke’s face led Pearson to believe that his mind was being read for the third record-breaking time. “You’re starting to wonder if maybe we’ve all gone Looney Tunes, you included,” Duke said. “Is that right?”

“Of course it is,” Pearson said, a little more sharply than he had intended.

“They disappear,” Duke said simply. “I saw the one in the barn disappear.”

“What?”

“Get transparent, turn to smoke, disappear. I know how crazy it sounds, but nothing I could ever say would make you understand how crazy it was to actually be there and watch it happen.

“At first you think it’s not real even though it’s going on right in front of you; you must be dreaming it, or maybe you stepped into a movie somehow, one full of killer special effects like in those old Star Wars movies. Then you smell something that’s like dust and piss and hot chili-peppers all mixed together. It stings your eyes, makes you want to puke. Lester did puke, and Janet sneezed for an hour afterward. She said ordinarily only ragweed or cat-dander does that to her. Anyway, I went up to the chair where he’d been. The ropes were still there, and the handcuffs, and the clothes. The guy’s shirt was still buttoned. The guy’s tie was still knotted. I reached out and unzipped his pants—careful, like his pecker was gonna fly outta there and rip

my nose off—but all I saw was his underwear inside his pants. Ordinary white Jockey shorts. That was all, but that was enough, because they were empty, too. Tell you something, my brother—you ain't seen weird until you've seen a guy's clothes all put together in layers like that with no guy left inside em."

"Turn to smoke and disappear," Pearson said. "Jesus Christ."

"Yeah. At the very end, he looked like that." He pointed to one of the streetlights with its bright revolving nimbus of moisture.

"And what happens to ..." Pearson stopped, unsure for a moment how to express what he wanted to ask. "Are they reported missing? Are they ..." Then he knew what it was he really wanted to know. "Duke, where's the real Douglas Keefer? And the real Suzanne Holding?"

Duke shook his head. "I don't know. Except that, in a way, it's the real Keefer you saw this morning, Brandon, and the real Suzanne Holding, too. We think that maybe the heads we see aren't really there, that our brains are translating what the bats really are—their hearts and their souls—into visual images."

"Spiritual telepathy?"

Duke grinned. "You got a way with words, bro—that'll do. You need to talk to Lester. When it comes to the batpeople, he's damn near a poet."

The name rang a clear bell, and after a moment's thought, Pearson thought he knew why.

"Is he an older guy with lots of white hair? Looks sort of like an aging tycoon on a soap opera?"

Duke burst out laughing. "Yeah, that's Les."

They walked on in silence for awhile. The river rippled mystically past on their right, and now they could see the lights of Cambridge on the other side. Pearson thought he had never seen Boston looking so beautiful.

“The batpeople come in, maybe no more than a germ you inhale...” Pearson began again, feeling his way.

“Yeah, well, some folks go for the germ idea, but I’m not one of em. Because, dig: you never see a batman janitor or a batwoman waitress. They like power, and they’re moving into the power neighborhoods. Did you ever hear of a germ that just picked on rich people, Brandon?”

“No.”

“Me either.”

“These people we’re going to meet ... are they ...” Pearson was a little amused to find he had to work to bring the next thing out. It wasn’t exactly a return to the land of boys’ books, but it was close. “Are they resistance fighters?”

Duke considered this, then both nodded and shrugged—a fascinating gesture, as if his body were saying yes and no at the same time. “Not yet,” he said, “but maybe, after tonight, we will be.”

Before Pearson could ask him what he meant by that, Duke had spotted another cab cruising empty, this one on the far side of Storrow Drive, and had stepped into the gutter to flag it. It made an illegal U-turn and swung over to the curb to pick them up.

*

In the cab they talked Hub sports—the maddening Red Sox, the depressing Patriots, the sagging Celtics—and left the batpeople alone, but when they got out in front of an isolated frame house on the Cambridge side of the river (KATE’S MYSTERY BOOKSHOP

was written on a sign that showed a hissing black cat with an arched back), Pearson took Duke Rhinemann's arm and said, "I have a few more questions."

Duke glanced at his watch. "No time, Brandon—we walked a little too long, I guess."

"Just two, then."

"Jesus, you're like that guy on TV, the one in the old dirty raincoat. I doubt if I can answer them, anyway—I know a hell of a lot less about all this than you seem to think."

"When did it start?"

"See? That's what I mean. I don't know, and the thing we caught sure wasn't going to tell us—that little sweetheart wouldn't even give us its name, rank, and serial number. Robbie Delray, the guy I told you about, says he saw his first one over five years ago, walking a Lhasa Apso on Boston Common. He says there have been more every year since. There still aren't many of them compared to us, but the number has been increasing... exponentially? ... is that the word I want?"

"I hope not," Pearson said. "It's a scary word."

"What's your other question, Brandon? Hurry up."

"What about other cities? Are there more bats? And other people who see them? What do you hear?"

"We don't know. They could be all over the world, but we're pretty sure that America's the only country in the world where more than a handful of people can see them."

"Why?"

"Because this is the only country that's gone bonkers about cigarettes ... probably because it's the only one where people

believe—and down deep they really do—that if they just eat the right foods, take the right combination of vitamins, think enough of the right thoughts, and wipe their asses with the right kind of toilet-paper, they'll live forever and be sexually active the whole time. When it comes to smoking, the battle-lines are drawn, and the result has been this weird hybrid. Us, in other words.”

“Ten O’Clock People,” Pearson said, smiling.

“Yep—Ten O’Clock People.” He looked past Pearson’s shoulder. “Moira! Hi!”

Pearson was not exactly surprised to smell Giorgio. He looked around and saw Little Miss Red Skirt.

“Moira Richardson, Brandon Pearson.”

“Hello,” Pearson said, and took her outstretched hand. “Credit Assistance, isn’t it?”

“That’s like calling a garbage collector a sanitation technician,” she said with a cheerful grin. It was a grin, Pearson thought, that a man could fall in love with, if he wasn’t careful. “Credit checks are what I actually do. If you want to buy a new Porsche, I check the records to make sure you’re really a Porsche kind of guy ... in a financial sense, of course.”

“Of course,” Pearson said, and grinned back at her.

“Cam!” she called. “Come on over here!”

It was the janitor who liked to mop the john with his cap turned around backward. In his streetclothes he seemed to have gained about fifty IQ points and a rather amazing resemblance to Armand Assante. Pearson felt a small pang but no real surprise when he put an arm around Moira Richardson’s delectable little waist and a casual kiss on the corner of her delectable little mouth. Then he offered Brandon his hand.

“Cameron Stevens.”

“Brandon Pearson.”

“I’m glad to see you here,” Stevens said. “I thought you were gonna high-side it this morning for sure.”

“How many of you were watching me?” Pearson asked. He tried to replay ten o’clock in the plaza and discovered he couldn’t—it was lost in a white haze of shock, for the most part.

“Most of us from the bank who see them,” Moira said quietly. “But it’s okay, Mr. Pearson—”

“Brandon. Please.”

She nodded. “We weren’t doing anything but rooting for you, Brandon. Come on, Cam.”

They hurried up the steps to the porch of the small frame building and slipped inside. Pearson caught just a glimpse of muted light before the door shut. Then he turned back to Duke.

“This is all real, isn’t it?” he asked.

Duke looked at him sympathetically. “Unfortunately, yes.” He paused, then added, “But there’s one good thing about it.”

“Oh? What’s that?”

Duke’s white teeth flashed in the drizzly dark. “You’re about to attend your first smoking-allowed meeting in five years or so,” he said.

“Come on—let’s go in.”

3

The foyer and the bookstore beyond it were dark; the light—along with a murmur of voices—was filtering up the steep staircase to their left.

“Well,” Duke said, “this is the place. To quote the Dead, what a long strange trip it’s been, right?”

“You better believe it,” Pearson agreed. “Is Kate a Ten O’Clock Person?”

“The owner? Nope. I only met her twice, but I have an idea she’s a total non-smoker. This place was Robbie’s idea. As far as Kate knows, we’re The Boston Society of Hardboiled Yeggs.”

Pearson raised his eyebrows. “Say again?”

“A small group of loyal fans that meets every week or so to discuss the works of Raymond Chandler, Dashiell Hammett, Ross Macdonald, people like that. If you haven’t read any of those guys, you probably ought to. It never hurts to be safe. It’s not that hard; some of them are actually pretty good.”

They descended with Duke in the lead—the staircase was too narrow for them to walk abreast—and passed through an open doorway into a well-lit, low-ceilinged basement room that probably ran the length of the converted frame house above. About thirty folding chairs had been set up, and an easel covered with a blue cloth had been placed before them. Beyond the easel were stacked shipping cartons from various publishers. Pearson was amused to see a framed picture on the left-hand wall, with a sign reading **DASHIELL HAMMETT: ALL HAIL OUR FEARLESS LEADER** beneath it.

“Duke?” a woman asked from Pearson’s left. “Thank God—I thought something had happened to you.”

She was someone else Pearson recognized: the serious-looking young woman with the thick glasses and long, straight black hair. Tonight she looked a lot less serious in a pair of tight faded jeans and a Georgetown University tee-shirt beneath which she was clearly braless. And Pearson had an idea that if Duke's wife ever saw the way this young woman was looking at her husband, she would probably drag Duke out of the basement of Kate's by the ear, and never mind all the batpeople in the world.

"I'm fine, darlin," he said. "I was bringing along another convert to the Church of the Fucked-Up Bat, that's all. Janet Brightwood, Brandon Pearson."

Brandon shook her hand, thinking: You're the one who kept sneezing.

"It's very nice to meet you, Brandon," she said, and then went back to smiling at Duke, who looked a little embarrassed at the intensity of her gaze. "Want to go for coffee after?" she asked him.

"Well... we'll see, darlin. Okay?"

"Okay," she said, and her smile said she'd wait three years to go out for coffee with Duke, if that was the way Duke wanted it.

What am I doing here? Pearson suddenly asked himself. This is totally insane ... like an A.A. meeting in a psycho ward.

The members of the Church of the Fucked-Up Bat were taking ashtrays from a stack on one of the book cartons and lighting up with obvious relish as they took their seats. Pearson estimated that there were going to be few if any folding chairs left over when everyone had gotten settled.

"Got just about everyone," Duke said, leading him to a pair of seats at the end of the back row, far from where Janet Brightwood was presiding over the coffeemaker. Pearson had no idea if this was coincidental or not. "That's good ... mind the window-pole, Brandon."

The pole, with a hook on the end to open the high cellar windows, was leaning against one whitewashed brick wall. Pearson had inadvertently kicked it as he sat down. Duke grabbed it before it could fall and possibly gash someone, moved it to a marginally safer location, then slipped up the side aisle and snagged an ashtray.

“You are a mind-reader,” Pearson said gratefully, and lit up. It felt incredibly strange (but rather wonderful) to be doing this as a member of such a large group.

Duke lit his own cigarette, then pointed it at the skinny, freckle-splattered man now standing by the easel. Freckles was deep in conversation with Lester Olson, who had shot the batman, pop-pop-pop, in a Newburyport barn.

“The redhead is Robbie Delray,” Duke said, almost reverently. “You’d hardly pick him as The Savior of His Race if you were casting a miniseries, would you? But he might turn out to be just that.”

Delray nodded at Olson, clapped him on the back, and said something that made the white-haired man laugh. Then Olson returned to his seat—front row center—and Delray moved toward the covered easel.

By this time all the seats had been taken, and there were even a few people standing at the back of the room near the coffeemaker. Conversation, animated and jittery, zinged and caromed around Pearson’s head like pool-balls after a hard break. A mat of blue-gray cigarette smoke had already gathered just below the ceiling.

Jesus, they’re cranked, he thought. Really cranked. I bet the bomb-shelters in London felt this way back in 1940, during the Blitz.

He turned to Duke. “Who’d you talk to? Who told you something big was up tonight?”

“Janet,” Duke said without looking at him. His expressive brown eyes were fixed on Robbie Delray, who had once saved his sanity on a

Red Line train. Pearson thought he saw adoration as well as admiration in Duke's eyes.

"Duke? This is a really big meeting, isn't it?"

"For us, yeah. Biggest I've ever seen."

"Does it make you nervous? Having so many of your people in the same place?"

"No," Duke said simply. "Robbie can smell bats. He ... shhhh, here we go."

Robbie Delray, smiling, raised his hands, and the babble quieted almost at once. Pearson saw Duke's look of adoration on many other faces. Nowhere did he see less than respect.

"Thanks for coming," Delray said quietly. "I think we've finally got what some of us have been waiting four or five years for."

This sparked spontaneous applause. Delray let it go on for a few moments, looking around the room, beaming. Finally he held his hands up for quiet. Pearson discovered a disconcerting thing as the applause (in which he had not participated) tapered off: he didn't like Duke's friend and mentor. He supposed he might be experiencing a touch of jealousy—now that Delray was doing his thing at the front of the room, Duke Rhinemann had clearly forgotten Pearson existed—but he didn't think that was all of it. There was something smug and self-congratulatory in that hands-up, be-quiet gesture; something that expressed a slick politician's almost unconscious contempt for his audience.

Oh, get off it, Pearson told himself. You can't know anything like that.

True, quite true, and Pearson tried to sweep the intuition out of his mind, to give Delray a chance, if only for Duke's sake.

“Before we begin,” Delray went on, “I’d like to introduce you to a brand-new member of the group: Brandon Pearson, from deepest, darkest Medford. Stand up for a second or two, Brandon, and let your new friends see what you look like.”

Pearson gave Duke a startled look. Duke grinned, shrugged, then pushed Pearson’s shoulder with the heel of his hand. “Go on, they won’t bite.”

Pearson was not so sure of that. Nevertheless he got up, face hot, all too aware of the people craning around to check him out. He was most particularly aware of the smile on Lester Olson’s face—like his hair, it was somehow too dazzling not to be suspect.

His fellow Ten O’Clock People began to applaud again, only this time it was him they were applauding: Brandon Pearson, middle-echelon banker and stubborn smoker. He found himself wondering again if he hadn’t somehow found his way into an A.A. meeting that was strictly for (not to mention run by) psychos. When he dropped back into his seat, his cheeks were bright red.

“I could have done without that very well, thanks,” he muttered to Duke.

“Relax,” Duke said, still grinning. “It’s the same for everybody. And you gotta love it, man, don’t you? I mean, shit, it’s so nineties. “

“It’s nineties, all right, but I don’t gotta love it,” Pearson said. His heart was pounding too hard and the flush in his cheeks wasn’t going away. It felt, in fact, as if it was deepening. What is this? he wondered. A hot-flash? Male menopause? What?

Robbie Delray bent over, spoke briefly to the bespectacled brunette woman sitting next to Olson, glanced at his watch, then stepped back to the covered easel and faced the group again. His freckled, open face made him look like a Sunday choirboy apt to get up to all sorts of harmless dickens—frogs down the backs of girls’ blouses,

short-sheeting baby brother's bed, that sort of thing—during the other six days of the week.

“Thanks, folks, and welcome to our place, Brandon,” he said.

Pearson muttered that he was glad to be here, but it wasn't true—what if his fellow Ten O'Clock People turned out to be a bunch of raving New Age assholes? Suppose he ended up feeling about them as he did about most of the guests he saw on Oprah, or the well-dressed religious nuts who used to pop up on The P.T.L Club at the drop of a hymn? What then?

Oh, quit it, he told himself. You like Duke, don't you?

Yes, he did like Duke, and he thought he was probably going to like Moira Richardson, too ... once he got past the sexy outer layer and was able to appreciate the person inside, that was. There would undoubtedly be others he'd end up liking as well; he wasn't that hard to please. And he had forgotten, at least temporarily, the underlying reason they were all here in this basement: the batpeople. Given the threat, he could put up with a few nerds and New Agers, couldn't he?

He supposed he could.

Good! Great! Now just sit back, relax, and watch the parade.

He sat back, but found he couldn't relax, at least not completely. Part of it was being the new boy. Part of it was his strong dislike for this sort of forced social interaction—as a rule, he viewed people who used his first name on short notice and without invitation as hijackers of a sort. And part of it...

Oh, stop! Don't you get it yet? You have no choice in the matter!

An unpleasant thought, but one it was hard to dispute. He had crossed a line that morning when he had casually turned his head and seen what was really living inside Douglas Keefer's clothes these days. He supposed he had known at least that much, but it

wasn't until tonight that he had realized how final that line was, how small was the chance of his ever being able to cross back to the other side of it again. To the safe side.

No, he couldn't relax. At least not yet.

*

"Before we get down to business, I want to thank you all for coming on such short notice," Robbie Delray said. "I know it's not always easy to break away without raising eyebrows, and sometimes it's downright dangerous. I don't think it'd be exaggerating to say that we've been through a lot of hell together... a lot of high water, too ..."

A polite, murmured chuckle from the audience. Most of them seemed to be hanging on Delray's every word.

"... and no one knows any better than I do how difficult it is to be one of the few people who actually know the truth. Since I saw my first bat, five years ago ..."

Pearson was already fidgeting, experiencing the one sensation he would not have expected tonight: boredom. For the day's strange passage to have ended as it was ending, with a bunch of people sitting in a bookstore basement and listening to a freckled housepainter give what sounded like a bad Rotary Club speech ...

Yet the others seemed utterly enrapt; Pearson glanced around again to confirm this to himself. Duke's eyes shone with that look of total fascination—a look similar to the look Pearson's childhood dog, Buddy, had worn when Pearson got its food-dish out of the cupboard under the sink. Cameron Stevens and Moira Richardson sat with their arms around each other and gazed at Robbie Delray with starry absorption. Ditto Janet Brightwood. Ditto the rest of the little group around the Bunn-O-Matic.

Ditto everyone, he thought, except Brand Pearson. Come on, sweetheart, try to get with the program.

Except he couldn't, and in a weird way it was almost as if Robbie Delray couldn't, either. Pearson looked back from his scan of the audience just in time to see Delray snatch another quick glance at his watch. It was a gesture Pearson had grown very familiar with since he'd joined the Ten O'clock People. He guessed that the man was counting down the time to his next cigarette.

As Delray rambled on, some of his other listeners also began to fall out a little—Pearson heard muffled coughs and a few shuffling feet. Delray sailed on regardless, seemingly unaware that, loved resistance leader or no, he was now in danger of overstaying his welcome.

“... so we've managed the best we can,” he was saying, “and we've taken our losses as best we can, too, hiding our tears the way I guess those who fight in the secret wars have always had to, all the time holding onto our belief that a day will come when the secret is out, and we'll—”

—Boink, another quick peek at the old Casio—

“—be able to share our knowledge with all the men and women out there who look but do not see.”

Savior of His Race? Pearson thought. Jesus please us. This guy sounds more like Jesse Helms during a filibuster.

He glanced at Duke and was encouraged to see that, while Duke was still listening, he was shifting in his seat and showing signs of coming out of his trance.

Pearson touched his face again and found it was still hot. He lowered the tips of his fingers to his carotid artery and felt his pulse—still racing. It wasn't the embarrassment at having to stand up and be looked over like a Miss America finalist now; the others had forgotten his existence, at least temporarily. No, it was something else. Not a good something else, either.

“... we’ve stuck with it and stuck to it, we’ve done the footwork even when the music wasn’t to our taste ...” Delray was droning.

It’s what you felt before, Brand Pearson told himself. It’s the fear that you’ve stumbled into a group of people sharing the same lethal hallucination.

“No, it’s not,” he muttered. Duke turned toward him, eyebrows raised, and Pearson shook his head. Duke turned his attention back to the front of the room.

He was scared, all right, but not of having fallen in with some weird thrill-kill cult. Maybe the people in this room—some of them, at least—had killed, maybe that interlude in the Newburyport barn had happened, but the energy necessary for such desperate endeavors was not evident here tonight, in this roomful of yuppies being watched over by Dashiell Hammett. All he felt here was sleepy half-headedness, the sort of partial attention that enabled people to get through dull speeches like this without falling asleep or walking out.

“Robbie, get to the point!” some kindred spirit shouted from the back of the room, and there was nervous laughter.

Robbie Delray shot an irritated glance in the direction the voice had come from, then smiled and checked his watch again. “Yeah, okay,” he said. “I got rambling, I admit it. Lester, will you help me a sec?”

Lester got up. The two men went behind a stack of book cartons and came back carrying a large leather trunk by the straps. They set it down to the right of the easel.

“Thanks, Les,” Robbie said.

Lester nodded and sat back down.

“What’s in the case?” Pearson murmured into Duke’s ear.

Duke shook his head. He looked puzzled and suddenly a little uncomfortable ... but maybe not as uncomfortable as Pearson felt.

“Okay, Mac’s got a point,” Delray said. “I guess I got carried away, but it feels like a historic occasion to me. On with the show.”

He paused for effect, then whipped aside the blue cloth on the easel. His audience sat forward on their folding chairs, prepared to be amazed, then sat back with a small collective whoosh of disappointment. It was a black-and-white photograph of what looked to be an abandoned warehouse. It had been enlarged enough so that the eye could easily sort through the litter of papers, condoms, and empty wine-bottles in the loading bays, and read the tangle of spray-painted wit and wisdom on the wall. The biggest of these said RIOT GRRRLS RULE.

A whispered babble of murmurs went through the room.

“Five weeks ago,” Delray said impressively, “Lester, Kendra, and I trailed two batmen to this abandoned warehouse in the Clark Bay section of Revere.”

The dark-haired woman in the round rimless glasses sitting next to Lester Olson looked around self-importantly ... and then Pearson was damned if she didn’t glance down at her watch.

“They were met at this point”—Delray tapped one of the trash-littered loading bays—“by three more batmen and two batwomen. They went inside. Since then, six or seven of us have set up a rotating watch on this place. We have established—”

Pearson glanced around at Duke’s hurt, incredulous face. He might as well have had WHY WASN’T I PICKED? tattooed on his forehead.

“—that this is some sort of meeting ground for the bats in the Boston metro area—”

The Boston Bats, Pearson thought, great name for a baseball team. And then it came back again, the doubt: Is this me, sitting here and listening to this craziness? Is it really?

In the wake of this thought, as if the memory had somehow been triggered by his momentary doubt, he again heard Delray telling the assembled Fearless Bat Hunters that their newest recruit was Brandon Pearson, from deepest, darkest Medford.

He turned back to Duke and spoke quietly into his ear.

“When you spoke to Janet on the phone—back in Gallagher’s—you told her you were bringing me, right?”

Duke gave him an impatient I’m-trying-to-listen look in which there was still a trace of hurt. “Sure,” he said.

“Did you tell her I was from Medford?”

“No,” Duke said. “How would I know where you’re from? Let me listen, Brand!” And he turned back.

“We have logged over thirty-five vehicles—luxury cars and limos, for the most part—visiting this abandoned warehouse in the middle of nowhere,” Delray said. He paused to let this sink in, snatched another quick peek at his watch, and hurried on. “Many of these have visited the site ten or a dozen times. The bats have undoubtedly congratulated themselves on having picked such an out-of-the-way spot for their meeting-hall or social club or whatever it is, but I think they’re going to find they’ve painted themselves into a corner instead. Because... pardon me just a sec, guys ...”

He turned and began a quiet conversation with Lester Olson. The woman named Kendra joined them, her head going back and forth like someone watching a Ping-Pong match. The seated audience watched the whispered conference with expressions of bewilderment and perplexity.

Pearson knew how they felt. Something big, Duke had promised, and from the feel of the place when they'd come in, everyone else had been promised the same. "Something big" had turned out to be a single black-and-white photo showing nothing but an abandoned warehouse wallowing in a sea of trash, discarded underwear, and used rubbers. What the fuck is wrong with this picture?

The big deal's got to be in the trunk, Pearson thought. And by the way, Freckles, how did you know I came from Medford? That's one I'm saving for the Q-and-A after the speech, believe me.

That feeling—flushed face, pounding heart, above all else the desire for another cigarette—was stronger than ever. Like the anxiety attacks he'd sometimes had back in college. What was it? If it wasn't fear, what was it?

Oh, it's fear, all right—it's just not fear of being the only sane man in the snake-pit. You know the bats are real; you're not crazy and neither is Duke and neither is Moira or Cam Stevens or Janet Brightwood. But something is wrong with this picture just the same ... really wrong. And I think it's him. Robbie Delray, housepainter and Savior of His Race. He knew where I was from. Brightwood called him and told him Duke was bringing someone from the First Merc, Brandon Pearson's his name, and Robbie checked on me. Why would he do that? And how did he do it?

In his mind he suddenly heard Duke Rhinemann saying, They're smart ... they've got friends in high places. Hell, high places is what they're all about.

If you had friends in high places, you could check on a fellow in a hurry, couldn't you? Yes. People in high places had access to all the right computer passwords, all the right records, all the numbers that made up all the right vital statistics ...

Pearson jerked in his seat like a man waking from a terrible dream. He kicked his foot out involuntarily and it struck the base of the

window-pole. It started to slide. Meanwhile, the whispering at the front of the room broke up with nods all around.

“Les?” Delray asked. “Would you and Kendra give me another little helping hand?”

Pearson reached to grab the window-pole before it could fall and brain someone—maybe even slice someone’s scalp open with the wicked little hook on top. He caught it, started to place it back against the wall, and saw the goblin-face peering in the basement window. The black eyes, like the eyes of a Raggedy Ann doll abandoned under a bed, stared into Pearson’s wide blue ones. Strips of flesh rotated like bands of atmosphere around one of the planets astronomers called gas giants. The black snakes of vein under the lumpy, naked skull pulsed. The teeth glimmered in its gaping mouth.

“Just help me with the snaps on this darned thing,” Delray was saying from the other end of the galaxy. He gave a friendly little chuckle. “They’re a little sticky, I guess.”

For Brandon Pearson, it was as if time had doubled back on itself to that morning: once again he tried to scream and once again shock robbed his voice and he was able to produce only a low, choked whuffling—the sound of a man moaning in his sleep.

The rambling speech.

The meaningless photograph.

The constant little peeks at the wristwatch.

Does it make you nervous? Having so many of your people in the same place? he had asked, and Duke had replied, smiling: No. Robbie can smell bats.

This time there was no one to stop him, and this time Pearson’s second effort was a total success.

“IT’S A SET-UP!” he screamed, leaping to his feet. “IT’S A SET-UP, WE HAVE TO GET OUT OF HERE!”

Startled faces craned around to look at him ... but there were three that didn’t have to crane. These belonged to Delray, Olson, and the dark-haired woman named Kendra. They had just solved the latches and opened the trunk. Their faces were full of shock and guilt ... but no surprise. That particular emotion was absent.

“Siddown, man!” Duke hissed. “Have you gone cra—”

Upstairs, the door crashed open. Bootheels clumped across the floor toward the stairwell.

“What’s happening?” Janet Brightwood asked. She spoke directly to Duke. Her eyes were wide and frightened. “What’s he talking about?”

“GET OUT!” Pearson roared. “GET THE FUCK OUT OF HERE! HE TOLD IT TO YOU BACKWARD! WE’RE THE ONES IN THE TRAP!”

The door at the head of the narrow staircase leading to the basement crashed open, and from the shadows up there came the most appalling sounds Pearson had ever heard—it was like listening to a pack of pit-bulls baying over a live baby thrown into their midst.

“Who’s that?” Janet screamed. “Who’s that up there?” Yet there was no question on her face; her face knew perfectly well who was up there. What was up there.

“Calm down!” Robbie Delray shouted to the confused group of people, most of whom were still sitting on their folding chairs. “They’ve promised amnesty! Do you hear me? Do you understand what I’m saying? They’ve given me their solemn—”

At that moment the cellar window to the left of the one through which Pearson had seen the first batface shattered inward, spraying glass across the stunned men and women in the first row along the wall. An Armani-clad arm snaked through the jagged opening and seized

Moira Richardson by the hair. She screamed and beat at the hand holding her... which was not really a hand at all, but a bundle of talons tipped with long, chitinous nails.

Without thinking, Pearson seized the window-pole, darted forward, and launched the hook at the pulsing batlike face peering in through the broken window. The hook drove into one of the thing's eyes. A thick, faintly astringent ink pattered down on Pearson's upthrust hands. The batman uttered a baying, savage sound—it didn't sound like a scream of pain to Pearson, but he supposed he was allowed to hope—and then it fell backward, pulling the window-pole out of Pearson's hands and into the drizzly night. Before the creature disappeared from view entirely, Pearson saw white mist begin to drift off its tumorous skin, and smelled a whiff of

(dust urine hot chili-peppers)

something unpleasant.

Cam Stevens pulled Moira into his arms and looked at Pearson with shocked, disbelieving eyes. All around them were men and women wearing that same blank look, men and women frozen like a herd of deer in the headlights of an oncoming truck.

They don't look much like resistance fighters to me, Pearson thought. They look like sheep caught in a shearing-pen... and the bastard of a judas goat who led them in is standing up there at the front of the room with his co-conspirators.

The savage baying upstairs was getting closer, but not as fast as Pearson might have expected. Then he remembered how narrow the staircase was—too narrow for two men to walk abreast—and said a little prayer of thanks as he shoved forward. He grabbed Duke by the tie and hauled him to his feet. "Come on," he said. "We're blowing this joint. Is there a back door?"

"I... don't know." Duke was rubbing one temple slowly and forcefully, like a man who has a bad headache. "Robbie did this? Robbie?"

Can't be, man ... can it?" He looked at Pearson with pitiful, stunned intensity.

"I'm afraid so, Duke. Come on."

He got two steps toward the aisle, still holding onto Duke's tie, then stopped. Delray, Olson, and Kendra had been rooting in the trunk, and now they flashed pistol-sized automatic weapons equipped with ridiculous-looking long wire stocks. Pearson had never seen an Uzi outside of the movies and TV, but he supposed that was what these were. Uzis or close relatives, and what the fuck did it matter, anyway? They were guns.

"Hold it," Delray said. He appeared to be speaking to Duke and Pearson. He was trying to smile and producing something that looked like the grimace of a death row prisoner who has just been notified it's still on. "Stay right where you are."

Duke kept moving. He was in the aisle now, and Pearson was right beside him. Others were getting up, following their lead, pressing forward but looking nervously back over their shoulders at the doorway giving on the stairs. Their eyes said they didn't like the guns, but they liked the snarling, baying sounds drifting down from the first floor even less.

"Why, man?" Duke asked, and Pearson saw he was on the verge of tears. He held out his hands, palms up. "Why would you sell us out?"

"Stop, Duke, I'm warning you," Lester Olson said in a Scotch-mellowed voice.

"The rest of you stay back, too!" Kendra snapped. She did not sound mellow at all. Her eyes rolled back and forth in their sockets, trying to cover the whole room at once.

"We never had a chance," Delray told Duke. He sounded as if he were pleading. "They were onto us, they could have taken us anytime, but they offered me a deal. Do you understand? I didn't sell

out; I never sold out. They came to me.” He spoke vehemently, as if this distinction actually meant something to him, but the shuttling blinks of his eyes signalled a different message. It was as if there were some other Robbie Delray inside, a better Robbie Delray, one who was trying frantically to dissociate himself from this shameful act of betrayal.

“YOU’RE A FUCKING LIAR!” Duke Rhinemann shrieked in a voice breaking with hurt betrayal and furious understanding. He leaped at the man who had saved his sanity and perhaps his life on a Red Line train ... and then everything swooped down at once.

*

Pearson could not have seen it all, yet it seemed that somehow he did. He saw Robbie Delray hesitate, then turn his weapon sideways, as if he intended to club Duke with the barrel instead of shooting him. He saw Lester Olson, who had shot the batman in the Newburyport barn pop-pop-pop before losing his guts and deciding to try and cut a deal, lodge the wire stock of his own gun against the buckle of his belt and pull the trigger. He saw momentary blue licks of fire appear in the ventilation holes in the barrel, and heard a hoarse hack!hack!hack!hack! that Pearson supposed was the way automatic weapons sounded in the real world. He heard something invisible slice the air an inch in front of his face; it was like hearing a ghost gasp. And he saw Duke flung backward with blood spraying up from his white shirt and splattering on his cream-colored suit. He saw the man who had been standing directly behind Duke stumble to his knees, hands clapped over his eyes, bright blood oozing out from between the knuckles.

Someone—maybe Janet Brightwood—had shut the door between the staircase and this downstairs room before the meeting started; now it banged open and two batmen wearing the uniforms of the Boston Police squeezed in. Their small, pushed-together faces stared savagely out of their oversized, strangely restless heads.

“Amnesty!” Robbie Delray was screaming. The freckles on his face now stood out like brands; the skin upon which they had been printed was ashy-white. “Amnesty! I’ve been promised amnesty if you’ll just stand where you are and put up your hands!”

Several people—those who had been clustered around the coffeemaker, for the most part—did raise their hands, although they continued to back away from the uniformed batmen as they did it. One of the bats reached forward with a low grunt, seized a man by the front of his shirt, and yanked him toward it. Almost before Pearson realized it had happened, the thing had torn out the man’s eyes. The thing looked at the jellied remains resting on its strange, misshapen palm for a moment, then popped them into its mouth.

As two more bats lunged in through the door, looking around with their blackly gleaming little eyes, the other police-bat drew its service revolver and fired three times, seemingly at random, into the crowd.

“No!” Pearson heard Delray scream. “No, you promised!”

Janet Brightwood grabbed the Bunn, lifted it over her head, and threw it at one of the newcomers. It struck with a muted metallic bonging and spewed hot coffee all over the thing. This time there was no mistaking the pain in that shriek. One of the police-bats reached for her. Brightwood ducked, tried to run, was tripped... and suddenly she was gone, lost in a stampede toward the front of the room.

Now all the windows were breaking, and somewhere close by Pearson could hear approaching sirens. He saw the bats breaking into two groups and running down the sides of the room, clearly bent on driving the panic-stricken Ten O’Clock People into the storage area behind the easel, which had now been knocked over.

Olson threw down his weapon, grabbed Kendra’s hand, and bolted in that direction. A bat-arm snaked down through one of the cellar windows, grabbed a handful of his theatrical white hair, and hauled him upward, choking and gargling. Another hand appeared through

the window, and a thumbnail three inches long opened his throat and let out a scarlet flood.

Your days of popping off batmen in barns on the coast are all over, my friend, Pearson thought sickly. He turned toward the front of the room again. Delray stood between the open trunk and the fallen easel, his gun now dangling from one hand, his eyes shocked nearly to vacancy. When Pearson pulled the wire stock from his fingers, the man made no attempt to resist.

“They promised us amnesty,” he told Pearson. “They promised.”

“Did you really think you could trust things that looked like that?” Pearson asked, and then drove the wire stock into the center of Delray’s face with all the force he could muster. He heard something break—probably Delray’s nose—and the thoughtless barbarian which had awakened within his banker’s soul cheered with rude savagery.

He started toward a passage zig-zagging between the stacked cartons—one that had been widened by the people who had already bolted their way through—then paused as gunfire erupted behind the building. Gunfire ... screams ... roars of triumph.

Pearson whirled and saw Cam Stevens and Moira Richardson standing at the head of the aisle between the folding chairs. They wore identical shocked expressions and were holding hands. Pearson had time to think, That’s how Hansel and Gretel must have looked after they finally got out of the candy-house. Then he bent down, picked up Kendra’s and Olson’s weapons, and handed one to each.

Two more bats had come in through the rear door. They moved casually, as if all were going according to plan ... which, Pearson supposed, it was. The action had moved to the rear of the house now—that was where the pen really was, not in here, and the bats were doing a lot more than just shearing.

“Come on,” he said to Cam and Moira. “Let’s get these fucks.”

The batmen at the rear of the room were late in realizing that a few of the refugees had decided to turn and fight. One of them spun around, possibly to run, struck a new arrival, and slipped in the spilled coffee. They both went down. Pearson opened fire on the one remaining on its feet. The machine-pistol made its somehow unsatisfying hack!hack!hack! sound and the bat was driven backward, its alien face breaking open and letting out a cloud of stinking fog ... it was as if, Pearson thought, they really were just illusions.

Cam and Moira got the idea and opened fire on the remaining bats, catching them in a withering field of fire that knocked them back against the wall and then sent them to the floor, already oozing out of their clothes in an insubstantial mist that to Pearson smelled quite a lot like the asters in the marble flower-islands outside The First Mercantile.

“Come on,” Pearson said. “If we go now, we might have a chance.”

“But—” Cameron began. He looked around, starting to come out of his daze. That was good; Pearson had an idea they’d all have to be wide-awake if they were going to have a chance of getting out of this.

“Never mind, Cam,” Moira said. She had also looked around, and noted the fact that they were the only ones, human or bat, left in here. Everyone else had gone out the back. “Let’s just go. I think maybe the door we came in through would be our best bet.”

“Yes,” Pearson said, “but not for long.”

He spared one last look at Duke, who lay on the floor with his face frozen in an expression of pained disbelief. He wished there were time to close Duke’s eyes, but there wasn’t.

“Let’s go,” he said, and they went.

By the time they reached the door which gave on the porch—and Cambridge Avenue beyond it—the gunfire coming from the rear of the house had begun to taper off. How many dead? Pearson wondered, and the answer which first occurred—all of them—was horrible but too plausible to deny. He supposed one or two others might have slipped through, but surely no more. It had been a good trap, set quietly and neatly around them while Robbie Delray ran his gums, stalling for time and checking his watch ... probably waiting to give some signal which Pearson had preempted.

If I'd woken up a little earlier, Duke might still be alive, he thought bitterly. Perhaps true, but if wishes were horses, beggars would ride. This wasn't the time for recriminations.

One police-bat had been left to stand sentry on the porch, but it was turned in the direction of the street, possibly watching for unwanted interference. Pearson leaned through the open door toward it and said, "Hey, you ugly ringmeat asshole—got a cigarette?"

The bat turned.

Pearson blew its face off.

4

Shortly after one the next morning, three people—two men and a woman, wearing torn nylons and a dirty red skirt—ran beside a freight-train pulling out of the South Station shipping yards. The younger of the two men leaped easily into the square mouth of an empty boxcar, turned, and held out his hands to the woman.

She stumbled and cried out as one of her low heels broke. Pearson put an arm around her waist (he got a heartbreakingly faint whiff of Giorgio below the much fresher smell of her sweat and her fear), ran with her that way, then yelled for her to jump. As she did, he grabbed her hips and boosted her toward Cameron Stevens's reaching hands. She caught them and Pearson gave her a final rough shove to help Stevens haul her aboard.

Pearson had fallen behind in his effort to help her, and now he could see the fence which marked the edge of the trainyards not far ahead. The freight was gliding through a hole in the chainlink, but there would be no room for both it and Pearson; if he didn't get aboard, and quickly, he would be left behind in the yard.

Cam glanced around the open boxcar door, saw the approaching fence, and held his hands out again. "Come on!" he shouted. "You can do it!"

Pearson couldn't have—not back in the old two-pack-a-day life, anyway. Now, however, he was able to find a little extra, both in his legs and in his lungs. He sprinted along the treacherous bed of trash-littered cinders beside the tracks, temporarily outrunning the lumbering train again, holding his hands out and up, stretching his fingers to touch the hands above him as the fence loomed. Now he could see the cruel interlacings of barbed wire weaving in and out of the chainlink diamonds.

The eye of his mind opened wide in that moment and he saw his wife sitting in her chair in the living room, her face puffy with crying

and her eyes red. He saw her telling two uniformed policemen that her husband had gone missing. He even saw the stack of Jenny's Pop-Up books on the little table beside her. Was that really going on? Yes; in one form or another, he supposed it was. And Lisabeth, who had never smoked a single cigarette in her whole life, would not be aware of the black eyes and fanged mouths beneath the young faces of the policemen sitting across from her on the couch; she would not see the oozing tumors or the black, pulsing lines which crisscrossed their naked skulls.

Would not know. Would not see.

God bless her blindness, Pearson thought. Let it last forever.

He stumbled toward the dark behemoth that was a westbound Conrail freight, toward the orange fluff of sparks which spiraled up from beneath one slowly turning steel wheel.

"Run!" Moira shrieked, and leaned out of the boxcar door farther, her hands imploring. "Please, Brandon—just a little more!"

"Hurry up, you gluefoot!" Cam screamed. "Watch out for the fucking fence!"

Can't, Pearson thought. Can't hurry up, can't watch out for the fence, can't do any more. Just want to lie down. Just want to sleep.

Then he thought of Duke and managed to put on a little more speed after all. Duke hadn't been old enough to know that sometimes people lose their guts and sell out, that sometimes even the ones you idolize do that, but he had been old enough to grab Brand Pearson's arm and keep him from killing himself with a scream. Duke wouldn't have wanted him to be left behind in this stupid trainyard.

He managed one last sprint toward their outstretched hands, watching the fence now seeming to leap toward him out of the corner of his eye, and seized Cam's fingers. He jumped, felt Moira's hand

clamp firmly under his armpit, and then he was squirming aboard, pulling his right foot into the boxcar a split second before the fence would have torn it off, loafer and all.

“All aboard for Boy’s Adventure,” he gasped, “illustrations by N. C. Wyeth!”

“What?” Moira asked. “What did you say?”

He turned over and looked up at them through a matted tangle of hair, resting on his elbows and panting. “Never mind. Who’s got a cigarette? I’m dying for one.”

They gawped at him silently for several seconds, looked at each other, then burst into wild shouts of laughter at exactly the same moment. Pearson guessed that meant they were in love.

As they rolled over and over on the floor of the boxcar, clutching each other and howling, Pearson sat up and slowly began to investigate the inside pockets of his filthy, torn suitcoat.

“Ahhh,” he said as his hand entered the second one and felt the familiar shape. He hauled out the battered pack and displayed it. “Here’s to victory!”

*

The boxcar trundled west across Massachusetts with three small red embers glowing in the dark of the open doorway. A week later they were in Omaha, spending the midmorning hours of each day idling along the downtown streets, watching the people who take their coffee-breaks outside even in the pouring rain, looking for Ten O’Clock People, hunting for members of the Lost Tribe, the one that wandered off following Joe Camel.

By November there were twenty of them having meetings in the back room of an abandoned hardware store in La Vista.

They mounted their first raid early the following year, across the river in Council Bluffs, and killed thirty very surprised mid-western bat-bankers and bat-executives. It wasn't much, but Brand Pearson had learned that killing bats had at least one thing in common with cutting down on your cigarette intake: you had to start somewhere.

**THAT FEELING, YOU CAN ONLY SAY WHAT IT IS
IN FRENCH**

Stephen King

Floyd, what's that over there? Oh shit.

The man's voice speaking these words was vaguely familiar, but the words themselves were just a disconnected snip of dialogue, the kind of thing you heard when you were channel-surfing with the remote. There was no one named Floyd in her life. Still, that was the start. Even before she saw the little girl in the red pinafore, there were those disconnected words.

But it was the little girl who brought it on strong. "Oh-oh, I'm getting that feeling," Carol said.

The girl in the pinafore was in front of a country market called Carson's—BEER, WINE, GROC, FRESH BAIT, LOTTERY—crouched down with her butt between her ankles and the bright-red apron-dress tucked between her thighs, playing with a doll. The doll was yellow-haired and dirty, the kind that's round and stuffed and boneless in the body.

"What feeling?" Bill asked.

"You know. The one you can only say what it is in French. Help me here."

"Deja vu," he said.

"That's it," she said, and turned to look at the little girl one more time. She'll have the doll by one leg, Carol thought. Holding it upside down by one leg with its grimy yellow hair hanging down.

But the little girl had abandoned the doll on the store's splintery gray steps and had gone over to look at a dog caged up in the back of a station wagon. Then Bill and Carol Shelton went around a curve in the road and the store was out of sight.

"How much farther?" Carol asked.

Bill looked at her with one eyebrow raised and his mouth dimpled at one corner—left eyebrow, right dimple, always the same. The look that said, You think I'm amused, but I'm really irritated. For the ninety trillionth or so time in the marriage, I'm really irritated. You don't know that, though, because you can only see about two inches into me and then your vision fails.

But she had better vision than he realized; it was one of the secrets of the marriage. Probably he had a few secrets of his own. And there were, of course, the ones they kept together.

"I don't know," he said. "I've never been here."

"But you're sure we're on the right road."

"Once you get over the causeway and onto Sanibel Island, there's only one," he said. "It goes across to Captiva, and there it ends. But before it does we'll come to Palm House. That I promise you."

The arch in his eyebrow began to flatten. The dimple began to fill in. He was returning to what she thought of as the Great Level. She had come to dislike the Great Level, too, but not as much as the eyebrow and the dimple, or his sarcastic way of saying "Excuse me?" when you said something he considered stupid, or his habit of pooching out his lower lip when he wanted to appear thoughtful and deliberative.

"Bill?"

"Mmm?"

"Do you know anyone named Floyd?"

"There was Floyd Denning. He and I ran the downstairs snack bar at Christ the Redeemer in our senior year. I told you about him, didn't I? He stole the Coke money one Friday and spent the weekend in New York with his girlfriend. They suspended him and expelled her. What made you think of him?"

“I don’t know,” she said. Easier than telling him that the Floyd with whom Bill had gone to high school wasn’t the Floyd the voice in her head was speaking to. At least, she didn’t think it was.

Second honeymoon, that’s what you call this, she thought, looking at the palms that lined Highway 867, a white bird that stalked along the shoulder like an angry preacher, and a sign that read SEMINOLE WILDLIFE PARK, BRING A CARFUL FOR \$10. Florida the Sunshine State. Florida the Hospitality State. Not to mention Florida the Second-Honeymoon State. Florida, where Bill Shelton and Carol Shelton, the former Carol O’Neill, of Lynn, Massachusetts, came on their first honeymoon twenty-five years before. Only that was on the other side, the Atlantic side, at a little cabin colony, and there were cockroaches in the bureau drawers. He couldn’t stop touching me. That was all right, though, in those days I wanted to be touched. Hell, I wanted to be torched like Atlanta in *Gone With the Wind*, and he torched me, rebuilt me, torched me again. Now it’s silver. Twenty-five is silver. And sometimes I get that feeling.

They were approaching a curve, and she thought, Three crosses on the right side of the road. Two small ones flanking a bigger one. The small ones are clapped-together wood. The one in the middle is white birch with a picture on it, a tiny photograph of the seventeen-year-old boy who lost control of his car on this curve one drunk night that was his last drunk night, and this is where his girlfriend and her girlfriends marked the spot—

Bill drove around the curve. A pair of black crows, plump and shiny, lifted off from something pasted to the macadam in a splat of blood. The birds had eaten so well that Carol wasn’t sure they were going to get out of the way until they did. There were no crosses, not on the left, not on the right. Just roadkill in the middle, a woodchuck or something, now passing beneath a luxury car that had never been north of the Mason-Dixon Line.

Floyd, what’s that over there?

“What’s wrong?”

“Huh?” She looked at him, bewildered, feeling a little wild.

“You’re sitting bolt-upright. Got a cramp in your back?”

“Just a slight one.” She settled back by degrees. “I had that feeling again. The *deja vu*.”

“Is it gone?”

“Yes,” she said, but she was lying. It had retreated a little, but that was all. She’d had this before, but never so continuously. It came up and went down, but it didn’t go away. She’d been aware of it ever since that thing about Floyd started knocking around in her head—and then the little girl in the red pinafore.

But, really, hadn’t she felt something before either of those things? Hadn’t it actually started when they came down the steps of the Lear 35 into the hammering heat of the Fort Myers sunshine? Or even before? En route from Boston?

They were coming to an intersection. Overhead was a flashing yellow light, and she thought, To the right is a used-car lot and a sign for the Sanibel Community Theater.

Then she thought, No, it’ll be like the crosses that weren’t there. It’s a strong feeling but a false feeling.

Here was the intersection. On the right there was a used-car lot—Palmdale Motors. Carol felt a real jump at that, a stab of something sharper than disquiet. She told herself to quit being stupid. There had to be car lots all over Florida and if you predicted one at every intersection sooner or later the law of averages made you a prophet. It was a trick mediums had been using for hundreds of years.

Besides, there’s no theater sign.

But there was another sign. It was Mary the Mother of God, the ghost of all her childhood days, holding out her hands the way she

did on the medallion Carol's grandmother had given her for her tenth birthday. Her grandmother had pressed it into her hand and looped the chain around her fingers, saying, "Wear her always as you grow, because all the hard days are coming." She had worn it, all right. At Our Lady of Angels grammar and middle school she had worn it, then at St. Vincent de Paul high. She wore the medal until breasts grew around it like ordinary miracles, and then someplace, probably on the class trip to Hampton Beach, she had lost it. Coming home on the bus she had tongue-kissed for the first time. Butch Soucy had been the boy, and she had been able to taste the cotton candy he'd eaten.

Mary on that long-gone medallion and Mary on this billboard had exactly the same look, the one that made you feel guilty of thinking impure thoughts even when all you were thinking about was a peanut-butter sandwich. Beneath Mary, the sign said MOTHER OF MERCY CHARITIES HELP THE FLORIDA HOMELESS—WON'T YOU HELP US?

Hey there, Mary, what's the story—

More than one voice this time; many voices, girls' voices, chanting ghost voices. These were ordinary miracles; there were also ordinary ghosts. You found these things out as you got older.

"What's wrong with you?" She knew that voice as well as she did the eyebrow-and-dimple look. Bill's I'm-only-pretending-to-be-pissed tone of voice, the one that meant he really was pissed, at least a little.

"Nothing." She gave him the best smile she could manage.

"You really don't seem like yourself. Maybe you shouldn't have slept on the plane."

"You're probably right," she said, and not just to be agreeable, either. After all, how many women got a second honeymoon on Captiva Island for their twenty-fifth anniversary? Round trip on a chartered

Learjet? Ten days at one of those places where your money was no good (at least until MasterCard coughed up the bill at the end of the month) and if you wanted a massage a big Swedish babe would come and pummel you in your six-room beach house?

*

Things had been different at the start. Bill, whom she'd first met at a crosstown high-school dance and then met again at college three years later (another ordinary miracle), had begun their married life working as a janitor, because there were no openings in the computer industry. It was 1973, and computers were essentially going nowhere and they were living in a grotty place in Revere, not on the beach but close to it, and all night people kept going up the stairs to buy drugs from the two sallow creatures who lived in the apartment above them and listened endlessly to dopey records from the sixties. Carol used to lie awake waiting for the shouting to start, thinking, We won't ever get out of here, we'll grow old and die within earshot of Cream and Blue Cheer and the Dodgem cars down on the beach.

Bill, exhausted at the end of his shift, would sleep through the noise, lying on his side, sometimes with one hand on her hip. And when it wasn't there she often put it there, especially if the creatures upstairs were arguing with their customers. Bill was all she had. Her parents had practically disowned her when she married him. He was a Catholic, but the wrong sort of Catholic. Gram had asked why she wanted to go with that boy when anyone could tell he was shanty, how could she fall for all his foolish talk, why did she want to break her father's heart. And what could she say?

It was a long distance from that place in Revere to a private jet soaring at forty-one thousand feet; a long way to this rental car, which was a Crown Victoria—what the goodfellas in the gangster movies invariably called a Crown Vic—heading for ten days in a place where the tab would probably be ... well, she didn't even want to think about it.

Floyd? ... Oh shit.

“Carol? What is it now?”

“Nothing,” she said. Up ahead by the road was a little pink bungalow, the porch flanked by palms—seeing those trees with their fringy heads lifted against the blue sky made her think of Japanese Zeros coming in low, their underwing machine guns firing, such an association clearly the result of a youth misspent in front of the TV—and as they passed a black woman would come out. She would be drying her hands on a piece of pink towelling and would watch them expressionlessly as they passed, rich folks in a Crown Vic headed for Captiva, and she’d have no idea that Carol Shelton once lay awake in a ninety-dollar-a-month apartment, listening to the records and the drug deals upstairs, feeling something alive inside her, something that made her think of a cigarette that had fallen down behind the drapes at a party, small and unseen but smoldering away next to the fabric.

“Hon?”

“Nothing, I said.” They passed the house. There was no woman. An old man—white, not black—sat in a rocking chair, watching them pass. There were rimless glasses on his nose and a piece of ragged pink towelling, the same shade as the house, across his lap. “I’m fine now. Just anxious to get there and change into some shorts.”

His hand touched her hip—where he had so often touched her during those first days—and then crept a little farther inland. She thought about stopping him (Roman hands and Russian fingers, they used to say) and didn’t. They were, after all, on their second honeymoon. Also, it would make that expression go away.

“Maybe,” he said, “we could take a pause. You know, after the dress comes off and before the shorts go on.”

“I think that’s a lovely idea,” she said, and put her hand over his, pressed both more tightly against her. Ahead was a sign that would

read PALM HOUSE 3 MI. ON LEFT when they got close enough to see it.

The sign actually read PALM HOUSE 2 MI. ON LEFT. Beyond it was another sign, Mother Mary again, with her hands outstretched and that little electric shimmy that wasn't quite a halo around her head. This version read MOTHER OF MERCY CHARITIES HELP THE FLORIDA SICK—WON'T YOU HELP US?

Bill said, "The next one ought to say 'Burma Shave.'"

She didn't understand what he meant, but it was clearly a joke and so she smiled. The next one would say "Mother of Mercy Charities Help the Florida Hungry," but she couldn't tell him that. Dear Bill. Dear in spite of his sometimes stupid expressions and his sometimes unclear allusions. He'll most likely leave you, and you know something? If you go through with it that's probably the best luck you can expect. This according to her father. Dear Bill, who had proved that just once, just that one crucial time, her judgement had been far better than her father's. She was still married to the man her Gram had called "the big boaster." At a price, true, but what was that old axiom? God says take what you want ... and pay for it.

Her head itched. She scratched at it absently, watching for the next Mother of Mercy billboard.

Horrible as it was to say, things had started turning around when she lost the baby. That was just before Bill got a job with Beach Computers, out on Route 128; that was when the first winds of change in the industry began to blow.

Lost the baby, had a miscarriage—they all believed that except maybe Bill. Certainly her family had believed it: Dad, Mom, Gram. "Miscarriage" was the story they told, miscarriage was a Catholic's story if ever there was one. Hey, Mary, what's the story, they had sometimes sung when they skipped rope, feeling daring, feeling sinful, the skirts of their uniforms flipping up and down over their scabby knees. That was at Our Lady of Angels, where Sister

Annunciata would spank your knuckles with her ruler if she caught you gazing out the window during Sentence Time, where Sister Dormatilla would tell you that a million years was but the first tick of eternity's endless clock (and you could spend eternity in Hell, most people did, it was easy). In Hell you would live forever with your skin on fire and your bones roasting. Now she was in Florida, now she was in a Crown Vic sitting next to her husband, whose hand was still in her crotch; the dress would be wrinkled but who cared if it got that look off his face, and why wouldn't the feeling stop?

She thought of a mailbox with RAGLAN painted on the side and an American-flag decal on the front, and although the name turned out to be Reagan and the flag a Grateful Dead sticker, the box was there. She thought of a small black dog trotting briskly along the other side of the road, its head down, sniffing, and the small black dog was there. She thought again of the billboard and, yes, there it was: MOTHER OF MERCY CHARITIES HELP THE FLORIDA HUNGRY—WON'T YOU HELP US?

Bill was pointing. "There—see? I think that's Palm House. No, not where the billboard is, the other side. Why do they let people put those things up out here, anyway?"

"I don't know." Her head itched. She scratched, and black dandruff began falling past her eyes. She looked at her fingers and was horrified to see dark smutches on the tips; it was as if someone had just taken her fingerprints.

"Bill?" She raked her hand through her blond hair and this time the flakes were bigger. She saw they were not flakes of skin but flakes of paper. There was a face on one, peering out of the char like a face peering out of a botched negative.

"Bill?"

"What? Wh—" Then a total change in his voice, and that frightened her more than the way the car swerved. "Christ, honey, what's in your hair?"

The face appeared to be Mother Teresa's. Or was that just because she'd been thinking about Our Lady of Angels? Carol plucked it from her dress, meaning to show it to Bill, and it crumbled between her fingers before she could. She turned to him and saw that his glasses were melted to his cheeks. One of his eyes had popped from its socket and then split like a grape pumped full of blood.

And I knew it, she thought. Even before I turned, I knew it. Because I had that feeling.

A bird was crying in the trees. On the billboard, Mary held out her hands. Carol tried to scream. Tried to scream.

*

"Carol?"

It was Bill's voice, coming from a thousand miles away. Then his hand—not pressing the folds of her dress into her crotch, but on her shoulder.

"You okay, babe?"

She opened her eyes to brilliant sunlight and her ears to the steady hum of the Learjet's engines. And something else—pressure against her eardrums. She looked from Bill's mildly concerned face to the dial below the temperature gauge in the cabin and saw that it had wound down to twenty-eight thousand.

"Landing?" she said, sounding muzzy to herself. "Already?"

"It's fast, huh?" Sounding pleased, as if he had flown it himself instead of only paying for it. "Pilot says we'll be on the ground in Fort Myers in twenty minutes. You took a hell of a jump, girl."

"I had a nightmare."

He laughed—the plummy ain't-you-the-silly-billy laugh she had come really to detest. "No nightmares allowed on your second honeymoon,

babe. What was it?”

“I don’t remember,” she said, and it was the truth. There were only fragments: Bill with his glasses melted all over his face, and one of the three or four forbidden skip rhymes they had sometimes chanted back in fifth and sixth grade. This one had gone Hey there, Mary, what’s the story ... and then something-something-something. She couldn’t come up with the rest. She could remember Jangle-tangle jingle-bingle, I saw daddy’s great big dingle, but she couldn’t remember the one about Mary.

Mary helps the Florida sick, she thought, with no idea of what the thought meant, and just then there was a beep as the pilot turned the seat-belt light on. They had started their final descent. Let the wild rumpus start, she thought, and tightened her belt.

“You really don’t remember?” he asked, tightening his own. The little jet ran through a cloud filled with bumps, one of the pilots in the cockpit made a minor adjustment, and the ride smoothed out again. “Because usually, just after you wake up, you can still remember. Even the bad ones.”

“I remember Sister Annunciata, from Our Lady of Angels. Sentence Time.”

“Now, that’s a nightmare.”

Ten minutes later the landing gear came down with a whine and a thump. Five minutes after that they landed.

“They were supposed to bring the car right out to the plane,” Bill said, already starting up the Type A shit. This she didn’t like, but at least she didn’t detest it the way she detested the plummy laugh and his repertoire of patronizing looks. “I hope there hasn’t been a hitch.”

There hasn’t been, she thought, and the feeling swept over her full force. I’m going to see it out the window on my side in just a second

or two. It's your total Florida vacation car, a great big white goddam Cadillac, or maybe it's a Lincoln—

And, yes, here it came, proving what? Well, she supposed, it proved that sometimes when you had *deja vu* what you thought was going to happen next really did. It wasn't a Caddy or a Lincoln after all, but a Crown Victoria—what the gangsters in a Martin Scorsese film would doubtless call a Crown Vic.

“Whoop,” she said as he helped her down the steps and off the plane. The hot sun made her feel dizzy.

“What's wrong?”

“Nothing, really. I've got *deja vu*. Left over from my dream, I guess. We've been here before, that kind of thing.”

“It's being in a strange place, that's all,” he said, and kissed her cheek. “Come on, let the wild rumpus start.”

They went to the car. Bill showed his driver's license to the young woman who had driven it out. Carol saw him check out the hem of her skirt, then sign the paper on her clipboard.

She's going to drop it, Carol thought. The feeling was now so strong it was like being on an amusement-park ride that goes just a little too fast; all at once you realize you're edging out of the Land of Fun and into the Kingdom of Nausea. She'll drop it, and Bill will say “Whoopsy-daisy” and pick it up for her, get an even closer look at her legs.

But the Hertz woman didn't drop her clipboard. A white courtesy van had appeared, to take her back to the Butler Aviation terminal. She gave Bill a final smile—Carol she had ignored completely—and opened the front passenger door. She stepped up, then slipped. “Whoopsy-daisy, don't be crazy,” Bill said, and took her elbow, steadying her. She gave him a smile, he gave her well-turned legs a

goodbye look, and Carol stood by the growing pile of their luggage and thought, Hey there, Mary ...

“Mrs. Shelton?” It was the co-pilot. He had the last bag, the case with Bill’s laptop inside it, and he looked concerned. “Are you all right? You’re very pale.”

Bill heard and turned away from the departing white van, his face worried. If her strongest feelings about Bill were her only feelings about Bill, now that they were twenty-five years on, she would have left him when she found out about the secretary, a Clairol blonde too young to remember the Clairol slogan that started “If I have only one life to live.” But there were other feelings. There was love, for instance. Still love. A kind that girls in Catholic-school uniforms didn’t suspect, a weedy, unlovely species too tough to die.

Besides, it wasn’t just love that held people together. There were secrets, and the price you paid to keep them.

“Carol?” he asked her. “Babe? All right?”

She thought about telling him no, she wasn’t all right, she was drowning, but then she managed to smile and said, “It’s the heat, that’s all. I feel a little groggy. Get me in the car and crank up the air-conditioning. I’ll be fine.”

Bill took her by the elbow (Bet you’re not checking out my legs, though, Carol thought. You know where they go, don’t you?) and led her toward the Crown Vic as if she were a very old lady. By the time the door was closed and cool air was pumping over her face, she actually had started to feel a little better.

If the feeling comes back, I’ll tell him, Carol thought. I’ll have to. It’s just too strong. Not normal.

Well, *deja vu* was never normal, she supposed—it was something that was part dream, part chemistry, and (she was sure she’d read this, maybe in a doctor’s office somewhere while waiting for her

gynecologist to go prospecting up her fifty-two-year-old twat) part the result of an electrical misfire in the brain, causing new experience to be identified as old data. A temporary hole in the pipes, hot water and cold water mingling. She closed her eyes and prayed for it to go away.

Oh, Mary, conceived without sin, pray for us who have recourse to thee.

Please (“Oh puh-lease,” they used to say), not back to parochial school. This was supposed to be a vacation, not—

Floyd, what’s that over there? Oh shit! Oh SHIT!

Who was Floyd? The only Floyd Bill knew was Floyd Dorning (or maybe it was Darling), the kid he’d run the snack bar with, the one who’d run off to New York with his girlfriend. Carol couldn’t remember when Bill had told her about that kid, but she knew he had.

Just quit it, girl. There’s nothing here for you. Slam the door on the whole train of thought.

And that worked. There was a final whisper—what’s the story—and then she was just Carol Shelton, on her way to Captiva Island, on her way to Palm House with her husband the renowned software designer, on their way to the beaches and the rum drinks, and the sound of a steel band playing “Margaritaville.”

*

They passed a Publix market. They passed an old black man minding a roadside fruit stand—he made her think of actors from the thirties and movies you saw on the American Movie Channel, an old yassuh-boss type of guy wearing bib overalls and a straw hat with a round crown. Bill made small talk, and she made it right back at him. She was faintly amazed that the little girl who had worn a Mary medallion every day from ten to sixteen had become this woman in

the Donna Karan dress—that the desperate couple in that Revere apartment were these middle-aged rich folks rolling down a lush aisle of palms—but she was and they were. Once in those Revere days he had come home drunk and she had hit him and drawn blood from below his eye. Once she had been in fear of Hell, had lain half-drugged in steel stirrups, thinking, I'm damned, I've come to damnation. A million years, and that's only the first tick of the clock.

They stopped at the causeway toll-booth and Carol thought, The toll-taker has a strawberry birthmark on the left side of his forehead, all mixed in with his eyebrow.

There was no mark—the toll-taker was just an ordinary guy in his late forties or early fifties, iron-gray hair in a buzz cut, horn-rimmed specs, the kind of guy who says, “Y'all have a nahce tahm, okai?”—but the feeling began to come back, and Carol realized that now the things she thought she knew were things she really did know, at first not all of them, but then, by the time they neared the little market on the right side of Route 41, it was almost everything.

The market's called Corson's and there's a little girl out front, Carol thought. She's wearing a red pinafore. She's got a doll, a dirty old yellow-haired thing, that she's left on the store steps so she can look at a dog in the back of a station wagon.

The name of the market turned out to be Carson's, not Corson's, but everything else was the same. As the white Crown Vic passed, the little girl in the red dress turned her solemn face in Carol's direction, a country girl's face, although what a girl from the toolies could be doing here in rich folks' tourist country, her and her dirty yellow-headed doll, Carol didn't know.

Here's where I ask Bill how much farther, only I won't do it. Because I have to break out of this cycle, this groove. I have to.

“How much farther?” she asked him. He says there's only one road, we can't get lost. He says he promises me we'll get to the Palm House with no problem. And, by the way, who's Floyd?

Bill's eyebrow went up. The dimple beside his mouth appeared. "Once you get over the causeway and onto Sanibel Island, there's only one road," he said. Carol barely heard him. He was still talking about the road, her husband who had spent a dirty weekend in bed with his secretary two years ago, risking all they had done and all they had made, Bill doing that with his other face on, being the Bill Carol's mother had warned would break her heart. And later Bill trying to tell her he hadn't been able to help himself, her wanting to scream, I once murdered a child for you, the potential of a child, anyway. How high is that price? And is this what I get in return? To reach my fifties and find out that my husband had to get into some Clairol girl's pants?

Tell him! she shrieked. Make him pull over and stop, make him do anything that will break you free—change one thing, change everything! You can do it—if you could put your feet up in those stirrups, you can do anything!

But she could do nothing, and it all began to tick by faster. The two overfed crows lifted off from their splatter of lunch. Her husband asked why she was sitting that way, was it a cramp, her saying, Yes, yes, a cramp in her back but it was easing. Her mouth quacked on about *deja vu* just as if she weren't drowning in it, and the Crown Vic moved forward like one of those sadistic Dodgem cars at Revere Beach. Here came Palmdale Motors on the right. And on the left? Some kind of sign for the local community theater, a production of *Naughty Marietta*.

No, it's Mary, not Marietta. Mary, mother of Jesus, Mary, mother of God, she's got her hands out ...

Carol bent all her will toward telling her husband what was happening, because the right Bill was behind the wheel, the right Bill could still hear her. Being heard was what married love was all about.

Nothing came out. In her mind Gram said, "All the hard days are coming." In her mind a voice asked Floyd what was over there, then

said, “Oh shit,” then screamed “Oh shit!”

She looked at the speedometer and saw it was calibrated not in miles an hour but thousands of feet: they were at twenty-eight thousand and descending. Bill was telling her that she shouldn't have slept on the plane and she was agreeing.

There was a pink house coming up, little more than a bungalow, fringed with palm trees that looked like the ones you saw in the Second World War movies, fronds framing incoming Learjets with their machine guns blazing—

Blazing. Burning hot. All at once the magazine he's holding turns into a torch. Holy Mary, mother of God, hey there, Mary, what's the story —

They passed the house. The old man sat on the porch and watched them go by. The lenses of his rimless glasses glinted in the sun. Bill's hand established a beachhead on her hip. He said something about how they might pause to refresh themselves between the doffing of her dress and the donning of her shorts and she agreed, although they were never going to get to Palm House. They were going to go down this road and down this road, they were for the white Crown Vic and the white Crown Vic was for them, forever and ever amen.

The next billboard would say PALM HOUSE 2 MI. Beyond it was the one saying that Mother of Mercy Charities helped the Florida sick. Would they help her?

Now that it was too late she was beginning to understand. Beginning to see the light the way she could see the subtropical sun sparkling off the water on their left. Wondering how many wrongs she had done in her life, how many sins if you liked that word, God knew her parents and her Gram certainly had, sin this and sin that and wear the medallion between those growing things the boys look at. And years later she had lain in bed with her new husband on hot summer nights, knowing a decision had to be made, knowing the clock was ticking, the cigarette butt was smoldering, and she remembered

making the decision, not telling him out loud because about some things you could be silent.

Her head itched. She scratched it. Black flecks came swirling down past her face. On the Crown Vic's instrument panel the speedometer froze at sixteen thousand feet and then blew out, but Bill appeared not to notice.

Here came a mailbox with a Grateful Dead sticker pasted on the front; here came a little black dog with its head down, trotting busily, and God how her head itched, black flakes drifting in the air like fallout and Mother Teresa's face looking out of one of them.

MOTHER OF MERCY CHARITIES HELP THE FLORIDA HUNGRY
—WON'T YOU HELP US?

Floyd. What's that over there? Oh shit.

She has time to see something big. And to read the word DELTA.

"Bill? Bill?"

His reply, clear enough but nevertheless coming from around the rim of the universe: "Christ, honey, what's in your hair?"

She plucked the charred remnant of Mother Teresa's face from her lap and held it out to him, the older version of the man she had married, the secretary-fucking man she had married, the man who had nonetheless rescued her from people who thought that you could live forever in paradise if you only lit enough candles and wore the blue blazer and stuck to the approved skipping rhymes. Lying there with this man one hot summer night while the drug deals went on upstairs and Iron Butterfly sang "In-A-Gadda-Da-Vida" for the nine billionth time, she had asked what he thought you got, you know, after. When your part in the show was over. He had taken her in his arms and held her, down the beach she had heard the jangle-jingle of the midway and the bang of the Dodgem cars and Bill—

Bill's glasses were melted to his face. One eye bulged out of its socket. His mouth was a bloodhole. In the trees a bird was crying, a bird was screaming, and Carol began to scream with it, holding out the charred fragment of paper with Mother Teresa's picture on it, screaming, watching as his cheeks turned black and his forehead swarmed and his neck split open like a poisoned goiter, screaming, she was screaming, somewhere Iron Butterfly was singing "In-A-Gadda-Da-Vida" and she was screaming.

*

"Carol?"

It was Bill's voice, from a thousand miles away. His hand was on her, but it was concern in his touch rather than lust.

She opened her eyes and looked around the sun-brilliant cabin of the Lear 35, and for a moment she understood everything—in the way one understands the tremendous import of a dream upon the first moment of waking. She remembered asking him what he believed you got, you know, after, and he had said you probably got what you'd always thought you would get, that if Jerry Lee Lewis thought he was going to Hell for playing boogie-woogie, that's exactly where he'd go. Heaven, Hell, or Grand Rapids, it was your choice—or the choice of those who had taught you what to believe. It was the human mind's final great parlor-trick: the perception of eternity in the place where you'd always expected to spend it.

"Carol? You okay, babe?" In one hand was the magazine he'd been reading, a Newsweek with Mother Teresa on the cover. SAINTHOOD NOW? it said in white.

Looking around wildly at the cabin, she was thinking, It happens at sixteen thousand feet. I have to tell them, I have to warn them.

But it was fading, all of it, the way those feelings always did. They went like dreams, or cotton candy turning into a sweet mist just above your tongue.

“Landing? Already?” She felt wide-awake, but her voice sounded thick and muzzy.

“It’s fast, huh?” he said, sounding pleased, as if he’d flown it himself instead of paying for it. “Floyd says we’ll be on the ground in—”

“Who?” she asked. The cabin of the little plane was warm but her fingers were cold. “Who?”

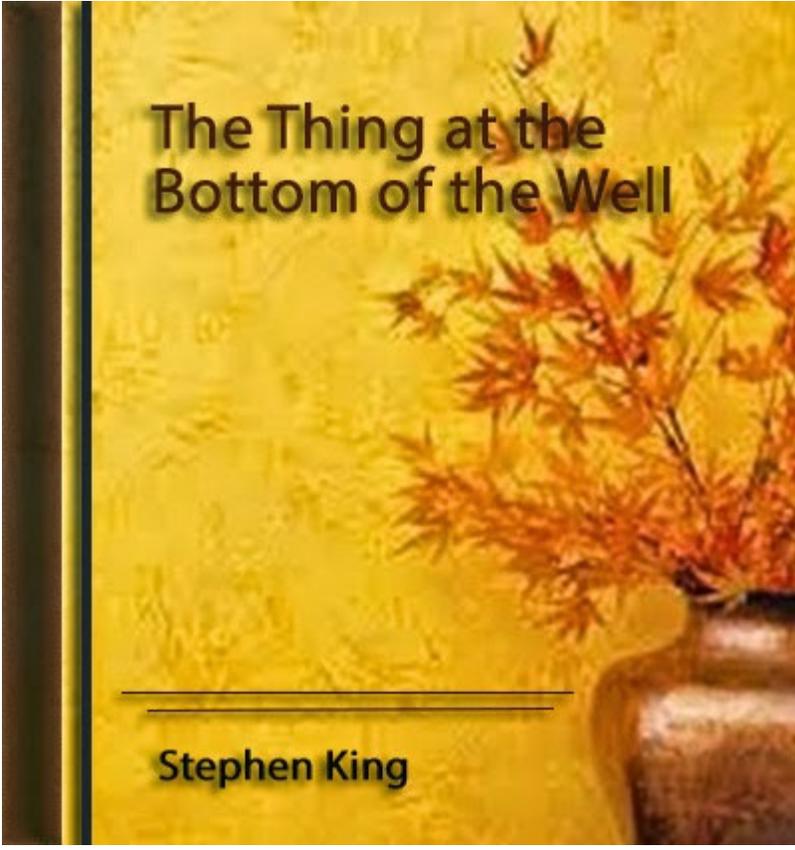
“Floyd. You know, the pilot.” He pointed his thumb toward the cockpit’s lefthand seat. They were descending into a scrim of clouds. The plane began to shake. “He says we’ll be on the ground in Fort Myers in twenty minutes. You took a hell of a jump, girl. And before that you were moaning.”

Carol opened her mouth to say it was that feeling, the one you could only say what it was in French, something *vu* or *vous*, but it was fading and all she said was “I had a nightmare.”

There was a beep as Floyd the pilot switched the seat-belt light on. Carol turned her head. Somewhere below, waiting for them now and forever, was a white car from Hertz, a gangster car, the kind the characters in a Martin Scorsese movie would probably call a Crown Vic. She looked at the cover of the news magazine, at the face of Mother Teresa, and all at once she remembered skipping rope behind Our Lady of Angels, skipping to one of the forbidden rhymes, skipping to the one that went Hey there, Mary, what’s the story, save my ass from Purgatory.

All the hard days are coming, her Gram had said. She had pressed the medal into Carol’s palm, wrapped the chain around her fingers. The hard days are coming.

I think this story is about Hell. A version of it where you are condemned to do the same thing over and over again. Existentialism, baby, what a concept; paging Albert Camus. There’s an idea that Hell is other people. My idea is that it might be repetition.



The Thing at the
Bottom of the Well

Stephen King

THE THING AT THE BOTTOM OF THE WELL

Stephen King

Oglethorpe Crater was an ugly, mean little wretch. He dearly loved plaguing the dog and cat, pulling the wings from flies and watching worms squirm as he slowly pulled them apart. (This lost its fun when he heard worms feel no pain).

But his mother, fool as she was, was blind to his faults and sadistic traits. One day the cook threw open the door in near hysterics and Oglethorpe and Mommy came home from a movie.

“That awful little boy tied a rope across the cellar stairs so when I went down to get potatoes, I fell and almost killed myself!” she screamed.

“Don’t believe her! Don’t believe her! She hates me!” cried Oglethorpe, tears springing into his eyes. And poor little Oglethorpe began sobbing as if his little heart would break.

Mommy fired the cook and Oglethorpe, dear little Oglethorpe, went up to his room where he poked pins in his dog, Spotty. When mommy asked why Spotty was crying, Oglethorpe said he got some glass in his foot. He said he would pull it out. Mommy thought dear little Oglethorpe a good Samaritan.

Then one day, while Oglethorpe was in the field looking for more things to torture, he spied a deep, dark well. He called down, thinking he’d hear an echo.

“Hello!”

But a soft voice called up, “Hello, Oglethorpe”

Oglethorpe looked down, but he could see nothing. “Who are you” Oglethorpe asked.

“Come on down,” said the voice, “And we’ll have jolly fun.”

So Oglethorpe went down.

The day passed and Oglethorpe didn't come back. Mommy called the police and a manhunt was formed. For over a month they hunted for dear little Oglethorpe. Just when they were about to give up, they found Oglethorpe in a well, dead as a door-nail.

But how he must have died!

His arms were pulled out, like people pull flies' wings. Pins had been stuck in his eyes and there were other tortures too horrible to mention.

As they covered his body (what was left of it), and tramped away, it actually seemed that they heard laughter coming from the bottom of the well.

FROM SHATTERED DREAMS PRODUCTIONS

BASED ON A STORY BY
STEPHEN KING

**THE
THINGS
THEY LEFT
BEHIND**

A FILM BY
PABLO MACHO MAYSONET IV



THE THINGS THEY LEFT BEHIND

Stephen King

The things I want to tell you about—the ones they left behind—showed up in my apartment in August of 2002. I'm sure of that, because I found most of them not long after I helped Paula Robeson with her air conditioner. Memory always needs a marker, and that's mine. She was a children's book illustrator, good-looking (hell, fine-looking), husband in import-export. A man has a way of remembering occasions when he's actually able to help a good-looking lady in distress (even one who keeps assuring you she's "very married"); such occasions are all too few. These days the would-be knight errant usually just makes matters worse.

She was in the lobby, looking frustrated, when I came down for an afternoon walk. I said Hi, howya doin', the way you do to other folks who share your building, and she asked me in an exasperated tone that stopped just short of querulousness why the super had to be on vacation now. I pointed out that even cowgirls get the blues and even supers go on vacation; that August, furthermore, was an extremely logical month to take time off. August in New York (and in Paris, mon ami) finds psychoanalysts, trendy artists, and building superintendents mighty thin on the ground.

She didn't smile. I'm not sure she even got the Tom Robbins reference (obliqueness is the curse of the reading class). She said it might be true about August being a good month to take off and go to the Cape or Fire Island, but her damned apartment was just about burning up and the damned air conditioner wouldn't so much as burp. I asked her if she'd like me to take a look, and I remember the glance she gave me—those cool, assessing gray eyes. I remember thinking that eyes like that probably saw quite a lot. And I remember smiling at what she asked me: Are you safe? It reminded me of that movie, not Lolita (thinking about Lolita, sometimes at two in the morning, came later) but the one where Laurence Olivier does the impromptu dental work on Dustin Hoffman, asking him over and over again, Is it safe?

I'm safe, I said. Haven't attacked a woman in over a year. I used to attack two or three a week, but the meetings are helping.

A giddy thing to say, but I was in a fairly giddy mood. A summer mood. She gave me another look, and then she smiled. Put out her hand. Paula Robeson, she said. It was the left hand she put out—not normal, but the one with the plain gold band on it. I think that was probably on purpose, don't you? But it was later that she told me about her husband being in import-export. On the day when it was my turn to ask her for help.

In the elevator, I told her not to expect too much. Now, if she'd wanted a man to find out the underlying causes of the New York City Draft Riots, or to supply a few amusing anecdotes about the creation of the small-pox vaccine, or even to dig up quotes on the sociological ramifications of the TV remote control (the most important invention of the last fifty years, in my 'umble opinion), I was the guy.

Research is your game, Mr. Staley? she asked as we went up in the slow and clattery elevator.

I admitted that it was, although I didn't add that I was still quite new to it. Nor did I ask her to call me Scott—that would have spooked her all over again. And I certainly didn't tell her that I was trying to forget all I'd once known about rural insurance. That I was, in fact, trying to forget quite a lot of things, including about two dozen faces.

You see, I may be trying to forget, but I still remember quite a lot. I think we all do when we put our minds to it (and sometimes, rather more nastily, when we don't). I even remember something one of those South American novelists said—you know, the ones they call the Magical Realists? Not the guy's name, that's not important, but this quote: As infants, our first victory comes in grasping some bit of the world, usually our mothers' fingers. Later we discover that the world, and the things of the world, are grasping us, and have been all along. Borges? Yes, it might have been Borges. Or it might have been Marquez. That I don't remember. I just know I got her air conditioner running, and when cool air started blowing out of the convector, it lit up her whole face. I also know it's true, that thing about how perception switches around and we come to realize that the things we thought we were holding are actually holding us.

Keeping us prisoner, perhaps—Thoreau certainly thought so—but also holding us in place. That’s the trade-off. And no matter what Thoreau might have thought, I believe the trade is mostly a fair one. Or I did then; now, I’m not so sure.

And I know these things happened in late August of 2002, not quite a year after a piece of the sky fell down and everything changed for all of us.

*

On an afternoon about a week after Sir Scott Staley donned his Good Samaritan armor and successfully battled the fearsome air conditioner, I took my afternoon walk to the Staples on 83rd Street to get a box of Zip discs and a ream of paper. I owed a fellow forty pages of background on the development of the Polaroid camera (which is more interesting a story than you might think). When I got back to my apartment, there was a pair of sunglasses with red frames and very distinctive lenses on the little table in the foyer where I keep bills that need to be paid, claim checks, overdue-book notices, and things of that nature. I recognized the glasses at once, and all the strength went out of me. I didn’t fall, but I dropped my packages on the floor and leaned against the side of the door, trying to catch my breath and staring at those sunglasses. If there had been nothing to lean against, I believe I would have swooned like a miss in a Victorian novel—one of those where the lustful vampire appears at the stroke of midnight.

Two related but distinct emotional waves struck me. The first was that sense of horrified shame you feel when you know you’re about to be caught in some act you will never be able to explain. The memory that comes to mind in this regard is of a thing that happened to me—or almost happened—when I was sixteen.

My mother and sister had gone shopping in Portland and I supposedly had the house to myself until evening. I was reclining naked on my bed with a pair of my sister’s underpants wrapped around my cock. The bed was scattered with pictures I’d clipped

from magazines I'd found in the back of the garage—the previous owner's stash of Penthouse and Gallery magazines, very likely. I heard a car come crunching into the driveway. No mistaking the sound of that motor; it was my mother and sister. Peg had come down with some sort of flu bug and started vomiting out the window. They'd gotten as far as Poland Springs and turned around.

I looked at the pictures scattered all over the bed, my clothes scattered all over the floor, and the foam of pink rayon in my left hand. I remember how the strength flowed out of my body, and the terrible sense of lassitude that came in its place. My mother was yelling for me—"Scott, Scott, come down and help me with your sister, she's sick"—and I remember thinking, "What's the use? I'm caught. I might as well accept it, I'm caught and this is the first thing they'll think of when they think about me for the rest of my life: Scott, the jerk-off artist."

But more often than not a kind of survival overdrive kicks in at such moments. That's what happened to me. I might go down, I decided, but I wouldn't do so without at least an effort to save my dignity. I threw the pictures and the panties under the bed. Then I jumped into my clothes, moving with numb but sure-fingered speed, all the time thinking of this crazy old game show I used to watch, Beat the Clock.

I can remember how my mother touched my flushed cheek when I got downstairs, and the thoughtful concern in her eyes. "Maybe you're getting sick, too," she said.

"Maybe I am," I said, and gladly enough. It was half an hour before I discovered I'd forgotten to zip my fly. Luckily, neither Peg nor my mother noticed, although on any other occasion one or both of them would have asked me if I had a license to sell hot dogs (this was what passed for wit in the house where I grew up). That day one of them was too sick and the other was too worried to be witty. So I got a total pass.

Lucky me.

*

What followed the first emotional wave that August day in my apartment was much simpler: I thought I was going out of my mind. Because those glasses couldn't be there. Absolutely could not. No way.

Then I raised my eyes and saw something else that had most certainly not been in my apartment when I left for Staples half an hour before (locking the door behind me, as I always did). Leaning in the corner between the kitchenette and the living room was a baseball bat. Hillerich & Bradsby, according to the label. And while I couldn't see the other side, I knew what was printed there well enough: CLAIMS ADJUSTOR, the words burned into the ash with the tip of a soldering iron and then colored deep blue.

Another sensation rushed through me: a third wave. This was a species of surreal dismay. I don't believe in ghosts, but I'm sure that at that moment I looked as though I had just seen one.

I felt that way, too. Yes indeed. Because those sunglasses had to be gone—long-time gone, as the Dixie Chicks say. Ditto Cleve Farrell's Claims Adjustor. ("Besboll been bery-bery good to mee," Cleve would sometimes say, waving the bat over his head as he sat at his desk. "In-SHOO-rance been bery-bery bad.")

I did the only thing I could think of, which was to grab up Sonja D'Amico's shades and trot back down to the elevator with them, holding them out in front of me the way you might hold out something nasty you found on your apartment floor after a week away on vacation—a piece of decaying food, or the body of a poisoned mouse. I found myself remembering a conversation I'd had about Sonja with a fellow named Warren Anderson. She must have looked like she thought she was going to pop back up and ask somebody for a Coca-Cola, I had thought when he told me what he'd seen. Over drinks in the Blarney Stone Pub on Third Avenue, this had been, about six weeks after the sky fell down. After we'd toasted each other on not being dead.

Things like that have a way of sticking, whether you want them to or not. Like a musical phrase or the nonsense chorus to a pop song that you just can't get out of your head. You wake up at three in the morning, needing to take a leak, and as you stand there in front of the bowl, your cock in your hand and your mind about ten percent awake, it comes back to you: Like she thought she was going to pop back up. Pop back up and ask for a Coke. At some point during that conversation Warren had asked me if I remembered her funny sunglasses, and I said I did. Sure I did.

*

Four floors down, Pedro the doorman was standing in the shade of the awning and talking with Rafe the FedEx man. Pedro was a serious hardboy when it came to letting deliverymen stand in front of the building—he had a seven-minute rule, a pocket watch with which to enforce it, and all the beat cops were his buddies—but he got on with Rafe, and sometimes the two of them would stand there for twenty minutes or more with their heads together, doing the old New York Yak. Politics? Besboll? The Gospel According to Henry David Thoreau? I didn't know and never cared less than on that day. They'd been there when I went up with my office supplies, and were still there when a far less carefree Scott Staley came back down. A Scott Staley who had discovered a small but noticeable hole in the column of reality. Just the two of them being there was enough for me. I walked up and held my right hand, the one with the sunglasses in it, out to Pedro.

“What would you call these?” I asked, not bothering to excuse myself or anything, just butting in headfirst.

He gave me a considering stare that said, “I am surprised at your rudeness, Mr. Staley, truly I am,” then looked down at my hand. For a long moment he said nothing, and a horrible idea took possession of me: he saw nothing because there was nothing to see. Only my hand outstretched, as if this were Turnabout Tuesday and I expected him to tip me. My hand was empty. Sure it was, had to be, because

Sonja D'Amico's sunglasses no longer existed. Sonja's joke shades were a long time gone.

"I call them sunglasses, Mr. Staley," Pedro said at last. "What else would I call them? Or is this some sort of trick question?"

Rafe the FedEx man, clearly more interested, took them from me. The relief of seeing him holding the sunglasses and looking at them, almost studying them, was like having someone scratch that exact place between your shoulder blades that itches. He stepped out from beneath the awning and held them up to the day, making a sun-star flash off each of the heart-shaped lenses.

"They're like the ones the little girl wore in that porno movie with Jeremy Irons," he said at last.

I had to grin in spite of my distress. In New York, even the deliverymen are film critics. It's one of the things to love about the place.

"That's right, Lolita," I said, taking the glasses back. "Only the heart-shaped sunglasses were in the version Stanley Kubrick directed. Back when Jeremy Irons was still nothing but a putter." That one hardly made sense (even to me), but I didn't give Shit One. Once again I was feeling giddy ... but not in a good way. Not this time.

"Who played the pervo in that one?" Rafe asked.

I shook my head. "I'll be damned if I can remember right now."

"If you don't mind me saying," Pedro said, "you look rather pale, Mr. Staley. Are you coming down with something? The flu, perhaps?"

No, that was my sister, I thought of saying. The day I came within about twenty seconds of getting caught masturbating into her panties while I looked at a picture of Miss April. But I hadn't been caught. Not then, not on 9/11, either. Fooled ya, beat the clock again. I couldn't speak for Warren Anderson, who told me in the Blarney Stone that

he'd stopped on the third floor that morning to talk about the Yankees with a friend, but not getting caught had become quite a specialty of mine.

"I'm all right," I told Pedro, and while that wasn't true, knowing I wasn't the only one who saw Sonja's joke shades as a thing that actually existed in the world made me feel better, at least. If the sunglasses were in the world, probably Cleve Farrell's Hillerich & Bradsby was, too.

"Are those the glasses?" Rafe suddenly asked in a respectful, ready-to-be-awestruck voice. "The ones from the first Lolita?"

"Nope," I said, folding the bows behind the heart-shaped lenses, and as I did, the name of the girl in the Kubrick version of the film came to me: Sue Lyon. I still couldn't remember who played the pervo. "Just a knock-off."

"Is there something special about them?" Rafe asked. "Is that why you came rushing down here?"

"I don't know," I said. "Someone left them behind in my apartment."

I went upstairs before they could ask any more questions and looked around, hoping there was nothing else. But there was. In addition to the sunglasses and the baseball bat with CLAIMS ADJUSTOR burned into the side, there was a Howie's Laff-Riot Farting Cushion, a conch shell, a steel penny suspended in a Lucite cube, and a ceramic mushroom (red with white spots) that came with a ceramic Alice sitting on top of it. The Farting Cushion had belonged to Jimmy Eagleton and got a certain amount of play every year at the Christmas party. The ceramic Alice had been on Maureen Hannon's desk—a gift from her granddaughter, she'd told me once. Maureen had the most beautiful white hair, which she wore long, to her waist. You rarely see that in a business situation, but she'd been with the company for almost forty years and felt she could wear her hair any way she liked. I remembered both the conch shell and the steel penny, but not in whose cubicles (or offices) they had been. It might

come to me; it might not. There had been lots of cubicles (and offices) at Light and Bell, Insurers.

The shell, the mushroom, and the Lucite cube were on the coffee table in my living room, gathered in a neat pile. The Farting Cushion was—quite rightly, I thought—lying on top of my toilet tank, beside the current issue of Spenck's Rural Insurance Newsletter. Rural insurance used to be my specialty, as I think I told you. I knew all the odds.

What were the odds on this?

*

When something goes wrong in your life and you need to talk about it, I think that the first impulse for most people is to call a family member. This wasn't much of an option for me. My father put an egg in his shoe and beat it when I was two and my sister was four. My mother, no quitter she, hit the ground running and raised the two of us, managing a mail-order clearinghouse out of our home while she did so. I believe this was a business she actually created, and she made an adequate living at it (only the first year was really scary, she told me later). She smoked like a chimney, however, and died of lung cancer at the age of forty-eight, six or eight years before the Internet might have made her a dot-com millionaire.

My sister Peg was currently living in Cleveland, where she had embraced Mary Kay cosmetics, the Indians, and fundamentalist Christianity, not necessarily in that order. If I called and told Peg about the things I'd found in my apartment, she would suggest I get down on my knees and ask Jesus to come into my life. Rightly or wrongly, I did not feel Jesus could help me with my current problem.

I was equipped with the standard number of aunts, uncles, and cousins, but most lived west of the Mississippi, and I hadn't seen any of them in years. The Killians (my mother's side of the family) have never been a reuning bunch. A card on one's birthday and at Christmas were considered sufficient to fulfill all familial obligations.

A card on Valentine's Day or at Easter was a bonus. I called my sister on Christmas or she called me, we muttered the standard crap about getting together "sometime soon," and hung up with what I imagine was mutual relief.

The next option when in trouble would probably be to invite a good friend out for a drink, explain the situation, and then ask for advice. But I was a shy boy who grew into a shy man, and in my current research job I work alone (out of preference) and thus have no colleagues apt to mature into friends. I made a few in my last job—Sonja and Cleve Farrell, to name two—but they're dead, of course.

*

I reasoned that if you don't have a friend you can talk to, the next-best thing would be to rent one. I could certainly afford a little therapy, and it seemed to me that a few sessions on some psychiatrist's couch (four might do the trick) would be enough for me to explain what had happened and to articulate how it made me feel. How much could four sessions set me back? Six hundred dollars? Maybe eight? That seemed a fair price for a little relief. And I thought there might be a bonus. A disinterested outsider might be able to see some simple and reasonable explanation I was just missing. To my mind the locked door between my apartment and the outside world seemed to do away with most of those, but it was my mind, after all; wasn't that the point? And perhaps the problem?

I had it all mapped out. During the first session I'd explain what had happened. When I came to the second one, I'd bring the items in question—sunglasses, Lucite cube, conch shell, baseball bat, ceramic mushroom, the ever-popular Farting Cushion. A little show-and-tell, just like in grammar school. That left two more during which my rent-a-pal and I could figure out the cause of this disturbing tilt in the axis of my life and set things straight again.

A single afternoon spent riffling the Yellow Pages and dialing the telephone was enough to prove to me that the idea of psychiatry was unworkable in fact, no matter how good it might be in theory. The

closest I came to an actual appointment was a receptionist who told me that Dr. Jauss might be able to work me in the following January. She intimated even that would take some inspired shoehorning. The others held out no hope whatsoever. I tried half a dozen therapists in Newark and four in White Plains, even a hypnotist in Queens, with the same result. Mohammed Atta and his Suicide Patrol might have been very bery-bery bad for the city of New York (not to mention for the in-SHOO-rance business), but it was clear to me from that single fruitless afternoon on the telephone that they had been a boon to the psychiatric profession, much as the psychiatrists themselves might wish otherwise. If you wanted to lie on some professional's couch in the summer of 2002, you had to take a number and wait in line.

*

I could sleep with those things in my apartment, but not well. They whispered to me. I lay awake in my bed, sometimes until two, thinking about Maureen Hannon, who felt she had reached an age (not to mention a level of indispensability) at which she could wear her amazingly long hair any way she damn well liked. Or I'd recall the various people who'd gone running around at the Christmas party, waving Jimmy Eagleton's famous Farting Cushion. It was, as I may have said, a great favorite once people got two or three drinks closer to New Year's. I remembered Bruce Mason asking me if it didn't look like an enema bag for elves—"elves," he said—and by a process of association remembered that the conch shell had been his. Of course. Bruce Mason, Lord of the Flies. And a step further down the associative food chain I found the name and face of James Mason, who had played Humbert Humbert back when Jeremy Irons was still just a putter. The mind is a wily monkey; sometime him take-a de banana, sometime him don't. Which is why I'd brought the sunglasses downstairs, although I'd been aware of no deductive process at the time. I'd only wanted confirmation. There's a George Seferis poem that asks, Are these the voices of our dead friends, or is it just the gramophone? Sometimes it's a good question, one you have to ask someone else. Or ... listen to this.

Once, in the late eighties, near the end of a bitter two-year romance with alcohol, I woke up in my study after dozing off at my desk in the middle of the night. I staggered off to my bedroom, where, as I reached for the light switch, I saw someone moving around. I flashed on the idea (the near certainty) of a junkie burglar with a cheap pawnshop .32 in his trembling hand, and my heart almost came out of my chest. I turned on the light with one hand and was grabbing for something heavy off the top of my bureau with the other—anything, even the silver frame holding the picture of my mother, would have done—when I saw the prowler was me. I was staring wild-eyed back at myself from the mirror on the other side of the room, my shirt half-untucked and my hair standing up in the back. I was disgusted with myself, but I was also relieved.

I wanted this to be like that. I wanted it to be the mirror, the gramophone, even someone playing a nasty practical joke (maybe someone who knew why I hadn't been at the office on that day in September). But I knew it was none of those things. The Farting Cushion was there, an actual guest in my apartment. I could run my thumb over the buckles on Alice's ceramic shoes, slide my finger down the part in her yellow ceramic hair. I could read the date on the penny inside the Lucite cube.

Bruce Mason, alias Conch Man, alias Lord of the Flies, took his big pink shell to the company shindig at Jones Beach one July and blew it, summoning people to a jolly picnic lunch of hotdogs and hamburgers. Then he tried to show Freddy Lounds how to do it. The best Freddy had been able to muster was a series of weak honking sounds like ... well, like Jimmy Eagleton's Farting Cushion. Around and around it goes. Ultimately, every associative chain forms a necklace.

*

In late September I had a brainstorm, one of those ideas so simple you can't believe you didn't think of it sooner. Why was I holding onto this unwelcome crap, anyway? Why not just get rid of it? It wasn't as if the items were in trust; the people who owned them weren't going

to come back at some later date and ask for them to be returned. The last time I'd seen Cleve Farrell's face it had been on a poster, and the last of those had been torn down by November of '01. The general (if unspoken) feeling was that such homemade homages were bumming out the tourists, who'd begun to creep back to Fun City. What had happened was horrible, most New Yorkers opined, but America was still here and Matthew Broderick would only be in *The Producers* for so long.

I'd gotten Chinese that night, from a place I like two blocks over. My plan was to eat it as I usually ate my evening meal, watching Chuck Scarborough explain the world to me. I was turning on the television when the epiphany came. They weren't in trust, these unwelcome souvenirs of the last safe day, nor were they evidence. There had been a crime, yes—everyone agreed to that—but the perpetrators were dead and the ones who'd set them on their crazy course were on the run. There might be trials at some future date, but Scott Staley would never be called to the stand, and Jimmy Eagleton's *Farting Cushion* would never be marked Exhibit A.

I left my General Tso's chicken sitting on the kitchen counter with the cover still on the aluminum dish, got a laundry bag from the shelf above my seldom-used washing machine, put the things into it (sacking them up, I couldn't believe how light they were, or how long I'd waited to do such a simple thing), and rode down in the elevator with the bag sitting between my feet. I walked to the corner of 75th and Park, looked around to make sure I wasn't being watched (God knows why I felt so furtive, but I did), then put litter in its place. I took one look back over my shoulder as I walked away. The handle of the bat poked out of the basket invitingly. Someone would come along and take it, I had no doubt. Probably before Chuck Scarborough gave way to John Seigenthaler or whoever else was sitting in for Tom Brokaw that evening.

On my way back to my apartment, I stopped at Fun Choy for a fresh order of General Tso's. "Last one no good?" asked Rose Ming, at the cash register. She spoke with some concern. "You tell why."

“No, the last one was fine,” I said. “Tonight I just felt like two.”

She laughed as though this were the funniest thing she'd ever heard, and I laughed, too. Hard. The kind of laughter that goes well beyond giddy. I couldn't remember the last time I'd laughed like that, so loudly and so naturally. Certainly not since Light and Bell, Insurers, fell into West Street.

I rode the elevator up to my floor and walked the twelve steps to 4-B. I felt the way seriously ill people must when they awaken one day, assess themselves by the sane light of morning, and discover that the fever has broken. I tucked my takeout bag under my left arm (an awkward maneuver but workable in the short run) and then unlocked my door. I turned on the light. There, on the table where I leave bills that need to be paid, claim checks, and overdue-book notices, were Sonja D'Amico's joke sunglasses, the ones with the red frames and the heart-shaped Lolita lenses. Sonja D'Amico who had, according to Warren Anderson (who was, so far as I knew, the only other surviving employee of Light and Bell's home office), jumped from the one hundred and tenth floor of the stricken building.

He claimed to have seen a photo that caught her as she dropped, Sonja with her hands placed primly on her skirt to keep it from skating up her thighs, her hair standing up against the smoke and blue of that day's sky, the tips of her shoes pointed down. The description made me think of "Falling," the poem James Dickey wrote about the stewardess who tries to aim the plummeting stone of her body for water, as if she could come up smiling, shaking beads of water from her hair and asking for a Coca-Cola.

"I vomited," Warren told me that day in the Blarney Stone. "I never want to look at a picture like that again, Scott, but I know I'll never forget it. You could see her face, and I think she believed that somehow ... yeah, that somehow she was going to be all right."

*

I've never screamed as an adult, but I almost did so when I looked from Sonja's sunglasses to Cleve Farrell's CLAIMS ADJUSTOR, the latter once more leaning nonchalantly in the corner by the entry to the living room. Some part of my mind must have remembered that the door to the hallway was open and both of my fourth-floor neighbors would hear me if I did scream; then, as the saying is, I would have some 'splainin to do.

I clapped my hand over my mouth to hold it in. The bag with the General Tso's chicken inside fell to the hardwood floor of the foyer and split open. I could barely bring myself to look at the resulting mess. Those dark chunks of cooked meat could have been anything.

I plopped into the single chair I keep in the foyer and put my face in my hands. I didn't scream and I didn't cry, and after a while I was able to clean up the mess. My mind kept trying to go toward the things that had beaten me back from the corner of 75th and Park, but I wouldn't let it. Each time it tried to lunge in that direction, I grabbed its leash and forced it away again.

That night, lying in bed, I listened to conversations. First the things talked (in low voices), and then the people who had owned the things replied (in slightly louder ones). Sometimes they talked about the picnic at Jones Beach—the coconut odor of suntan lotion and Lou Bega singing “Mambo No. 5” over and over from Misha Bryzinski's boom box. Or they talked about Frisbees sailing under the sky while dogs chased them. Sometimes they discussed children puddling along the wet sand with the seats of their shorts and their bathing suits sagging. Mothers in swimsuits ordered from the Lands' End catalogue walking beside them with white gloop on their noses. How many of the kids that day had lost a guardian Mom or a Frisbee-throwing Dad? Man, that was a math problem I didn't want to do. But the voices I heard in my apartment did want to do it. They did it over and over.

I remembered Bruce Mason blowing his conch shell and proclaiming himself the Lord of the Flies. I remembered Maureen Hannon once telling me (not at Jones Beach, not this conversation) that Alice in

Wonderland was the first psychedelic novel. Jimmy Eagleton telling me one afternoon that his son had a learning disability to go along with his stutter, two for the price of one, and the kid was going to need a tutor in math and another one in French if he was going to get out of high school in the foreseeable future. “Before he’s eligible for the AARP discount on textbooks” was how Jimmy had put it. His cheeks pale and a bit stubbly in the long afternoon light, as if that morning the razor had been dull.

I’d been drifting toward sleep, but this last one brought me fully awake again with a start, because I realized the conversation must have taken place not long before September Eleventh. Maybe only days. Perhaps even the Friday before, which would make it the last day I’d ever seen Jimmy alive. And the l’il putter with the stutter and the learning disability: had his name actually been Jeremy, as in Jeremy Irons? Surely not, surely that was just my mind (sometime him take-a de banana) playing its little games, but it had been close to that, by God. Jason, maybe. Or Justin. In the wee hours everything grows, and I remember thinking that if the kid’s name did turn out to be Jeremy, I’d probably go crazy. Straw that broke the camel’s back, baby.

Around three in the morning I remembered who had owned the Lucite cube with the steel penny in it: Roland Abelson, in Liability. He called it his retirement fund. It was Roland who had a habit of saying “Lucy, you got some ‘splainin to do.” One night in the fall of ‘01, I had seen his widow on the six o’clock news. I had talked with her at one of the company picnics (very likely the one at Jones Beach) and thought then that she was pretty, but widowhood had refined that prettiness, winnowed it into severe beauty. On the news report she kept referring to her husband as “missing.” She would not call him “dead.” And if he was alive—if he ever turned up—he would have some ‘splainin to do. You bet. But of course, so would she. A woman who has gone from pretty to beautiful as the result of a mass murder would certainly have some ‘splainin to do.

Lying in bed and thinking of this stuff—remembering the crash of the surf at Jones Beach and the Frisbees flying under the sky—filled me with an awful sadness that finally emptied in tears. But I have to admit it was a learning experience. That was the night I came to understand that things—even little ones, like a penny in a Lucite cube—can get heavier as time passes. But because it's a weight of the mind, there's no mathematical formula for it, like the ones you can find in an insurance company's Blue Books, where the rate on your whole life policy goes up x if you smoke and coverage on your crops goes up y if your farm's in a tornado zone. You see what I'm saying?

It's a weight of the mind.

*

The following morning I gathered up all the items again, and found a seventh, this one under the couch. The guy in the cubicle next to mine, Misha Bryzinski, had kept a small pair of Punch and Judy dolls on his desk. The one I spied under my sofa with my little eye was Punch. Judy was nowhere to be found, but Punch was enough for me. Those black eyes, staring out from amid the ghost bunnies, gave me a terrible sinking feeling of dismay. I fished the doll out, hating the streak of dust it left behind. A thing that leaves a trail is a real thing, a thing with weight. No question about it.

I put Punch and all the other stuff in the little utility closet just off the kitchenette, and there they stayed. At first I wasn't sure they would, but they did.

*

My mother once told me that if a man wiped his ass and saw blood on the toilet tissue, his response would be to shit in the dark for the next thirty days and hope for the best. She used this example to illustrate her belief that the cornerstone of male philosophy was "If you ignore it, maybe it'll go away."

I ignored the things I'd found in my apartment, I hoped for the best, and things actually got a little better. I rarely heard those voices whispering in the utility closet (except late at night), although I was more and more apt to take my research chores out of the house. By the middle of November, I was spending most of my days in the New York Public Library. I'm sure the lions got used to seeing me there with my PowerBook.

Then, just before Thanksgiving, I happened to be going out of my building one day and met Paula Robeson, the maiden fair whom I'd rescued by pushing the reset button on her air conditioner, coming in.

With absolutely no forethought whatsoever—if I'd had time to think about it, I'm convinced I never would have said a word—I asked her if I could buy her lunch and talk to her about something.

"The fact is," I said, "I have a problem. Maybe you could push my reset button."

We were in the lobby. Pedro the doorman was sitting in the corner, reading the Post (and listening to every word, I have no doubt—to Pedro, his tenants were the world's most interesting daytime drama). She gave me a smile both pleasant and nervous. "I guess I owe you one," she said, "but ... you know I'm married, don't you?"

"Yes," I said, not adding that she'd shaken with me wrong-handed so I could hardly fail to notice the ring.

She nodded. "Sure, you must've seen us together at least a couple of times, but he was in Europe when I had all that trouble with the air conditioner, and he's in Europe now. Edward, that's his name. Over the last two years he's been in Europe more than he's here, and although I don't like it, I'm very married in spite of it." Then, as a kind of afterthought, she added: "Edward is in import-export."

I used to be in insurance, but then one day the company exploded, I thought of saying. In the end, I managed something a little more

sane.

“I don’t want a date, Ms. Robeson,” no more than I wanted to be on a first-name basis with her, and was that a wink of disappointment I saw in her eyes? By God, I thought it was. But at least it convinced her. I was still safe.

She put her hands on her hips and looked at me with mock exasperation. Or maybe not so mock. “Then what do you want?”

“Just someone to talk to. I tried several shrinks, but they’re ... busy.”

“All of them?”

“It would appear so.”

“If you’re having problems with your sex life or feeling the urge to race around town killing men in turbans, I don’t want to know about it.”

“It’s nothing like that. I’m not going to make you blush, I promise.” Which wasn’t quite the same as saying I promise not to shock you or You won’t think I’m crazy. “Just lunch and a little advice, that’s all I’m asking. What do you say?”

I was surprised—almost flabbergasted—by my own persuasiveness. If I’d planned the conversation in advance, I almost certainly would have blown the whole deal. I suppose she was curious, and I’m sure she heard a degree of sincerity in my voice. She may also have surmised that if I was the sort of man who liked to try his hand picking up women, I would have had a go on that day in August when I’d actually been alone with her in her apartment, the elusive Edward in France or Germany. And I have to wonder how much actual desperation she saw in my face.

In any case, she agreed to have lunch with me on Friday at Donald’s Grill down the street. Donald’s may be the least romantic restaurant in all of Manhattan—good food, fluorescent lights, waiters who make

it clear they'd like you to hurry. She did so with the air of a woman paying an overdue debt about which she's nearly forgotten. This was not exactly flattering, but it was good enough for me. Noon would be fine for her, she said. If I'd meet her in the lobby, we could walk down there together. I told her that would be fine for me, too.

That night was a good one for me. I went to sleep almost immediately, and there were no dreams of Sonja D'Amico going down beside the burning building with her hands on her thighs, like a stewardess looking for water.

*

As we strolled down 86th Street the following day, I asked Paula where she'd been when she heard.

"San Francisco," she said. "Fast asleep in a Wradling Hotel suite with Edward beside me, undoubtedly snoring as usual. I was coming back here on September twelfth and Edward was going on to Los Angeles for meetings. The hotel management actually rang the fire alarm."

"That must have scared the hell out of you."

"It did, although my first thought wasn't fire but earthquake. Then this disembodied voice came through the speakers, telling us that there was no fire in the hotel, but a hell of a big one in New York."

"Jesus."

"Hearing it like that, in bed in a strange room ... hearing it come down from the ceiling like the voice of God ..." She shook her head. Her lips were pressed so tightly together that her lipstick almost disappeared. "That was very frightening. I suppose I understand the urge to pass on news like that, and immediately, but I still haven't entirely forgiven the management of the Wradling for doing it that way. I don't think I'll be staying there again."

“Did your husband go on to his meetings?”

“They were canceled. I imagine a lot of meetings were canceled that day. We stayed in bed with the TV on until the sun came up, trying to get our heads around it. Do you know what I mean?”

“Yes.”

“We talked about who might have been there that we knew. I suppose we weren’t the only ones doing that, either.”

“Did you come up with anyone?”

“A broker from Shearson Lehman and the assistant manager of the Borders book store in the mall,” she said. “One of them was all right. One of them ... well, you know, one of them wasn’t. What about you?”

So I didn’t have to sneak up on it, after all. We weren’t even at the restaurant yet and here it was.

“I would have been there,” I said. “I should have been there. It’s where I worked. In an insurance company on the hundred and tenth floor.”

She stopped dead on the sidewalk, looking up at me, eyes wide. I suppose to the people who had to veer around us, we must have looked like lovers. “Scott, no!”

“Scott, yes,” I said. And finally told someone about how I woke up on September Eleventh expecting to do all the things I usually did on weekdays, from the cup of black coffee while I shaved all the way to the cup of cocoa in front of the midnight news summary on Channel Thirteen. A day like any other day, that was what I had in mind. I think that is what Americans had come to expect as their right. Well, guess what? That’s an airplane! Flying into the side of a skyscraper! Ha-ha, asshole, the joke’s on you, and half the goddam world’s laughing!

I told her about looking out my apartment window and seeing the seven A.M. sky was perfectly cloudless, the sort of blue so deep you think you can almost see through it to the stars beyond. Then I told her about the voice. I think everyone has various voices in their heads and we get used to them. When I was sixteen, one of mine spoke up and suggested it might be quite a kick to masturbate into a pair of my sister's underpants. She has about a thousand pairs and surely won't miss one, y'all, the voice opined. (I did not tell Paula Robeson about this particular adolescent adventure.) I'd have to call that the voice of utter irresponsibility, more familiarly known as Mr. Yow, Git Down.

"Mr. Yow, Git Down?" Paula asked doubtfully.

"In honor of James Brown, the King of Soul."

"If you say so."

Mr. Yow, Git Down had had less and less to say to me, especially since I'd pretty much given up drinking, and on that day he awoke from his doze just long enough to speak a dozen words, but they were life-changers. Life-savers.

The first five (that's me, sitting on the edge of the bed): Yow, call in sick, y'all! The next seven (that's me, plodding toward the shower and scratching my left buttock as I go): Yow, spend the day in Central Park! There was no premonition involved. It was clearly Mr. Yow, Git Down, not the voice of God. It was just a version of my very own voice (as they all are), in other words, telling me to play hooky. Do a little suffin fo' yo'self, Gre't God! The last time I could recall hearing this version of my voice, the subject had been a karaoke contest at a bar on Amsterdam Avenue: Yow, sing along wit' Neil Diamond, fool—git up on stage and git ya bad self down!

"I guess I know what you mean," she said, smiling a little.

"Do you?"

“Well ... I once took off my shirt in a Key West bar and won ten dollars dancing to ‘Honky Tonk Women.’” She paused. “Edward doesn’t know, and if you ever tell him, I’ll be forced to stab you in the eye with one of his tie tacks.”

“Yow, you go, girl,” I said, and her smile became a rather wistful grin. It made her look younger. I thought this had a chance of working.

We walked into Donald’s. There was a cardboard turkey on the door, cardboard Pilgrims on the green tile wall above the steam table.

“I listened to Mr. Yow, Git Down and I’m here,” I said. “But some other things are here, too, and he can’t help with them. They’re things I can’t seem to get rid of. Those are what I want to talk to you about.”

“Let me repeat that I’m no shrink,” she said, and with more than a trace of uneasiness. The grin was gone. “I majored in German and minored in European history.”

You and your husband must have a lot to talk about, I thought. What I said out loud was that it didn’t have to be her, necessarily, just someone.

“All right. Just as long as you know.”

A waiter took our drink orders, decaf for her, regular for me. Once he went away she asked me what things I was talking about.

“This is one of them.” From my pocket I withdrew the Lucite cube with the steel penny suspended inside it and put it on the table. Then I told her about the other things, and to whom they had belonged. Cleve “Besboll been bery-bery good to me” Farrell. Maureen Hannon, who wore her hair long to her waist as a sign of her corporate indispensability. Jimmy Eagleton, who had a divine nose for phony accident claims, a son with learning disabilities, and a Farting Cushion he kept safely tucked away in his desk until the Christmas party rolled around each year. Sonja D’Amico, Light and

Bell's best accountant, who had gotten the Lolita sunglasses as a bitter divorce present from her first husband. Bruce "Lord of the Flies" Mason, who would always stand shirtless in my mind's eye, blowing his conch on Jones Beach while the waves rolled up and expired around his bare feet. Last of all, Misha Bryzinski, with whom I'd gone to at least a dozen Mets games. I told her about putting everything but Misha's Punch doll in a trash basket on the corner of Park and 75th, and how they had beaten me back to my apartment, possibly because I had stopped for a second order of General Tso's chicken. During all of this, the Lucite cube stood on the table between us. We managed to eat at least some of our meal in spite of his stern profile.

When I was finished talking, I felt better than I'd dared to hope. But there was a silence from her side of the table that felt terribly heavy.

"So," I said, to break it. "What do you think?"

She took a moment to consider that, and I didn't blame her. "I think that we're not the strangers we were," she said finally, "and making a new friend is never a bad thing. I think I'm glad I know about Mr. Yow, Git Down and that I told you what I did."

"I am, too." And it was true.

"Now may I ask you two questions?"

"Of course."

"How much of what they call 'survivor guilt' are you feeling?"

"I thought you said you weren't a shrink."

"I'm not, but I read the magazines and have even been known to watch Oprah. That my husband does know, although I prefer not to rub his nose in it. So ... how much, Scott?"

I considered the question. It was a good one—and, of course, it was one I'd asked myself on more than one of those sleepless nights. "Quite a lot," I said. "Also, quite a lot of relief, I won't lie about that. If Mr. Yow, Git Down was a real person, he'd never have to pick up another restaurant tab. Not when I was with him, at least." I paused. "Does that shock you?"

She reached across the table and briefly touched my hand. "Not even a little."

Hearing her say that made me feel better than I would have believed. I gave her hand a brief squeeze and then let it go. "What's your other question?"

"How important to you is it that I believe your story about these things coming back?"

I thought this was an excellent question, even though the Lucite cube was right there next to the sugar bowl. Such items are not exactly rare, after all. And I thought that if she had majored in psychology rather than German, she probably would have done fine.

"Not as important as I thought an hour ago," I said. "Just telling it has been a help."

She nodded and smiled. "Good. Now here's my best guess: someone is very likely playing a game with you. Not a nice one."

"Trickin' on me," I said. I tried not to show it, but I'd rarely been so disappointed. Maybe a layer of disbelief settles over people in certain circumstances, protecting them. Or maybe—probably—I hadn't conveyed my own sense that this thing was just ... happening. Still happening. The way avalanches do.

"Trickin' on you," she agreed, and then: "But you don't believe it."

More points for perception. I nodded. "I locked the door when I went out, and it was locked when I came back from Staples. I heard the

clunk the tumblers make when they turn. They're loud. You can't miss them."

"Still ... survivor guilt is a funny thing. And powerful, at least according to the magazines."

"This ..." This isn't survivor guilt was what I meant to say, but it would have been the wrong thing. I had a fighting chance to make a new friend here, and having a new friend would be good, no matter how the rest of this came out. So I amended it. "I don't think this is survivor guilt." I pointed to the Lucite cube. "It's right there, isn't it? Like Sonja's sunglasses. You see it. I do, too. I suppose I could have bought it myself, but ..." I shrugged, trying to convey what we both surely knew: anything is possible.

"I don't think you did that. But neither can I accept the idea that a trapdoor opened between reality and the twilight zone and these things fell out."

Yes, that was the problem. For Paula the idea that the Lucite cube and the other things which had appeared in my apartment had some supernatural origin was automatically off-limits, no matter how much the facts might seem to support the idea. What I needed to do was to decide if I needed to argue the point more than I needed to make a friend.

I decided I did not.

"All right," I said. I caught the waiter's eye and made a check-writing gesture in the air. "I can accept your inability to accept."

"Can you?" she asked, looking at me closely.

"Yes." And I thought it was true. "If, that is, we could have a cup of coffee from time to time. Or just say hi in the lobby."

"Absolutely." But she sounded absent, not really in the conversation. She was looking at the Lucite cube with the steel penny inside it.

Then she looked up at me. I could almost see a lightbulb appearing over her head, like in a cartoon. She reached out and grasped the cube with one hand. I could never convey the depth of the dread I felt when she did that, but what could I say? We were New Yorkers in a clean, well-lighted place. For her part, she'd already laid down the ground rules, and they pretty firmly excluded the supernatural. The supernatural was out of bounds. Anything hit there was a do-over.

And there was a light in Paula's eyes. One that suggested Ms. Yow, Git Down was in the house, and I know from personal experience that's a hard voice to resist.

"Give it to me," she proposed, smiling into my eyes. When she did that I could see—for the first time, really—that she was sexy as well as pretty.

"Why?" As if I didn't know.

"Call it my fee for listening to your story."

"I don't know if that's such a good—"

"It is, though," she said. She was warming to her own inspiration, and when people do that, they rarely take no for an answer. "It's a great idea. I'll make sure this piece of memorabilia at least doesn't come back to you, wagging its tail behind it. We've got a safe in the apartment." She made a charming little pantomime gesture of shutting a safe door, twirling the combination, and then throwing the key back over her shoulder.

"All right," I said. "It's my gift to you." And I felt something that might have been mean-spirited gladness. Call it the voice of Mr. Yow, You'll Find Out. Apparently just getting it off my chest wasn't enough, after all. She hadn't believed me, and at least part of me did want to be believed and resented Paula for not getting what it wanted. That part knew that letting her take the Lucite cube was an absolutely terrible

idea, but was glad to see her tuck it away in her purse, just the same.

“There,” she said briskly. “Mama say bye-bye, make all gone. Maybe when it doesn’t come back in a week—or two, I guess it all depends on how stubborn your subconscious wants to be—you can start giving the rest of the things away.” And her saying that was her real gift to me that day, although I didn’t know it then.

“Maybe so,” I said, and smiled. Big smile for the new friend. Big smile for pretty Mama. All the time thinking, You’ll find out.

Yow.

*

She did.

Three nights later, while I was watching Chuck Scarborough explain the city’s latest transit woes on the six o’clock news, my doorbell rang. Since no one had been announced, I assumed it was a package, maybe even Rafe with something from FedEx. I opened the door and there stood Paula Robeson.

This was not the woman with whom I’d had lunch. Call this version of Paula Ms. Yow, Ain’t That Chemotherapy Nasty. She was wearing a little lipstick but nothing else in the way of makeup, and her complexion was a sickly shade of yellow-white. There were dark brownish purple arcs under her eyes. She might have given her hair a token swipe with the brush before coming down from the fifth floor, but it hadn’t done much good. It looked like straw and stuck out on either side of her head in a way that would have been comic-strip funny under other circumstances. She was holding the Lucite cube up in front of her breasts, allowing me to note that the well-kept nails on that hand were gone. She’d chewed them away, right down to the quick. And my first thought, God help me, was yep, she found out.

She held it out to me. “Take it back,” she said.

I did so without a word.

“His name was Roland Abelson,” she said. “Wasn’t it?”

“Yes.”

“He had red hair.”

“Yes.”

“Not married but paying child support to a woman in Rahway.”

I hadn’t known that—didn’t believe anyone at Light and Bell had known that—but I nodded again, and not just to keep her rolling. I was sure she was right. “What was her name, Paula?” Not knowing why I was asking, not yet, just knowing I had to know.

“Tonya Gregson.” It was as if she was in a trance. There was something in her eyes, though, something so terrible I could hardly stand to look at it. Nevertheless, I stored the name away. Tonya Gregson, Rahway. And then, like some guy doing stockroom inventory: One Lucite cube with penny inside.

“He tried to crawl under his desk, did you know that? No, I can see you didn’t. His hair was on fire and he was crying. Because in that instant he understood he was never going to own a catamaran or even mow his lawn again.” She reached out and put a hand on my cheek, a gesture so intimate it would have been shocking even if her hand had not been so cold. “At the end, he would have given every cent he had, and every stock option he held, just to be able to mow his lawn again. Do you believe that?”

“Yes.”

“The place was full of screams, he could smell jet fuel, and he understood it was his dying hour. Do you understand that? Do you understand the enormity of that?”

I nodded. I couldn't speak. You could have put a gun to my head and I still wouldn't have been able to speak.

"The politicians talk about memorials and courage and wars to end terrorism, but burning hair is apolitical." She bared her teeth in an unspeakable grin. A moment later it was gone. "He was trying to crawl under his desk with his hair on fire. There was a plastic thing under his desk, a what-do-you-call it—"

"Mat—"

"Yes, a mat, a plastic mat, and his hands were on that and he could feel the ridges in the plastic and smell his own burning hair. Do you understand that?"

I nodded. I started to cry. It was Roland Abelson we were talking about, this guy I used to work with. He was in Liability and I didn't know him very well. To say hi to is all; how was I supposed to know he had a kid in Rahway? And if I hadn't played hooky that day, my hair probably would have burned, too. I'd never really understood that before.

"I don't want to see you again," she said. She flashed her gruesome grin once more, but now she was crying, too. "I don't care about your problems. I don't care about any of the shit you found. We're quits. From now on you leave me alone." She started to turn away, then turned back. She said: "They did it in the name of God, but there is no God. If there was a God, Mr. Staley, He would have struck all eighteen of them dead in their boarding lounges with their boarding passes in their hands, but no God did. They called for passengers to get on and those fucks just got on."

I watched her walk back to the elevator. Her back was very stiff. Her hair stuck out on either side of her head, making her look like a girl in a Sunday funnies cartoon. She didn't want to see me anymore, and I didn't blame her. I closed the door and looked at the steel Abe Lincoln in the Lucite cube. I looked at him for quite a long time. I thought about how the hair of his beard would have smelled if U.S.

Grant had stuck one of his everlasting cigars in it. That unpleasant frying aroma. On TV, someone was saying that there was a mattress blowout going on at Sleepy's. After that, Len Berman came on and talked about the Jets.

*

That night I woke up at two in the morning, listening to the voices whisper. I hadn't had any dreams or visions of the people who owned the objects, hadn't seen anyone with their hair on fire or jumping from the windows to escape the burning jet fuel, but why would I? I knew who they were, and the things they left behind had been left for me. Letting Paula Robeson take the Lucite cube had been wrong, but only because she was the wrong person.

And speaking of Paula, one of the voices was hers. You can start giving the rest of the things away, it said. And it said, I guess it all depends on how stubborn your subconscious wants to be.

I lay back down and after a while I was able to go to sleep. I dreamed I was in Central Park, feeding the ducks, when all at once there was a loud noise like a sonic boom and smoke filled the sky. In my dream, the smoke smelled like burning hair.

*

I thought about Tonya Gregson in Rahway—Tonya and the child who might or might not have Roland Abelson's eyes—and thought I'd have to work up to that one. I decided to start with Bruce Mason's widow.

I took the train to Dobbs Ferry and called a taxi from the station. The cabbie took me to a Cape Cod house on a residential street. I gave him some money, told him to wait—I wouldn't be long—and rang the doorbell. I had a box under one arm. It looked like the kind that contains a bakery cake.

I only had to ring once because I'd called ahead and Janice Mason was expecting me. I had my story carefully prepared and told it with some confidence, knowing that the taxi sitting in the driveway, its meter running, would forestall any detailed cross-examination.

On September seventh, I said—the Friday before—I had tried to blow a note from the conch Bruce kept on his desk, as I had heard Bruce himself do at the Jones Beach picnic. (Janice, Mrs. Lord of the Flies, nodding; she had been there, of course.) Well, I said, to make a long story short, I had persuaded Bruce to let me have the conch shell over the weekend so I could practice. Then, on Tuesday morning, I'd awakened with a raging sinus infection and a horrible headache to go with it. (This was a story I had already told several people.) I'd been drinking a cup of tea when I heard the boom and saw the rising smoke. I hadn't thought of the conch shell again until just this week. I'd been cleaning out my little utility closet and by damn, there it was. And I just thought ... well, it's not much of a keepsake, but I just thought maybe you'd like to ... you know ...

Her eyes filled up with tears just as mine had when Paula brought back Roland Abelson's "retirement fund," only these weren't accompanied by the look of fright that I'm sure was on my own face as Paula stood there with her stiff hair sticking out on either side of her head. Janice told me she would be glad to have any keepsake of Bruce.

"I can't get over the way we said good-bye," she said, holding the box in her arms. "He always left very early because he took the train. He kissed me on the cheek and I opened one eye and asked him if he'd bring back a pint of half-and-half. He said he would. That's the last thing he ever said to me. When he asked me to marry him, I felt like Helen of Troy—stupid but absolutely true—and I wish I'd said something better than 'Bring home a pint of half-and-half.' But we'd been married a long time, and it seemed like business as usual that day, and ... we don't know, do we?"

"No."

“Yes. Any parting could be forever, and we don’t know. Thank you, Mr. Staley. For coming out and bringing me this. That was very kind.” She smiled a little then. “Do you remember how he stood on the beach with his shirt off and blew it?”

“Yes,” I said, and looked at the way she held the box. Later she would sit down and take the shell out and hold it on her lap and cry. I knew that the conch, at least, would never come back to my apartment. It was home.

*

I returned to the station and caught the train back to New York. The cars were almost empty at that time of day, early afternoon, and I sat by a rain-and dirt-streaked window, looking out at the river and the approaching skyline. On cloudy and rainy days, you almost seem to be creating that skyline out of your own imagination, a piece at a time.

Tomorrow I’d go to Rahway, with the penny in the Lucite cube. Perhaps the child would take it in his or her chubby hand and look at it curiously. In any case, it would be out of my life. I thought the only difficult thing to get rid of would be Jimmy Eagleton’s Farting Cushion—I could hardly tell Mrs. Eagleton I’d brought it home for the weekend in order to practice using it, could I? But necessity is the mother of invention, and I was confident that I would eventually think of some halfway plausible story.

It occurred to me that other things might show up, in time. And I’d be lying if I told you I found that possibility entirely unpleasant. When it comes to returning things which people believe have been lost forever, things that have weight, there are compensations. Even if they’re only little things, like a pair of joke sunglasses or a steel penny in a Lucite cube ... yeah. I’d have to say there are compensations.

U-TURN, U-DIE!

TIMOTHY BUSFIELD

TRUCKS

**BASED ON A SHORT STORY BY
STEPHEN KING**



TRUCKS

Stephen King

The guy's name was Snodgrass and I could see him getting ready to do something crazy. His eyes had gotten bigger, showing a lot of the whites, like a dog getting ready to fight. The two kids who had come skidding into the parking lot in the old Fury were trying to talk to him, but his head was cocked as though he was hearing other voices. He had a tight little pot-belly encased in a good suit that was getting a little shiny in the seat. He was a salesman and he kept his display bag close to him, like a pet dog that had gone to sleep.

"Try the radio again," the truck driver at the counter said.

The short-order cook shrugged and turned it on. He flipped it across the band and got nothing but static.

"You went too fast," the trucker protested. "You might have missed something."

"Hell," the short-order cook said. He was an elderly black man with a smile of gold and he wasn't looking at the trucker. He was looking through the diner-length picture window at the parking lot.

Seven or eight heavy trucks were out there, engines rumbling in low, idling roars that sounded like big cats purring. There were a couple of Macks, a Hemingway, and four or five Reos. Trailer trucks, interstate haulers with a lot of license plates and CB whip antennas on the back.

The kids' Fury was lying on its roof at the end of long, looping skid marks in the loose crushed rock of the parking lot. It had been battered into senseless junk. At the entrance to the truck stop's turnaround, there was a blasted Cadillac. Its owner stared out of the star-shattered windshield like a gutted fish. Horn-rimmed glasses hung from one ear.

Halfway across the lot from it lay the body of a girl in a pink dress. She had jumped from the Caddy when she saw it wasn't going to make it. She had hit running but never had a chance. She was the

worst, even though she was face down. There were flies around her in clouds.

Across the road an old Ford station wagon had been slammed through the guardrails. That had happened an hour ago. No one had been by since then. You couldn't see the turnpike from the window and the phone was out.

"You went too fast," the trucker was protesting. "You oughta—"

That was when Snodgrass bolted. He turned the table over getting up, smashing coffee cups and sending sugar in a wild spray. His eyes were wilder than ever, and his mouth hung loosely and he was blabbering: "We gotta get outta here we gotta getouttahere wegottagetouttahere—"

The kid shouted and his girl friend screamed.

I was on the stool closest to the door and I got a handful of his shirt, but he tore loose. He was cranked up all the way. He would have gone through a bank-vault door.

He slammed out the door and then he was sprinting across the gravel toward the drainage ditch on the left. Two of the trucks lunged after him, smokestacks blowing diesel exhaust dark brown against the sky, huge rear wheels machine-gunning gravel up in sprays.

He couldn't have been any more than five or six running steps from the edge of the flat parking lot when he turned back to look, fear scrawled on his face. His feet tangled each other and he faltered and almost fell down. He got his balance again, but it was too late.

One of the trucks gave way and the other charged down, huge front grill glittering savagely in the sun. Snodgrass screamed, the sound high and thin, nearly lost under the Reo's heavy diesel roar.

It didn't drag him under. As things turned out, it would have been better if it had. Instead it drove him up and out, the way a punter

kicks a football. For a moment he was silhouetted against the hot afternoon sky like a crippled scarecrow, and then he was gone into the drainage ditch.

The big truck's brakes hissed like dragon's breath, its front wheels locked, digging grooves into the gravel skin of the lot, and it stopped inches from jackknifing in. The bastard.

The girl in the booth screamed. Both hands were clamped into her cheeks, dragging the flesh down, turning it into a witch's mask.

Glass broke. I turned my head and saw that the trucker had squeezed his glass hard enough to break it. I don't think he knew it yet. Milk and a few drops of blood fell onto the counter.

The black counterman was frozen by the radio, a dishcloth in hand, looking amazed. His teeth glittered. For a moment there was no sound but the buzzing Westclox and the rumbling of the Reo's engine as it returned to its fellows. Then the girl began to cry and it was all right—or at least better.

My own car was around the side, also battered to junk. It was a 1971 Camaro and I had still been paying on it, but I didn't suppose that mattered now.

There was no one in the trucks.

The sun glittered and flashed on empty cabs. The wheels turned themselves. You couldn't think about it too much. You'd go insane if you thought about it too much. Like Snodgrass.

Two hours passed. The sun began to go down. Outside, the trucks patrolled in slow circles and figure eights. Their parking lights and running lights had come on.

I walked the length of the counter twice to get the kinks out of my legs and then sat in a booth by the long front window. It was a standard truck stop, close to the major thruway, a complete service

facility out back, gas and diesel fuel both. The truckers came here for coffee and pie.

“Mister?” The voice was hesitant.

I looked around. It was the two kids from the Fury. The boy looked about nineteen. He had long hair and a beard that was just starting to take hold. His girl looked younger.

“Yeah?”

“What happened to you?”

I shrugged. “I was coming up the interstate to Pelson,” I said. “A truck came up behind me—I could see it in the mirror a long way off—really highballing. You could hear it a mile down the road. It whipped out around a VW Beetle and just snapped it off the road with the whiplash of the trailer, the way you’d snap a ball of paper off a table with your finger. I thought the truck would go, too. No driver could have held it with the trailer whipping that way. But it didn’t go. The VW flopped over six or seven times and exploded. And the truck got the next one coming up the same way. It was coming up on me and I took the exit ramp in a hurry.” I laughed but my heart wasn’t in it. “Right into a truck stop, of all places. From the frying pan into the fire.”

The girl swallowed. “We saw a Greyhound going north in the southbound lane. It was ... plowing ... through cars. It exploded and burned but before it did ... slaughter.”

A Greyhound bus. That was something new. And bad.

Outside, all the headlights suddenly popped on in unison, bathing the lot in an eerie, depthless glare. Growling, they cruised back and forth. The headlights seemed to give them eyes, and in the growing gloom, the dark trailer boxes looked like the hunched, squared-off shoulders of prehistoric giants.

The counterman said, "Is it safe to turn on the lights?"

"Do it," I said, "and find out."

He flipped the switches and a series of flyspecked globes overhead came on. At the same time a neon sign out front stuttered into life: "Conant's Truck Stop & Diner—Good Eats." Nothing happened. The trucks continued their patrol.

"I can't understand it," the trucker said. He had gotten down from his stool and was walking around, his hand wrapped in a red engineer's bandanna. "I ain't had no problems with my rig. She's a good old girl. I pulled in here a little past one for a spaghetti dinner and this happens." He waved his arms and the bandanna flapped. "My own rig's out there right now, the one with the weak left taillight. Been driving her for six years. But if I stepped out that door—"

"It's just starting," the counterman said. His eyes were hooded and obsidian. "It must be bad if that radio's gone. It's just starting."

The girl had drained as pale as milk. "Never mind that," I said to the counterman. "Not yet."

"What would do it?" The trucker was worrying. "Electrical storms in the atmosphere? Nuclear testing? What?"

"Maybe they're mad," I said.

Around seven o'clock I walked over to the counterman. "How are we fixed here? I mean, if we have to stay awhile?"

His brow wrinkled. "Not so bad. Yest'y was delivery day. We got two-three hunnert hamburg patties, canned fruit and vegetables, dry cereal, aigs ... no more milk than what's in the cooler, but the water's from the well. If we had to, the five of us cud get on for a month or more."

The trucker came over and blinked at us. "I'm dead out of cigarettes. Now that cigarette machine ..."

"It ain't my machine," the counterman said. "No sir."

The trucker had a steel pinch bar he'd gotten in the supply room out back. He went to work on the machine.

The kid went down to where the jukebox glittered and flashed and plugged in a quarter. John Fogarty began to sing about being born on the bayou.

I sat down and looked out the window. I saw something I didn't like right away. A Chevy light pickup had joined the patrol, like a Shetland pony amid Percherons. I watched it until it rolled impartially over the body of the girl from the Caddy and then I looked away.

"We made them!" the girl cried out with sudden wretchedness. "They can't!"

Her boy friend told her to hush. The trucker got the cigarette machine open and helped himself to six or eight packs of Viceroy's. He put them in different pockets and then ripped one pack open. From the intent expression on his face, I wasn't sure if he was going to smoke them or eat them up.

Another record came on the juke. It was eight o'clock.

At eight-thirty the power went off.

When the lights went, the girl screamed, a cry that stopped suddenly, as if her boy friend had put his hand over her mouth. The jukebox died with a deepening, unwinding sound.

"What the Christ!" the trucker said.

"Counterman!" I called. "You got any candles?"

"I think so. Wait ... yeah. Here's a few."

I got up and took them. We lit them and started placing them around. "Be careful," I said. "If we burn the place down there's the devil to pay."

He chuckled morosely. "You know it."

When we were done placing the candles, the kid and his girl were huddled together and the trucker was by the back door, watching six more heavy trucks weaving in and out between the concrete fuel islands. "This changes things, doesn't it?" I said.

"Damn right, if the power's gone for good."

"How bad?"

"Hamburg'll go over in three days. Rest of the meat and aigs'll go by about as quick. The cans will be okay, an' the dry stuff. But that ain't the worst. We ain't gonna have no water without the pump."

"How long?"

"Without no water? A week."

"Fill every empty jug you've got. Fill them till you can't draw anything but air. Where are the toilets? There's good water in the tanks."

"Employees' res'room is in the back. But you have to go outside to get to the lady's and gent's."

"Across to the service building?" I wasn't ready for that. Not yet.

"No. Out the side door an' up a ways."

"Give me a couple of buckets."

He found two galvanized pails. The kid strolled up.

"What are you doing?"

“We have to have water. All we can get.”

“Give me a bucket then.”

I handed him one.

“Jerry!” the girl cried. “You—”

He looked at her and she didn’t say anything else, but she picked up a napkin and began to tear at the corners. The trucker was smoking another cigarette and grinning at the floor. He didn’t speak up.

We walked over to the side door where I’d come in that afternoon and stood there for a second, watching the shadows wax and wane as the trucks went back and forth.

“Now?” the kid said. His arm brushed mine and the muscles were jumping and humming like wires. If anyone bumped him he’d go straight up to heaven.

“Relax,” I said.

He smiled a little. It was a sick smile, but better than none.

“Okay.”

We slipped out.

The night air had cooled. Crickets chirred in the grass, and frogs thumped and croaked in the drainage ditch. Out here the rumble of the trucks was louder, more menacing, the sound of beasts. From inside it was a movie. Out here it was real, you could get killed.

We slid along the tiled outer wall. A slight overhang gave us some shadow. My Camaro was huddled against the cyclone fence across from us, and faint light from the roadside sign glinted on broken metal and puddles of gas and oil.

“You take the lady’s,” I whispered. “Fill your bucket from the toilet tank and wait.”

Steady diesel rumblings. It was tricky; you thought they were coming, but it was only echoes bouncing off the building’s odd corners. It was only twenty feet, but it seemed much farther.

He opened the lady’s-room door and went in. I went past and then I was inside the gent’s. I could feel my muscles loosen and a breath whistled out of me. I caught a glimpse of myself in the mirror, strained white face with dark eyes.

I got the porcelain tank cover off and dunked the bucket full. I poured a little back to keep from sloshing and went to the door. “Hey?”

“Yeah,” he breathed.

“You ready?”

“Yeah.”

We went out again. We got maybe six steps before lights blared in our faces. It had crept up, big wheels barely turning on the gravel. It had been lying in wait and now it leaped at us, electric headlamps glowing in savage circles, the huge chrome grill seeming to snarl.

The kid froze, his face stamped with horror, his eyes blank, the pupils dilated down to pinpricks. I gave him a hard shove, spilling half his water.

“Go!”

The thunder of that diesel engine rose to a shriek. I reached over the kid’s shoulder to yank the door open, but before I could it was shoved from inside. The kid lunged in and I dodged after him. I looked back to see the truck—a big cab-over Peterbilt—kiss off the tiled outside wall, peeling away jagged hunks of tile. There was an ear-grinding squealing noise, like gigantic fingers scraping a

blackboard. Then the right mudguard and the corners of the grill smashed into the still-open door, sending glass in a crystal spray and snapping the door's steel-gauge hinges like tissue paper. The door flew into the night like something out of a Dali painting and the truck accelerated toward the front parking lot, its exhaust racketing like machine-gun fire. It had a disappointed, angry sound.

The kid put his bucket down and collapsed into the girl's arms, shuddering.

My heart was thudding heavily in my chest and my calves felt like water. And speaking of water, we had brought back about a bucket and a quarter between us. It hardly seemed worth it.

"I want to block up that doorway," I said to the counterman. "What will do the trick?"

"Well—"

The trucker broke in: "Why? One of those big trucks couldn't get a wheel in through there."

"It's not the big trucks I'm worried about."

The trucker began hunting for a smoke.

"We got some sheet sidin' out in the supply room," the counterman said. "Boss was gonna put up a shed to store butane gas."

"We'll put them across and prop them with a couple of booths."

"It'll help," the trucker said.

It took about an hour and by the end we'd all gotten into the act, even the girl. It was fairly solid. Of course, fairly solid wasn't going to be good enough, not if something hit it at full speed. I think they all knew that.

There were still three booths ranged along the big glass picture window and I sat down in one of them. The clock behind the counter had stopped at 8:32, but it felt like ten. Outside the trucks prowled and growled. Some left, hurrying off to unknown missions, and others came. There were three pickup trucks now, circling importantly amid their bigger brothers.

I was starting to doze, and instead of counting sheep I counted trucks. How many in the state, how many in America? Trailer trucks, pickup trucks, flatbeds, day-haulers, three-quarter-tons, army convoy trucks by the tens of thousands, and buses. Nightmare vision of a city bus, two wheels in the gutter and two wheels on the pavement roaring along and plowing through screaming pedestrians like ninepins.

I shook it off and fell into a light, troubled sleep.

It must have been early morning when Snodgrass began to scream. A thin new moon had risen and was shining icily through a high scud of cloud. A new clattering note had been added, counterpointing the throaty, idling roar of the big rigs. I looked for it and saw a hay baler circling out by the darkened sign. The moonlight glanced off the sharp, turning spokes of its packer.

The scream came again, unmistakably from the drainage ditch:
“Help ... meeeee ...”

“What was that?” It was the girl. In the shadows her eyes were wide and she looked horribly frightened.

“Nothing,” I said.

“Help ... meeeee ...”

“He’s alive,” she whispered. “Oh, God. Alive.”

I didn’t have to see him. I could imagine it all too well. Snodgrass lying half in and half out of the drainage ditch, back and legs broken,

carefully-pressed suit caked with mud, white, gasping face turned up to the indifferent moon ...

“I don’t hear anything,” I said. “Do you?”

She looked at me. “How can you? How?”

“Now if you woke him up,” I said, jerking a thumb at the kid, “he might hear something. He might go out there. Would you like that?”

Her face began to twitch and pull as if stitched by invisible needles. “Nothing,” she whispered. “Nothing out there.”

She went back to her boy friend and pressed her head against his chest. His arms came up around her in his sleep.

No one else woke up. Snodgrass cried and wept and screamed for a long time, and then he stopped.

Dawn.

Another truck had arrived, this one a flatbed with a giant rack for hauling cars. It was joined by a bulldozer. That scared me.

The trucker came over and twitched my arm. “Come on back,” he whispered excitedly. The others were still sleeping. “Come look at this.”

I followed him back to the supply room. About ten trucks were patrolling out there. At first I didn’t see anything new.

“See?” he said, and pointed. “Right there.”

Then I saw. One of the pickups was stopped dead. It was sitting there like a lump, all of the menace gone out of it.

“Out of gas?”

“That’s right, buddy. And they can’t pump their own. We got it knocked. All we have to do is wait.” He smiled and fumbled for a cigarette.

It was about nine o’clock and I was eating a piece of yesterday’s pie for breakfast when the air horn began—long, rolling blasts that rattled your skull. We went over to the windows and looked out. The trucks were sitting still, idling. One trailer truck, a huge Reo with a red cab, had pulled up almost to the narrow verge of grass between the restaurant and the parking lot. At this distance the square grill was huge and murderous. The tires would stand to a man’s chest cavity.

The horn began to blare again; hard, hungry blasts that traveled off in straight, flat lines and echoed back. There was a pattern. Shorts and longs in some kind of rhythm.

“That’s Morse!” the kid, Jerry, suddenly exclaimed.

The trucker looked at him. “How would you know?”

The kid went a little red. “I learned it in the Boy Scouts.”

“You?” the trucker said. “You? Wow.” He shook his head.

“Never mind,” I said. “Do you remember enough to—”

“Sure. Let me listen. Got a pencil?”

The counterman gave him one, and the kid began to write letters on a napkin. After a while he stopped. “It’s just saying ‘Attention’ over and over again. Wait.”

We waited. The air horn beat its longs and shorts into the still morning air. Then the pattern changed and the kid started to write again. We hung over his shoulders and watched the message form. “Someone must pump fuel. Someone will not be harmed. All fuel

must be pumped. This shall be done now. Now someone will pump fuel.”

The air blasts kept up, but the kid stopped writing. “It’s just repeating ‘Attention’ again,” he said.

The truck repeated its message again and again. I didn’t like the look of the words, printed on the napkin in block style. They looked machinelike, ruthless. There would be no compromise with those words. You did or you didn’t.

“Well,” the kid said, “what do we do?”

“Nothing,” the trucker said. His face was excited and working. “All we have to do is wait. They must all be low on fuel. One of the little ones out back has already stopped. All we have to do—”

The air horn stopped. The truck backed up and joined its fellows. They waited in a semicircle, headlights pointed in toward us.

“There’s a bulldozer out there,” I said.

Jerry looked at me. “You think they’ll rip the place down?”

“Yes.”

He looked at the counterman. “They couldn’t do that, could they?”

The counterman shrugged.

“We oughta vote,” the trucker said. “No blackmail, damn it. All we gotta do is wait.” He had repeated it three times now, like a charm.

“Okay,” I said. “Vote.”

“Wait,” the trucker said immediately.

“I think we ought to fuel them,” I said. “We can wait for a better chance to get away. Counterman?”

“Stay in here,” he said. “You want to be their slaves? That’s what it’ll come to. You want to spend the rest of your life changin’ oil filters every time one of those ... things blats its horn? Not me.” He looked darkly out the window. “Let them starve.”

I looked at the kid and the girl.

“I think he’s right,” he said. “That’s the only way to stop them. If someone was going to rescue us, they would have. God knows what’s going on in other places.” And the girl, with Snodgrass in her eyes, nodded and stepped closer to him.

“That’s it then,” I said.

I went over to the cigarette machine and got a pack without looking at the brand. I’d stopped smoking a year ago, but this seemed like a good time to start again. The smoke rasped harsh in my lungs.

Twenty minutes crawled by. The trucks out front waited. In back, they were lining up at the pumps.

“I think it was all a bluff,” the trucker said. “Just—”

Then there was a louder, harsher, choppy note, the sound of an engine revving up and falling off, then revving up again. The bulldozer.

It glittered like a yellowjacket in the sun, a Caterpillar with clattering steel treads. Black smoke belched from its short stack as it wheeled around to face us.

“It’s going to charge,” the trucker said. There was a look of utter surprise on his face. “It’s going to charge!”

“Get back,” I said. “Behind the counter.”

The bulldozer was still revving. Gear-shift levers moved themselves. Heat shimmer hung over its smoking stack. Suddenly the dozer

blade lifted, a heavy steel curve clotted with dried dirt. Then, with a screaming howl of power, it roared straight at us.

“The counter!” I gave the trucker a shove, and that started them.

There was a small concrete verge between the parking lot and the grass. The dozer charged over it, blade lifting for a moment, and then it rammed the front wall head on. Glass exploded inward with a heavy, coughing roar and the wood frame crashed into splinters. One of the overhead light globes fell, splashing more glass. Crockery fell from the shelves. The girl was screaming but the sound was almost lost beneath the steady, pounding roar of the Cat’s engine.

It reversed, clanked across the chewed strip of lawn, and lunged forward again, sending the remaining booths crashing and spinning. The pie case fell off the counter, sending pie wedges skidding across the floor.

The counterman was crouching with his eyes shut, and the kid was holding his girl. The trucker was walleyed with fear.

“We gotta stop it,” he gibbered. “Tell ‘em we’ll do it, we’ll do anything —”

“A little late, isn’t it?”

The Cat reversed and got ready for another charge. New nicks in its blade glittered and heliographed in the sun. It lurched forward with a bellowing roar and this time it took down the main support to the left of what had been the window. That section of the roof fell in with a grinding crash. Plaster dust billowed up.

The dozer pulled free. Beyond it I could see the group of trucks, waiting.

I grabbed the counterman. “Where are the oil drums?” The cookstoves ran on butane gas, but I had seen vents for a warm-air furnace.

“Back of the storage room,” he said.

I grabbed the kid. “Come on.”

We got up and ran into the storage room. The bulldozer hit again and the building trembled. Two or three more hits and it would be able to come right up to the counter for a cup of coffee.

There were two large fifty-gallon drums with feeds to the furnace and turn spigots. There was a carton of empty ketchup bottles near the back door. “Get those, Jerry.”

While he did, I pulled off my shirt and yanked it to rags. The dozer hit again and again, and each hit was accompanied by the sound of more breakage.

I filled four of the ketchup bottles from the spigots, and he stuffed rags into them. “You play football?” I asked him.

“In high school.”

“Okay. Pretend you’re going in from the five.”

We went out into the restaurant. The whole front wall was open to the sky. Sprays of glass glittered like diamonds. One heavy beam had fallen diagonally across the opening. The dozer was backing up to take it out and I thought that this time it would keep coming, ripping through the stools and then demolishing the counter itself.

We knelt down and thrust the bottles out. “Light them up,” I said to the trucker.

He got his matches out, but his hands were shaking too badly and he dropped them. The counterman picked them up, struck one, and the hunks of shirt blazed greasily alight.

“Quick,” I said.

We ran, the kid a little in the lead. Glass crunched and gritted underfoot. There was a hot, oily smell in the air. Everything was very loud, very bright.

The dozer charged.

The kid dodged out under the beam and stood silhouetted in front of that heavy tempered steel blade. I went out to the right. The kid's first throw fell short. His second hit the blade and the flame splashed harmlessly.

He tried to turn and then it was on him, a rolling juggernaut, four tons of steel. His hands flew up and then he was gone, chewed under.

I buttonhooked around and lobbed one bottle into the open cab and the second right into the works. They exploded together in a leaping shout of flame.

For a moment the dozer's engine rose in an almost human squeal of rage and pain. It wheeled in a maddened half-circle, ripping out the left corner of the diner, and rolled drunkenly toward the drainage ditch.

The steel treads were streaked and dotted with gore and where the kid had been there was something that looked like a crumpled towel.

The dozer got almost to the ditch, flames boiling from under its cowling and from the cockpit, and then it exploded in a geyser.

I stumbled backward and almost fell over a pile of rubble. There was a hot smell that wasn't just oil. It was burning hair. I was on fire.

I grabbed a tablecloth, jammed it on my head, ran behind the counter, and plunged my head into the sink hard enough to crack it on the bottom. The girl was screaming Jerry's name over and over in a shrieking insane litany.

I turned around and saw the huge car-carrier slowly rolling toward the defenseless front of the diner.

The trucker screamed and broke for the side door.

“Don’t!” the counterman cried. “Don’t do that—”

But he was out and sprinting for the drainage ditch and the open field beyond.

The truck must have been standing sentry just out of sight of that side door—a small panel job with “Wong’s Cash-and-Carry Laundry” written on the side. It ran him down almost before you could see it happen. Then it was gone and only the trucker was left, twisted into the gravel. He had been knocked out of his shoes.

The car-carrier rolled slowly over the concrete verge, onto the grass, over the kid’s remains, and stopped with its huge snout poking into the diner.

Its air horn let out a sudden, shattering honk, followed by another, and another.

“Stop!” the girl whimpered. “Stop, oh stop, please—”

But the honks went on a long time. It took only a minute to pick up the pattern. It was the same as before. It wanted someone to feed it and the others.

“I’ll go,” I said. “Are the pumps unlocked?”

The counterman nodded. He had aged fifty years.

“No!” the girl screamed. She threw herself at me. “You’ve got to stop them! Beat them, burn them, break them—” Her voice wavered and broke into a harsh bray of grief and loss.

The counterman held her. I went around the corner of the counter, picking my way through the rubble, and out through the supply room.

My heart was thudding heavily when I stepped out into the warm sun. I wanted another cigarette, but you don't smoke around fuel islands.

The trucks were still lined up. The laundry truck was crouched across the gravel from me like a hound dog, growling and rasping. A funny move and it would cream me. The sun glittered on its blank windshield and I shuddered. It was like looking into the face of an idiot.

I switched the pump to "on" and pulled out the nozzle; unscrewed the first gas cap and began to pump fuel.

It took me half an hour to pump the first tank dry and then I moved on to the second island. I was alternating between gas and diesel. Trucks marched by endlessly. I was beginning to understand now. I was beginning to see. People were doing this all over the country or they were lying dead like the trucker, knocked out of their boots with heavy treadmarks mashed across their guts.

The second tank was dry then and I went to the third. The sun was like a hammer and my head was starting to ache with the fumes. There were blisters in the soft webbing between thumb and index finger. But they wouldn't know about that. They would know about leaky manifolds and bad gaskets and frozen universal joints, but not about blisters or sunstroke or the need to scream. They needed to know only one thing about their late masters, and they knew it. We bleed.

The last tank was sucked dry and I threw the nozzle on the ground. Still there were more trucks, lined up around the corner. I twisted my head to relieve a crick in my neck and stared. The line went out of the front parking lot and up the road and out of sight, two and three lanes deep. It was like a nightmare of the Los Angeles Freeway at rush hour. The horizon shimmered and danced with their exhaust; the air stank of carburization.

"No," I said. "Out of gas. All gone, fellas."

And there was a heavier rumble, a bass note that shook the teeth. A huge silvery truck was pulling up, a tanker. Written on the side was: "Fill Up with Phillips 66—The Jetport Fuel"!

A heavy hose dropped out of the rear.

I went over, took it, flipped up the feeder plate on the first tank, and attached the hose. The truck began to pump. The stench of petroleum sank into me—the same stink that the dinosaurs must have died smelling as they went down into the tar pits. I filled the other two tanks and then went back to work.

Consciousness twinkled away to a point where I lost track of time and trucks. I unscrewed, rammed the nozzle into the hole, pumped until the hot, heavy liquid splurged out, then replaced the cap. My blisters broke, trickling pus down to my wrists. My head was pounding like a rotted tooth and my stomach rolled helplessly with the stench of hydrocarbons.

I was going to faint. I was going to faint and that would be the end of it. I would pump until I dropped.

Then there were hands on my shoulders, the dark hands of the counterman. "Go in," he said. "Rest yourself. I'll take over till dark. Try to sleep."

I handed him the pump.

But I can't sleep.

The girl is sleeping. She's sprawled over in the corner with her head on a tablecloth and her face won't unknot itself even in sleep. It's the timeless, ageless face of the warhag. I'm going to get her up pretty quick. It's twilight and the counterman has been out there for five hours.

Still they keep coming. I look out through the wrecked window and their headlights stretch for a mile or better, twinkling like yellow

sapphires in the growing darkness. They must be backed up all the way to the turnpike, maybe further.

The girl will have to take her turn. I can show her how. She'll say she can't, but she will. She wants to live.

You want to be their slaves? the counterman had said. That's what it'll come to. You want to spend the rest of your life changin' oil filters every time one of those things blats its horn?

We could run, maybe. It would be easy to make the drainage ditch now, the way they're stacked up. Run through the fields, through the marshy places where trucks would bog down like mastodons and go

—
—back to the caves.

Drawing pictures in charcoal. This is the moon god. This is a tree. This is a Mack semi overwhelming a hunter.

Not even that. So much of the world is paved now. Even the playgrounds are paved. And for the fields and marshes and deep woods there are tanks, half-tracks, flatbeds equipped with lasers, masers, heat-seeking radar. And little by little, they can make it into the world they want.

I can see great convoys of trucks filling the Okefenokee Swamp with sand, the bulldozers ripping through the national parks and wildlands, grading the earth flat, stamping it into one great flat plain. And then the hot-top trucks arriving.

But they're machines. No matter what's happened to them, what mass consciousness we've given them, they can't reproduce. In fifty or sixty years they'll be rusting hulks with all menace gone out of them, moveless carcasses for free men to stone and spit at.

And if I close my eyes I can see the production lines in Detroit and Dearborn and Youngstown and Mackinac, new trucks being put

together by blue-collars who no longer even punch a clock but only drop and are replaced.

The counterman is staggering a little now. He's an old bastard, too. I've got to wake the girl.

Two planes are leaving silver contrails etched across the darkening eastern horizon.

I wish I could believe there are people in them.



UNCLE OTTO'S TRUCK

Stephen King

It's a great relief to write this down.

I haven't slept well since I found my Uncle Otto dead and there have been times when I have really wondered if I have gone insane—or if I will. In a way it would all have been more merciful if I did not have the actual object here in my study, where I can look at it, or pick it up and heft it if I should want to. I don't want to do that; I don't want to touch that thing. But sometimes I do.

If I hadn't taken it away from his little one-room house when I fled from it, I could begin persuading myself it was all only an hallucination—a figment of an overworked and overstimulated brain. But it is there. It has weight. It can be hefted in the hand.

It all happened, you see.

Most of you reading this memoir will not believe that, not unless something like it has happened to you. I find that the matter of your belief and my relief are mutually exclusive, however, and so I will gladly tell the tale anyway. Believe what you want.

Any tale of grue should have a provenance or a secret. Mine has both. Let me begin with the provenance—by telling you how my Uncle Otto, who was rich by the standards of Castle County, happened to spend the last twenty years of his life in a one-room house with no plumbing on a back road in a small town.

Otto was born in 1905, the eldest of the five Schenck children. My father, born in 1920, was the youngest. I was the youngest of my father's children, born in 1955, and so Uncle Otto always seemed very old to me.

Like many industrious Germans, my grandfather and grandmother came to America with some money. My grandfather settled in Derry because of the lumber industry, which he knew something about. He did well, and his children were born into comfortable circumstances.

My grandfather died in 1925. Uncle Otto, then twenty, was the only child to receive a full inheritance. He moved to Castle Rock and began to speculate in real estate. In the next five years he made a lot of money dealing in wood and in land. He bought a large house on Castle Hill, had servants, and enjoyed his status as a young, relatively handsome (the qualifier “relatively” because he wore spectacles), extremely eligible bachelor. No one thought him odd. That came later.

He was hurt in the crash of ‘29—not as badly as some, but hurt is hurt. He held on to his big Castle Hill house until 1933, then sold it because a great tract of woodland had come on the market at a distress sale price and he wanted it desperately. The land belonged to the New England Paper Company.

New England Paper still exists today, and if you wanted to purchase shares in it, I would tell you to go right ahead. But in 1933 the company was offering huge chunks of land at fire-sale prices in a last-ditch effort to stay afloat.

How much land in the tract my uncle was after? That original, fabulous deed has been lost, and accounts differ ... but by all accounts, it was better than four thousand acres. Most of it was in Castle Rock, but it sprawled into Waterford and Harlow, as well. When the deal was broken down, New England Paper was offering it for about two dollars and fifty cents an acre ... if the purchaser would take it all.

That was a total price of about ten thousand dollars. Uncle Otto couldn’t swing it, and so he took a partner—a Yankee named George McCutcheon. You probably know the names Schenck and McCutcheon if you live in New England; the company was bought out long ago, but there are still Schenck and McCutcheon hardware stores in forty New England cities, and Schenck and McCutcheon lumberyards from Central Falls to Derry.

McCutcheon was a burly man with a great black beard. Like my Uncle Otto, he wore spectacles. Also like Uncle Otto, he had

inherited a sum of money. It must have been a fairish sum, because he and Uncle Otto together swung the purchase of that tract with no further trouble. Both of them were pirates under the skin and they got on well enough together. Their partnership lasted for twenty-two years—until the year I was born, in fact—and prosperity was all they knew.

But it all began with the purchase of those four thousand acres, and they explored them in McCutcheon's truck, cruising the woods roads and the pulper's tracks, grinding along in first gear for the most part, shuddering over washboards and splashing through washouts, McCutcheon at the wheel part of the time, my Uncle Otto at the wheel the rest of the time, two young men who had become New England land barons in the dark depths of the big Depression.

I don't know where McCutcheon came by that truck. It was a Cresswell, if it matters—a breed which no longer exists. It had a huge cab, painted bright red, wide running boards, and an electric starter, but if the starter ever failed, it could be cranked—although the crank could just as easily kick back and break your shoulder, if the man cranking wasn't careful. The bed was twenty feet long with stake sides, but what I remember best about that truck was its snout. Like the cab, it was red as blood. To get at the engine, you had to lift out two steel panels, one on either side. The radiator was as high as a grown man's chest. It was an ugly, monstrous thing.

McCutcheon's truck broke down and was repaired, broke down again and was repaired again. When the Cresswell finally gave up, it gave up in spectacular fashion. It went like the wonderful one-hoss shay in the Holmes poem.

McCutcheon and Uncle Otto were coming up the Black Henry Road one day in 1953, and by Uncle Otto's own admission both of them were "shithouse drunk." Uncle Otto downshifted to first in order to get up Trinity Hill. That went fine, but, drunk as he was, he never thought to shift up again coming down the far side. The Cresswell's tired old engine overheated. Neither Uncle Otto nor McCutcheon saw the needle go over the red mark by the letter H on the right side of the

dial. At the bottom of the hill, there was an explosion that blew the engine-compartment's folding sides out like red dragon's wings. The radiator cap rocketed into the summer sky. Steam plumed up like Old Faithful. Oil went in a gusher, drenching the windshield. Uncle Otto cramped down on the brake pedal but the Cresswell had developed a bad habit of shooting brake fluid over the last year or so and the pedal just sank to the mat. He couldn't see where he was driving and he ran off the road, first into a ditch and then out of it. If the Cresswell had stalled, all still might have been well. But the engine continued to run and it blew first one piston and then two more, like firecrackers on the Fourth of July. One of them, Uncle Otto said, zinged right through his door, which had flopped open. The hole was big enough to put a fist through. They came to rest in a field full of August goldenrod. They would have had a fine view of the White Mountains if the windshield hadn't been covered with Diamond Gem Oil.

That was the last roundup for McCutcheon's Cresswell; it never moved from that field again. Not that there was any squawk from the landlord; the two of them owned it, of course. Considerably sobered by the experience, the two men got out to examine the damage. Neither was a mechanic, but you didn't have to be to see that the wound was mortal. Uncle Otto was stricken—or so he told my father—and offered to pay for the truck. George McCutcheon told him not to be a fool. McCutcheon was, in fact, in a kind of ecstasy. He had taken one look at the field, at the view of the mountains, and had decided this was the place where he would build his retirement home. He told Uncle Otto just that, in tones one usually saves for a religious conversion. They walked back to the road together and hooked a ride into Castle Rock with the Cushman Bakery truck, which happened to be passing. McCutcheon told my father that it had been God's hand at work—he had been looking for just the perfect place, and there it had been all the time, in that field they passed three and four times a week, with never a spared glance. The hand of God, he reiterated, never knowing that he would die in that field two years later, crushed under the front end of his own truck—the truck which became Uncle Otto's truck when he died.

McCutcheon had Billy Dodd hook his wrecker up to the Cresswell and drag it around so it faced the road. So he could look at it, he said, every time he went by, and know that when Dodd hooked up to it again and dragged it away for good, it would be so that the construction men could come and dig him a cellar-hole. He was something of a sentimentalist, but he was not a man to let sentiment stand in the way of making a dollar. When a pulper named Baker came by a year later and offered to buy the Cresswell's wheels, tires and all, because they were the right size to fit his rig, McCutcheon took the man's twenty dollars like a flash. This was a man, remember, who was then worth a million dollars. He also told Baker to block the truck up aright smart. He said he didn't want to go past it and see it sitting in the field hip-deep in hay and timothy and goldenrod, like some old derelict. Baker did it. A year later the Cresswell rolled off the blocks and crushed McCutcheon to death. The old-timers told the story with relish, always ending by saying that they hoped old Georgie McCutcheon had enjoyed the twenty dollars he got for those wheels.

I grew up in Castle Rock. By the time I was born my father had worked for Schenck and McCutcheon almost ten years, and the truck, which had become Uncle Otto's along with everything else McCutcheon owned, was a landmark in my life. My mother shopped at Warren's in Bridgton, and the Black Henry Road was the way you got there. So every time we went, there was the truck, standing in that field with the White Mountains behind it. It was no longer blocked up—Uncle Otto said that one accident was enough—but just the thought of what had happened was enough to give a small boy in knee-pants a shiver.

It was there in the summer; in the fall with oak and elm trees blazing on the three edges of the field like torches; in the winter with drifts sometimes all the way up and over its bug-eyed headlights, so that it looked like a mastodon struggling in white quicksand; in the spring, when the field was a quagmire of March-mud and you wondered that it just didn't sink into the earth. If not for the underlying backbone of

good Maine rock, it might well have done just that. Through all the seasons and years, it was there.

I was even in it, once. My father pulled over to the side of the road one day when we were on our way to the Fryeburg Fair, took me by the hand and led me out to the field. That would have been 1960 or 1961, I suppose. I was frightened of the truck. I had heard the stories of how it had slithered forward and crushed my uncle's partner. I had heard these tales in the barbershop, sitting quiet as a mouse behind a Life magazine I couldn't read, listening to the men talk about how he had been crushed, and about how they hoped old Georgie had enjoyed his twenty dollars for those wheels. One of them—it might have been Billy Dodd, crazy Frank's father—said McCutcheon had looked like “a pumpkin that got squot by a tractor wheel.” That haunted my thoughts for months ... but my father, of course, had no idea of that.

My father just thought I might like to sit in the cab of that old truck; he had seen the way I looked at it every time we passed, mistaking my dread for admiration, I suppose.

I remember the goldenrod, its bright yellow dulled by the October chill. I remember the gray taste of the air, a little bitter, a little sharp, and the silvery look of the dead grass. I remember the whissht-whissht of our footfalls. But what I remember best is the truck looming up, getting bigger and bigger—the toothy snarl of its radiator, the bloody red of its paint, the bleary gaze of the windshield. I remember fear sweeping over me in a wave colder and grayer than the taste of the air as my father put his hands in my armpits and lifted me into the cab, saying, “Drive her to Portland, Quentin ... go to her!” I remember the air sweeping past my face as I went up and up, and then its clean taste was replaced by the smells of ancient Diamond Gem Oil, cracked leather, mousedroppings, and ... I swear it ... blood. I remember trying not to cry as my father stood grinning up at me, convinced he was giving me one hell of a thrill (and so he was, but not the way he thought). It came to me with perfect certainty that he would walk away then, or at least turn his back, and that the

truck would just eat me—eat me alive. And what it spat out would look chewed and broken and ... and sort of exploded. Like a pumpkin that got squot by a tractor wheel.

I began to cry and my father, who was the best of men, took me down and soothed me and carried me back to the car.

He carried me up in his arms, over his shoulder, and I looked at the receding truck, standing there in the field, its huge radiator looming, the dark round hole where the crank was supposed to go looking like a horribly misplaced eye socket, and I wanted to tell him I had smelled blood, and that's why I had cried. I couldn't think of a way to do it. I suppose he wouldn't have believed me anyway.

As a five-year-old who still believed in Santy Claus and the Tooth Fairy and the Allamagoosalum, I also believed that the bad, scary feelings which swamped me when my father boosted me into the cab of the truck came from the truck. It took twenty-two years for me to decide it wasn't the Cresswell that had murdered George McCutcheon; my Uncle Otto had done that.

The Cresswell was a landmark in my life, but it belonged to the whole area's consciousness, as well. If you were giving someone directions on how to get from Bridgton to Castle Rock, you told them they'd know they were going right if they saw a big old red truck sitting off to the left in a hayfield three miles or so after the turn from 11. You often saw tourists parked on the soft shoulder (and sometimes they got stuck there, which was always good for a laugh), taking pictures of the White Mountains with Uncle Otto's truck in the foreground for picturesque perspective—for a long time my father called the Cresswell "the Trinity Hill Memorial Tourist Truck," but after a while he stopped. By then Uncle Otto's obsession with it had gotten too strong for it to be funny.

So much for the provenance. Now for the secret.

That he killed McCutcheon is the one thing of which I am absolutely sure. "Squot him like a pumpkin," the barbershop sages said. One of

them added: “I bet he was down in front o’ that truck, prayin like one o’ them greaseball Ay-rabs prayin to Arlah. I can just pitcher him that way. They was tetchted, y’know, t’both of them. Just lookit the way Otto Schenck ended up, if you don’t believe me. Right across the road in that little house he thought the town was gonna take for a school, and just as crazy as a shithouse rat.”

This was greeted with nods and wise looks, because by then they thought Uncle Otto was odd, all right—oh, ayuh! —but there wasn’t a one of the barbershop sages who considered that image—
McCutcheon down on his knees in front of the truck “like one o’ them greaseball Ay-rabs prayin to Arlah”—suspicious as well as eccentric.

Gossip is always a hot item in a small town; people are condemned as thieves, adulterers, poachers, and cheats on the flimsiest evidence and the wildest deductions. Often, I think, the talk gets started out of no more than boredom. I think what keeps this from being actually nasty—which is how most novelists have depicted small towns, from Nathaniel Hawthorne to Grace Metalious—is that most party-line, grocery-store, and barbershop gossip is oddly naive—it is as if these people expect meanness and shallowness, will even invent it if it is not there, but that real and conscious evil may be beyond their conception, even when it floats right before their faces like a magic carpet from one o’ those greaseball Ay-rab fairy tales.

How do I know he did it? you ask. Simply because he was with McCutcheon that day? No. Because of the truck. The Cresswell. When his obsession began to overtake him, he went to live across from it in that tiny house ... even though, in the last few years of his life, he was deathly afraid of the truck beached across the road.

I think Uncle Otto got McCutcheon out into the field where the Cresswell was blocked up by getting McCutcheon to talk about his house plans. McCutcheon was always eager to talk about his house and his approaching retirement. The partners had been made a good offer by a much larger company—I won’t mention the name, but if I did you would know it—and McCutcheon wanted to take it. Uncle Otto didn’t. There had been a quiet struggle going on between

them over the offer since the spring. I think that disagreement was the reason Uncle Otto decided to get rid of his partner.

I think that my uncle might have prepared for the moment by doing two things: first, undermining the blocks holding the truck up, and second, planting something on the ground or perhaps in it, directly in front of the truck, where McCutcheon would see it.

What sort of thing? I don't know. Something bright. A diamond? Nothing more than a chunk of broken glass? It doesn't matter. It winks and flashes in the sun. Maybe McCutcheon sees it. If not, you can be sure Uncle Otto points it out. What's that? he asks, pointing. Dunno, McCutcheon says, and hurries over to take a look-see.

McCutcheon falls on his knees in front of the Cresswell, just like one o' them greaseball Ay-rabs prayin to Arlah, trying to work the object out of the ground, while my uncle strolls casually around to the back of the truck. One good shove and down it came, crushing McCutcheon flat. Squotting him like a pumpkin.

I suspect there may have been too much pirate in him to have died easily. In my imagination I see him lying pinned beneath the Cresswell's tilted snout, blood streaming from his nose and mouth and ears, his face paper-white, his eyes dark, pleading with my uncle to get help, to get help fast. Pleading ... then begging ... and finally cursing my uncle, promising him he would get him, kill him, finish him ... and my uncle standing there, watching, hands in his pockets, until it was over.

It wasn't long after McCutcheon's death that my uncle began to do things that were first described by the barbershop sages as odd ... then as queer ... then as "damn peculiar." The things which finally caused him to be deemed, in the pungent barbershop argot, "as crazy as a shithouse rat" came in the fullness of time—but there seemed little doubt in anyone's mind that his peculiarities began right around the time George McCutcheon died.

In 1965, Uncle Otto had a small one-room house built across from the truck. There was a lot of talk about what old Otto Schenck might be up to out there on the Black Henry by Trinity Hill, but the surprise was total when Uncle Otto finished the little building off by having Chuckie Barger slap on a coat of bright red paint and then announcing it was a gift to the town—a fine new schoolhouse, he said, and all he asked was that they name it after his late partner.

Castle Rock's selectmen were flabbergasted. So was everyone else. Most everyone in the Rock had gone to such a one-room school (or thought they had, which comes down to almost the same thing). But all of the one-room schools were gone from Castle Rock by 1965. The very last of them, the Castle Ridge School, had closed the year before. It's now Steve's Pizzaville out on Route 117. By then the town had a glass-and-cinderblock grammar school on the far side of the common and a fine new high school on Carbine Street. As a result of his eccentric offer, Uncle Otto made it all the way from "odd" to "damn peculiar" in one jump.

The selectmen sent him a letter (not one of them quite dared to go see him in person) thanking him kindly, and hoping he would remember the town in the future, but declining the little schoolhouse on the grounds that the educational needs of the town's children were already well provided for. Uncle Otto flew into a towering rage. Remember the town in the future? he stormed to my father. He would remember them, all right, but not the way they wanted. He hadn't fallen off a hay truck yesterday. He knew a hawk from a handsaw. And if they wanted to get into a pissing contest with him, he said, they were going to find he could piss like a polecat that had just drunk a keg of beer.

"So what now?" my father asked him. They were sitting at the kitchen table in our house. My mother had taken her sewing upstairs. She said she didn't like Uncle Otto; she said he smelled like a man who took a bath once a month, whether he needed one or not—"and him a rich man," she would always add with a sniff. I think his smell really did offend her but I also think she was frightened of him. By

1965, Uncle Otto had begun to look damn peculiar as well as act that way. He went around dressed in green workman's pants held up by suspenders, a thermal underwear shirt, and big yellow workshoes. His eyes had begun to roll in strange directions as he spoke.

"Huh?"

"What are you going to do with the place now?"

"Live in the son of a bitch," Uncle Otto snapped, and that's what he did.

The story of his later years doesn't need much telling. He suffered the dreary sort of madness that one often sees written up in cheap tabloid newspapers. Millionaire Dies of Malnutrition in Tenement Apartment. Bag Lady Was Rich, Bank Records Reveal. Forgotten Bank Tycoon Dies in Seclusion.

He moved into the little red house—in later years it faded to a dull, washed-out pink—the very next week. Nothing my father said could talk him out of it. A year afterward, he sold the business I believe he had murdered to keep. His eccentricities had multiplied, but his business sense had not deserted him, and he realized a handsome profit—staggering might actually be a better word.

So there was my Uncle Otto, worth perhaps as much as seven millions of dollars, living in that tiny little house on the Black Henry Road. His town house was locked up and shuttered. He had by then progressed beyond "damned peculiar" to "crazy as a shithouse rat." The next progression is expressed in a flatter, less colorful, but more ominous phrase: "dangerous, maybe." That one is often followed by committal.

In his own way, Uncle Otto became as much a fixture as the truck across the road, although I doubt if any tourists ever wanted to take his picture. He had grown a beard, which came more yellow than white, as if infected by the nicotine of his cigarettes. He had gotten very fat. His jowls sagged down into wrinkly dewlaps creased with

dirt. Folks often saw him standing in the doorway of his peculiar little house, just standing there motionlessly, looking out at the road, and across it.

Looking at the truck—his truck.

When Uncle Otto stopped coming to town, it was my father who made sure that he didn't starve to death. He brought him groceries every week, and paid for them out of his own pocket, because Uncle Otto never paid him back—never thought of it, I suppose. Dad died two years before Uncle Otto, whose money ended up going to the University of Maine Forestry Department. I understand they were delighted. Considering the amount, they should have been.

After I got my driver's license in 1972, I often took the weekly groceries out. At first Uncle Otto regarded me with narrow suspicion, but after a while he began to thaw. It was three years later, in 1975, when he told me for the first time that the truck was creeping toward the house.

I was attending the University of Maine myself by then, but I was home for the summer and had fallen into my old habit of taking Uncle Otto his weekly groceries. He sat at his table, smoking, watching me put the canned goods away and listening to me chatter. I thought he might have forgotten who I was; sometimes he did that ... or pretended to. And once he had turned my blood cold by calling "That you, George?" out the window as I walked up to the house.

On that particular day in July of 1975, he broke into whatever trivial conversation I was making to ask with harsh abruptness: "What do you make of yonder truck, Quentin?"

That abruptness startled an honest answer out of me: "I wet my pants in the cab of that truck when I was five," I said. "I think if I got up in it now I'd wet them again."

Uncle Otto laughed long and loud. I turned and gazed at him with wonder. I could not remember ever hearing him laugh before. It

ended in a long coughing fit that turned his cheeks a bright red. Then he looked at me, his eyes glittering.

“Gettin closer, Quent,” he said.

“What, Uncle Otto?” I asked. I thought he had made one of his puzzling leaps from one subject to another—maybe he meant Christmas was getting closer, or the Millennium, or the return of Christ the King.

“That buggardly truck,” he said, looking at me in a still, narrow, confidential way that I didn’t much like. “Gettin closer every year.”

“It is?” I asked cautiously, thinking that here was a new and particularly unpleasant idea. I glanced out at the Cresswell, standing across the road with hay all around it and the White Mountains behind it ... and for one crazy minute it actually did seem closer. Then I blinked and the illusion went away. The truck was right where it had always been, of course.

“Oh, ayuh,” he said. “Gets a little closer every year.”

“Gee, maybe you need glasses. I can’t see any difference at all, Uncle Otto.”

” ‘Course you can’t!” he snapped. “Can’t see the hour hand move on your wristwatch, either, can you? Buggardly thing moves too slow to see ... unless you watch it all the time. Just the way I watch that truck.” He winked at me, and I shivered.

“Why would it move?” I asked.

“It wants me, that’s why,” he said. “Got me in mind all the while, that truck does. One day it’ll bust right in here, and that’ll be the end. It’ll run me down just like it did Mac, and that’ll be the end.”

This scared me quite badly—his reasonable tone was what scared me the most, I think. And the way the young commonly respond to

fright is to crack wise or become flippant. “Ought to move back to your house in town if it bothers you, Uncle Otto,” I said, and you never would have known from my tone that my back was ridged with gooseflesh.

He looked at me ... and then at the truck across the road. “Can’t, Quentin,” he said. “Sometimes a man just has to stay in one place and wait for it to come to him.”

“Wait for what, Uncle Otto?” I asked, although I thought he must mean the truck.

“Fate,” he said, and winked again ... but he looked frightened.

My father fell ill in 1979 with the kidney disease which seemed to be improving just days before it finally killed him. Over a number of hospital visits in the fall of that year, my father and I talked about Uncle Otto. My dad had some suspicions about what might really have happened in 1955—mild ones that became the foundation of my more serious ones. My father had no idea how serious or how deep Uncle Otto’s obsession with the truck had become. I did. He stood in his doorway almost all day long, looking at it. Looking at it like a man watching his watch to see the hour hand move.

By 1981 Uncle Otto had lost his few remaining marbles. A poorer man would have been put away years before, but millions in the bank can forgive a lot of craziness in a small town—particularly if enough people think there might be something in the crazy fellow’s will for the municipality. Even so, by 1981 people had begun talking seriously about having Uncle Otto put away for his own good. That flat, deadly phrase, “dangerous, maybe,” had begun to supersede “crazy as a shithouse rat.” He had taken to wandering out to urinate by the side of the road instead of walking back into the woods where his privy was. Sometimes he shook his fist at the Cresswell while he relieved himself, and more than one person passing in his or her car thought Uncle Otto was shaking his fist at them.

The truck with the scenic White Mountains in the background was one thing; Uncle Otto pissing by the side of the road with his suspenders hanging down by his knees was something else entirely. That was no tourist attraction.

I was by then wearing a business suit more often than the blue jeans that had seen me through college when I took Uncle Otto his weekly groceries—but I still took them. I also tried to persuade him that he had to stop doing his duty by the side of the road, at least in the summertime, when anyone from Michigan, Missouri, or Florida who just happened to be happening by could see him.

I never got through to him. He couldn't be concerned with such minor things when he had the truck to worry about. His concern with the Cresswell had become a mania. He now claimed it was on his side of the road—right in his yard, as a matter of fact.

"I woke up last night around three and there it was, right outside the window, Quentin," he said. "I seen it there, moonlight shinin off the windshield, not six feet from where I was layin, and my heart almost stopped. It almost stopped, Quentin."

I took him outside and pointed out that the Cresswell was right where it had always been, across the road in the field where McCutcheon had planned to build. It did no good.

"That's just what you see, boy," he said with a wild and infinite contempt, a cigarette shaking in one hand, his eyeballs rolling. "That's just what you see."

"Uncle Otto," I said, attempting a witticism, "what you see is what you get."

It was as if he hadn't heard.

"Bugger almost got me," he whispered. I felt a chill. He didn't look crazy. Miserable, yes, and terrified, certainly ... but not crazy. For a moment I remembered my father boosting me into the cab of that

truck. I remembered smelling oil and leather ... and blood. "It almost got me," he repeated.

And three weeks later, it did.

I was the one who found him. It was Wednesday night, and I had gone out with two bags of groceries in the back seat, as I did almost every Wednesday night. It was a hot, muggy evening. Every now and then thunder rumbled distantly. I remember feeling nervous as I rolled up the Black Henry Road in my Pontiac, somehow sure something was going to happen, but trying to convince myself it was just low barometric pressure.

I came around the last corner, and just as my uncle's little house came into view, I had the oddest hallucination—for a moment I thought that damned truck really was in his dooryard, big and hulking with its red paint and its rotten stake sides. I went for the brake pedal, but before my foot ever came down on it I blinked and the illusion was gone. But I knew that Uncle Otto was dead. No trumpets, no flashing lights; just that simple knowledge, like knowing where the furniture is in a familiar room.

I pulled into his dooryard in a hurry and got out, heading for the house without bothering to get the groceries.

The door was open—he never locked it. I asked him about that once and he explained to me, patiently, the way you would explain a patently obvious fact to a simpleton, that locking the door would not keep the Cresswell out.

He was lying on his bed, which was to the left of the one room—his kitchen area being to the right. He lay there in his green pants and his thermal underwear shirt, his eyes open and glassy. I don't believe he had been dead more than two hours. There were no flies and no smell, although it had been a brutally hot day.

"Uncle Otto?" I spoke quietly, not expecting an answer—you don't lie on your bed with your eyes open and bugging out like that just for

the hell of it. If I felt anything, it was relief. It was over.

“Uncle Otto?” I approached him. “Uncle—”

I stopped, seeing for the first time how strangely misshapen his lower face looked—how swelled and twisted. Seeing for the first time how his eyes were not just staring but actually glaring from their sockets. But they were not looking toward the doorway or at the ceiling. They were twisted toward the little window above his bed.

I woke up last night around three and there it was, right outside my window, Quentin. It almost got me.

Squod him like a pumpkin, I heard one of the barbershop sages saying as I sat pretending to read a Life magazine and smelling the aromas of Vitalis and Wildroot Creme Oil.

Almost got me, Quentin.

There was a smell in here—not barbershop, and not just the stink of a dirty old man.

It smelled oily, like a garage.

“Uncle Otto?” I whispered, and as I walked toward the bed where he lay I seemed to feel myself shrinking, not just in size but in years ... becoming twenty again, fifteen, ten, eight, six ... and finally five. I saw my trembling small hand stretch out toward his swelled face. As my hand touched him, cupping his face, I looked up, and the window was filled with the glaring windshield of the Cresswell—and although it was only for a moment, I would swear on a Bible that was no hallucination. The Cresswell was there, in the window, less than six feet from me.

I had placed my fingers on one of Uncle Otto’s cheeks, my thumb on the other, wanting to investigate that strange swelling, I suppose. When I first saw the truck in the window, my hand tried to tighten into

a fist, forgetting that it was cupped loosely around the corpse's lower face.

In that instant the truck disappeared from the window like smoke—or like the ghost I suppose it was. In the same instant I heard an awful squirting noise. Hot liquid filled my hand. I looked down, feeling not just yielding flesh and wetness but something hard and angled. I looked down, and saw, and that was when I began to scream. Oil was pouring out of Uncle Otto's mouth and nose. Oil was leaking from the corners of his eyes like tears. Diamond Gem Oil—the recycled stuff you can buy in a five-gallon plastic container, the stuff McCutcheon had always run in the Cresswell.

But it wasn't just oil; there was something sticking out of his mouth.

I kept screaming but for a while I was unable to move, unable to take my oily hand from his face, unable to take my eyes from that big greasy thing sticking out of his mouth—the thing that had so distorted the shape of his face.

At last my paralysis broke and I fled from the house, still screaming. I ran across the dooryard to my Pontiac, flung myself in, and screamed out of there. The groceries meant for Uncle Otto tumbled off the back seat and onto the floor. The eggs broke.

It was something of a wonder that I didn't kill myself in the first two miles—I looked down at the speedometer and saw I was doing better than seventy. I pulled over and took deep breaths until I had myself under some kind of control. I began to realize that I simply could not leave Uncle Otto as I had found him; it would raise too many questions. I would have to go back.

And, I must admit, a certain hellish curiosity had come over me. I wish now that it hadn't, or that I had withstood it; in fact, I wish now I had let them go ahead and ask their questions. But I did go back. I stood outside his door for some five minutes—I stood in about the same place and in much the same position where he had stood so often and so long, looking at that truck. I stood there and came to

this conclusion: the truck across the road had shifted position, ever so slightly.

Then I went inside.

The first few flies were circling and buzzing around his face. I could see oily prints on his cheeks: thumb on his left, three fingers on his right. I looked nervously at the window where I had seen the Cresswell looming ... and then I walked over to his bed. I took out my handkerchief and wiped my fingerprints away. Then I reached forward and opened Uncle Otto's mouth.

What fell out was a Champion spark plug—one of the old Maxi-Duty kind, nearly as big as a circus strongman's fist.

I took it with me. Now I wish I hadn't done that, but of course I was in shock. It would all have been more merciful if I didn't have the actual object here in my study where I can look at it, or pick it up and heft it if I should want to—the 1920's-vintage spark plug that fell out of Uncle Otto's mouth.

If it wasn't there, if I hadn't taken it away from his little one-room house when I fled from it the second time, I could perhaps begin the business of persuading myself that all of it—not just coming around the turn and seeing the Cresswell pressed against the side of the little house like a huge red hound, but all of it—was only an hallucination. But it is there; it catches the light. It is real. It has weight. The truck is getting closer every year, he said, and it seems now that he was right ... but even Uncle Otto had no idea how close the Cresswell could get.

The town verdict was that Uncle Otto had killed himself by swallowing oil, and it was a nine days' wonder in Castle Rock. Carl Durkin, the town undertaker and not the most closemouthed of men, said that when the docs opened him up to do the autopsy, they found more than three quarts of oil in him ... and not just in his stomach, either. It had suffused his whole system. What everyone in town

wanted to know was: what had he done with the plastic jug? For none was ever found.

As I said, most of you reading this memoir won't believe it ... at least, not unless something like it has happened to you. But the truck is still out there in its field ... and for whatever it is worth, it all happened.

*

“Uncle Otto’s Truck”—The truck is real, and so is the house; I made up the story that goes around them one day in my head on a long drive to pass the time. I liked it and so I took a few days to write it down.

THE WEDDING GIG

Stephen King

In the year 1927 we were playing jazz in a speakeasy just south of Morgan, Illinois, a town seventy miles from Chicago. It was real hick country, not another big town for twenty miles in any direction. But there were a lot of farmboys with a hankering for something stronger than Moxie after a hot day in the field, and a lot of would-be jazz-babies out stepping with their drugstore-cowboy boyfriends. There were also some married men (you always know them, friend; they might as well be wearing signs) coming far out of their way to be where no one would recognize them while they cut a rug with their not-quite-legit lassies.

That was when jazz was jazz, not noise. We had a five-man combination—drums, comet, trombone, piano, trumpet—and we were pretty good. That was still three years before we made our first record and four years before talkies.

We were playing “Bamboo Bay” when this big fellow walked in, wearing a white suit and smoking a pipe with more squiggles in it than a French horn. The whole band was a little tight by that time but everyone in the crowd was absolutely blind and really ramping the joint. They were in a good mood, though; there hadn’t been a single fight all night. All of us guys were sweating rivers and Tommy Englander, the guy who ran the place, kept sending up rye as smooth as a varnished plank. Englander was a good joe to work for, and he liked our sound. Of course that made him aces in my book.

The guy in the white suit sat down at the bar and I forgot him. We finished up the set with “Aunt Hagar’s Blues,” which was a tune that passed for racy out in the boondocks back then, and got a good round of applause. Manny had a big grin on his face when he put his trumpet down, and I clapped him on the back as we left the bandstand. There was a lonely-looking girl in a green evening gown who had been giving me the eye all night. She was a redhead, and I’ve always been partial to those. I got a signal from her eyes and the tilt of her head, so I started weaving through the crowd to see if she wanted a drink.

I was halfway there when the man in the white suit stepped in front of me. Up close he looked like a pretty tough egg. His hair was bristling up in the back in spite of what smelled like a whole bottle of Wildroot Creme Oil and he had the flat, oddly shiny eyes that some deep-sea fish have.

“Want to talk to you outside,” he said.

The redhead looked away with a small pout.

“It can wait,” I said. “Let me by.”

“My name is Scollay. Mike Scollay.”

I knew the name. Mike Scollay was a small-time racketeer from Shytown who paid for his beer and skittles by running booze in from Canada. The high-tension stuff that started out where the men wear skirts and play bagpipes. When they aren’t tending the vats, that is. His picture had been in the paper a few times. The last time had been when some other dancehall Dan tried to gun him down.

“You’re pretty far from Chicago, my friend,” I said.

“I brought some chaperones,” he said, “don’t worry. Outside.”

The redhead took another look. I pointed at Scollay and shrugged. She sniffed and turned her back.

“There,” I said. “You queered that.”

“Bimbos like that are a penny a bushel in Chi,” he said.

“I didn’t want a bushel.”

“Outside.”

I followed him out. The air was cool on my skin after the smoky atmosphere of the club, sweet with fresh-cut alfalfa. The stars were

out, soft and flickering. The hoods were out, too, but they didn't look soft, and the only things flickering were their cigarettes.

"I got a job for you," Scollay said.

"Is that so."

"Pays two C's. Split it with the band or hold back a hundred for yourself."

"What is it?"

"A gig, what else? My sis is tying the knot. I want you to play for the reception. She likes Dixieland. Two of my boys say you play good Dixieland."

I told you Englander was good to work for. He was paying us eighty bucks a week. This guy was offering over twice that for one gig.

"It's from five to eight, next Friday," Scollay said. "At the Sons of Erin Hall on Grover Street."

"It's too much," I said. "How come?"

"There's two reasons," Scollay said. He puffed on his pipe. It looked out of place in the middle of that yegg's face. He should have had a Lucky Strike Green dangling from that mouth, or maybe a Sweet Caporal. The Cigarette of Bums. With the pipe he didn't look like a bum. The pipe made him look sad and funny.

"Two reasons," he repeated. "Maybe you heard the Greek tried to rub me out."

"I saw your picture in the paper," I said. "You were the guy trying to crawl into the sidewalk."

"Smart guy," he growled, but with no real force. "I'm getting too big for him. The Greek is getting old. He thinks small. He ought to be back in the old country, drinking olive oil and looking at the Pacific."

“I think it’s the Aegean,” I said.

“I don’t give a tin shit if it’s Lake Huron,” he said. “Point is, he don’t want to be old. He still wants to get me. He don’t know the coming thing when he sees it.”

“That’s you.”

“You’re fucking-A.”

“In other words, you’re paying two C’s because our last number might be arranged for Enfield rifle accompaniment.”

Anger flashed in his face, but there was something else there, as well. I didn’t know what it was then, but I think I do now. I think it was sorrow. “Buddy Gee, I got the best protection money can buy. If anyone funny sticks his nose in, he won’t get a chance to sniff twice.”

“What’s the other thing?”

He spoke softly. “My sister’s marrying an Italian.”

“A good Catholic like you,” I sneered softly.

The anger flashed again, white-hot, and for a minute I thought I’d pushed him too far. “A good mick! A good old shanty-Irish mick, sonny, and you better not forget it!” To that he added, almost too low to be heard, “Even if I did lose most of my hair, it was red.”

I started to say something, but he didn’t give me the chance. He swung me around and pressed his face down until our noses almost touched. I have never seen such anger and humiliation and rage and determination in a man’s face. You never see that look on a white face these days, how it is to be hurt and made to feel small. All that love and hate. But I saw it on his face that night and knew I could crack wise a few more times and get my ass killed.

“She’s fat,” he half-whispered, and I could smell checkerberry mints on his breath. “A lot of people have been laughing at me while my

back was turned. They don't do it when I can see them, though, I'll tell you that, Mr. Comet Player. Because maybe this dago was all she could get. But you're not gonna laugh at me or her or the dago. And nobody else is, either. Because you're gonna play too loud. No one is going to laugh at my sis."

"We never laugh when we play our gigs. Makes it too hard to pucker."

That relieved the tension. He laughed—a short, barking laugh. "You be there, ready to play at five. The Sons of Erin on Grover Street. I'll pay your expenses both ways, too."

He wasn't asking. I felt railroaded into the decision, but he wasn't giving me time to talk it over. He was already striding away, and one of his chaperones was holding open the back door of a Packard coupe.

They drove away. I stayed out awhile longer and had a smoke. The evening was soft and fine and Scollay seemed more and more like something I might have dreamed. I was just wishing we could bring the bandstand out to the parking lot and play when Biff tapped me on the shoulder.

"Time," he said.

"Okay."

We went back in. The redhead had picked up some salt-and-pepper sailor who looked twice her age. I don't know what a member of the U.S. Navy was doing in Illinois, but as far as I was concerned, she could have him if her taste was that bad. I didn't feel so good. The rye had gone to my head, and Scollay seemed a lot more real in here, where the fumes of what he and his kind sold were strong enough to float on.

"We had a request for 'Camptown Races,' " Charlie said.

“Forget it,” I said curtly. “We don’t play that nigger stuff till after midnight.”

I could see Billy-Boy stiffen as he was sitting down to the piano, and then his face was smooth again. I could have kicked myself around the block, but, goddammit, a man can’t shift gears on his mouth overnight, or in a year, or maybe even in ten. In those days nigger was a word I hated and kept saying.

I went over to him. “I’m sorry, Bill—I haven’t been myself tonight.”

“Sure,” he said, but his eyes looked over my shoulder and I knew my apology wasn’t accepted. That was bad, but I’ll tell you what was worse—knowing he was disappointed in me.

I told them about the gig during our next break, being square with them about the money and how Scollay was a hoodlum (although I didn’t tell them about the other hood who was out to get him). I also told them that Scollay’s sister was fat and Scollay was sensitive about it. Anyone who cracked any jokes about inland barges might wind up with a third breather-hole, somewhat above the other two.

I kept looking at Billy-Boy Williams while I talked, but you could read nothing on the cat’s face. It would be easier trying to figure out what a walnut was thinking by reading the wrinkles on the shell. Billy-Boy was the best piano player we ever had, and we were all sorry about the little ways it got taken out on him as we traveled from one place to another. In the south was the worst, of course—Jim Crow car, nigger heaven at the movies, stuff like that—but it wasn’t that great in the north, either. But what could I do? Huh? You go on and tell me. In those days you lived with those differences.

We turned up at the Sons of Erin Hall on Friday at four o’clock, an hour before. We drove up in the special Ford truck Biff and Manny and me put together. The back end was all enclosed with canvas, and there were two cots bolted on the floor. We even had an electric hotplate that ran off the battery, and the band’s name was painted on the outside.

The day was just right—a ham-and-egger if you ever saw one, with little white summer clouds casting shadows on the fields. But once we got into the city it was hot and kind of grim, full of the hustle and bustle you got out of touch with in a place like Morgan. By the time we got to the hall my clothes were sticking to me and I needed to visit the comfort station. I could have used a shot of Tommy Englander’s rye, too.

The Sons of Erin was a big wooden building, affiliated with the church where Scollay’s sis was getting married. You know the sort of place I mean if you ever took the Wafer, I guess—CYO meetings on Tuesdays, bingo on Wednesdays, and a sociable for the kids on Saturday nights.

We trooped up the walk, each of us carrying his instrument in one hand and some part of Biff’s drum-kit in the other. A thin lady with no breastworks to speak of was directing traffic inside. Two sweating men were hanging crepe paper. There was a bandstand at the front of the hall, and over it was a banner and a couple of big pink paper wedding bells. The tinsel lettering on the banner said BEST ALWAYS MAUREEN AND RICO.

Maureen and Rico. Damned if I couldn’t see why Scollay was so wound up. Maureen and Rico. Stone the crows.

The thin lady swooped down on us. She looked like she had a lot to say so I beat her to punch. “We’re the band,” I said.

“The band?” She blinked at our instruments distrustfully. “Oh. I was hoping you were the caterers.”

I smiled as if caterers always carried snare drums and trombone cases.

“You can—” she began, but just then a ruff-tuff-creampuff of about nineteen strolled over. A cigarette was dangling from the corner of his mouth, but so far as I could see it wasn’t doing a thing for his image except making his left eye water.

“Open that shit up,” he said.

Charlie and Biff looked at me. I shrugged. We opened our cases and he looked at the horns. Seeing nothing that looked like you could load it and fire it, he wandered back to his corner and sat down on a folding chair.

“You can set your things up right away,” the thin lady went on, as if she had never been interrupted. “There’s a piano in the other room. I’ll have my men wheel it in when we’re done putting up our decorations.”

Biff was already lugging his drum-kit up on to the little stage.

“I thought you were the caterers,” she repeated in a distraught way. “Mr. Scollay ordered a wedding cake and there are hors d’oeuvres and roasts of beef and—”

“They’ll be here, ma’am,” I said. “They get payment on delivery.”

“—two roasts of pork and a capon and Mr. Scollay will be just furious if—” She saw one of her men pausing to light a cigarette just below a dangling streamer of crepe and shrieked, “HENRY!” The man jumped as if he had been shot. I escaped to the bandstand.

We were all set up by a quarter of five. Charlie, the trombone player, was wah-wahing away into a mute and Biff was loosening up his wrists. The caterers had arrived at 4:20 and Miss Gibson (that was the thin lady’s name; she made a business out of such affairs) almost threw herself on them.

Four long tables had been set up and covered with white linen, and four black women in caps and aprons were setting places. The cake had been wheeled into the middle of the room for everyone to gasp over. It was six layers high, with a little bride and groom standing on top.

I walked outside to grab a fag and just about halfway through it I heard them coming—tooting away and raising a racket. I stayed where I was until I saw the lead car coming around the corner of the block below the church, then I snubbed my smoke and went inside.

“They’re coming,” I told Miss Gibson.

She went white and actually swayed on her heels. There was a lady that should have taken up a different profession—interior decoration, maybe, or library science. “The tomato juice!” she screamed. “Bring in the tomato juice!”

I went back to the bandstand and we got ready. We had played gigs like this before—what combo hasn’t?—and when the doors opened, we swung into a ragtime version of “The Wedding March” that I had arranged myself. If you think that sounds sort of like a lemonade cocktail I have to agree with you, but most receptions we played for just ate it up, and this one was no different. Everybody clapped and yelled and whistled, then started gassing amongst themselves. But I could tell by the way some of them were tapping their feet while they talked that we were getting through. We were on—I thought it was going to be a good gig. I know everything they say about the Irish, and most of it’s true, but, hot damn! they can’t not have a good time once they are set up for it.

All the same, I have to admit I almost blew the whole number when the groom and the blushing bride walked in. Scollay, dressed in a morning coat and striped trousers, shot me a hard look, and don’t think I didn’t see it. I managed to keep a poker face, and the rest of the band did, too—no one so much as missed a note. Lucky for us. The wedding party, which looked as if it were made up almost entirely of Scollay’s goons and their molls, were wise already. They had to be, if they’d been at the church. But I’d only heard faint rumblings, you might say.

You’ve heard about Jack Sprat and his wife. Well, this was a hundred times worse. Scollay’s sister had the red hair he was losing, and it was long and curly. But not that pretty auburn shade you may

be imagining. No, this was County Cork red—bright as a carrot and kinky as a bedspring. Her natural complexion was curd-white but she was wearing almost too many freckles to tell. And had Scollay said she was fat? Brother, that was like saying you could buy a few things in Macy's. She was a human dinosaur—three hundred and fifty pounds if she was one. It had all gone to her bosom and hips and butt and thighs, like it usually does on fat girls, making what should be sexy grotesque and sort of frightening instead. Some fat girls have pathetically pretty faces, but Scollay's sis didn't even have that. Her eyes were too close together, her mouth was too big, and she had jug-ears. Then there were the freckles. Even thin she would have been ugly enough to stop a clock—hell, a whole show-window of them.

That alone wouldn't have made anybody laugh, unless they were stupid or just poison-mean. It was when you added the groom, Rico, to the picture that you wanted to laugh until you cried. He could have put on a top hat and still stood in the top half of her shadow. He looked like he might have weighed ninety pounds or so, soaking wet. He was skinny as a rail, his complexion darkly olive. When he grinned around nervously, his teeth looked like a picket fence in a slum neighborhood.

We kept right on playing.

Scollay roared: "The bride and the groom! God give 'em every happiness!" And if God don't, his thundering brow proclaimed, you folks here better—at least today.

Everyone shouted their approval and applauded. We finished our number with a flourish, and that brought another round. Scollay's sister Maureen smiled. God, her mouth was big. Rico simpered.

For a while everyone just walked around, eating cheese and cold cuts on crackers and drinking Scollay's best bootleg Scotch. I had three shots myself between numbers, and it put Tommy Englander's rye in the shade.

Scollay began to look happier, too—a little, anyway.

He cruised by the bandstand once and said, “You guys play pretty good.” Coming from a music lover like him, I reckoned that was a real compliment.

Just before everyone sat down to the meal, Maureen came up herself. She was even uglier up close, and her white gown (there must have been enough white satin wrapped around that mama to cover three beds) wasn’t helping her at all. She asked us if we could play “Roses of Picardy” like Red Nichols and His Five Pennies, because, she said, it was her very favorite song. Fat and ugly she was, but hoity-toity she was not—unlike some of the two-biters who’d been dropping by to make requests. We played it, but not very well. Still, she gave us a sweet smile that was almost enough to make her pretty, and she applauded when it was done.

They sat down to dinner around 6:15, and Miss Gibson’s hired help rolled the chow to them. They fell to like a bunch of animals, which was not entirely surprising, and kept knocking back that high-tension booze the whole time. I couldn’t help watching the way Maureen was eating. I tried to look away, but my eye kept wandering back, as if to make sure it was seeing what it thought it was seeing. The rest of them were packing it in, but she made them look like old ladies in a tearoom. She had no more time for sweet smiles or listening to “Roses of Picardy”; you could have stuck a sign in front of her that said WOMAN WORKING. That lady didn’t need a knife and fork; she needed a steam shovel and a conveyor belt. It was sad to watch her. And Rico (you could just see his chin over the table where the bride was sitting, and a pair of brown eyes as shy as a deer’s) kept handing her things, never changing that nervous simper.

We took a twenty-minute break while the cake-cutting ceremony was going on, and Miss Gibson herself fed us in the kitchen. It was hot as blazes with the cookstove on, and none of us was too hungry. The gig had started out feeling right and now it felt wrong. I could see it on my band’s faces ... on Miss Gibson’s, too, for that matter.

By the time we returned to the bandstand, the drinking had begun in earnest. Tough-looking guys staggered around with silly grins on their mugs or stood in corners haggling over racing forms. Some couples wanted to Charleston, so we played “Aunt Hagar’s Blues” (those goons ate it up) and “I’m Gonna Charleston Back to Charleston” and some other numbers like that. Jazz-baby stuff. The debs rocked around the floor, flashing their rolled hose and shaking their fingers beside their faces and yelling *voe-doe-dee-oh-doe*, a phrase that makes me feel like sicking up my supper to this very day. It was getting dark out. The screens had fallen off some of the windows and moths came in and flitted around the light fixtures in clouds. And, as the song says, the band played on. The bride and groom stood on the sidelines—neither of them seemed interested in slipping away early—almost completely neglected. Even Scollay seemed to have forgotten about them. He was pretty drunk.

It was almost 8:00 when the little fellow crept in. I spotted him immediately because he was sober and he looked scared; scared as a nearsighted cat in a dog pound. He walked up to Scollay, who was talking with some floozie right by the bandstand, and tapped him on the shoulder. Scollay wheeled around, and I heard every word they said. Believe me, I wish I hadn’t.

“Who the hell are you?” Scollay asked rudely.

“My name is Demetrius,” the fellow said. “Demetrius Katzenos. I come from the Greek.”

Motion on the floor came to a dead stop. Jacket buttons were freed, and hands stole out of sight under lapels. I saw Manny looking nervous. Hell, I didn’t feel so calm myself. We kept on playing though, you bet.

“Is that right,” Scollay said quietly, almost reflectively.

The guy burst out, “I didn’t want to come, Mr. Scollay! The Greek, he has my wife. He say he kill her if I doan give you his message!”

“What message?” Scollay growled. The thunderclouds were back on his forehead.

“He say—” The guy paused with an agonized expression. His throat worked as if the words were physical things, caught in there and choking him. “He say to tell you your sister is one fat pig. He say ... he say ...” His eyes rolled wildly at Scollay’s still expression. I shot a look at Maureen. She looked as if she had been slapped. “He say she got an itch. He say if a fat woman got an itch on her back, she buy a back-scratcher. He say if a woman got an itch in her parts, she buy a man. “

Maureen gave a great strangled cry and ran out, weeping. The floor shook. Rico pattered after her, his face bewildered. He was wringing his hands.

Scollay had grown so red his cheeks were actually purple. I half-expected—maybe more than half-expected—his brains to just blow out his ears. I saw that same look of mad agony I had seen in the dark outside Englander’s. Maybe he was just a cheap hood, but I felt sorry for him. You would have, too.

When he spoke his voice was very quiet—almost mild.

“Is there more?”

The little Greek man quailed. His voice was splintery with anguish. “Please doan kill me, Mr. Scollay! My wife—the Greek, he got my wife! I doan want to say these thing! He got my wife, my woman—”

“I ain’t going to hurt you,” Scollay said, quieter still. “Just tell me the rest.”

“He say the whole town laughing at you.”

We had stopped playing and there was dead silence for a second. Then Scollay turned his eyes to the ceiling. Both of his hands were shaking and held out clenched in front of him. He was holding them

in fists so tight that it seemed I could see his hamstrings standing out right through his shirt.

“ALL RIGHT!” he screamed. “ALL RIGHT!”

He broke for the door. Two of his men tried to stop him, tried to tell him it was suicide, just what the Greek wanted, but Scollay was like a crazy man. He knocked them down and rushed out into the black summer night.

In the dead quiet that followed, all I could hear was the messenger’s tortured breathing and somewhere out back, the soft sobbing of the bride.

Just about then the young kid who had braced us when we came in uttered a curse and made for the door. He was the only one.

Before he could even get under the big paper shamrock hung in the foyer, automobile tires screeched on the pavement and engines revved up—a lot of engines. It sounded like Memorial Day at the Brickyard out there.

“Oh dear-to-Jaysus!” the kid screamed from the doorway. “It’s a fucking caravan! Get down, boss! Get down! Get down—”

The night exploded with gunfire. It was like World War I out there for maybe a minute, maybe two. Bullets stitched across the open door of the hall, and one of the hanging light-globes overhead exploded. Outside the night was bright with Winchester fireworks. Then the cars howled away. One of the molls was brushing broken glass out of her bobbed hair.

Now that the danger was over, the rest of the goons rushed out. The door to the kitchen banged open and Maureen ran through again. Everything she had was jiggling. Her face was more puffy than ever. Rico came in her wake like a bewildered valet. They went out the door.

Miss Gibson appeared in the empty hall, her eyes wide and shocked. The little man who had started all the trouble with his singing telegram had powdered.

“It was shooting,” Miss Gibson murmured. “What happened?”

“I think the Greek just cooled the paymaster,” Biff said.

She looked at me, bewildered, but before I could translate Billy-Boy said in his soft, polite voice: “He means that Mr. Scollay just got rubbed out, Miz Gibson.”

Miss Gibson stared at him, her eyes getting wider and wider, and then she fainted dead away. I felt a little like fainting myself.

Just then, from outside, came the most anguished scream I have ever heard, then or since. That unholy caterwauling just went on and on. You didn’t have to peek out the door to know who was tearing her heart out in the street, keening over her dead brother even while the cops and newshawks were on their way.

“Let’s blow,” I muttered. “Quick.”

We had it packed in before five minutes had passed. Some of the goons came back inside, but they were too drunk and too scared to notice the likes of us.

We went out the back, each of us carrying part of Biffs drum-kit. Quite a parade we must have made, walking up the street, for anyone who saw us. I led the way with my horn case tucked under my arm and a cymbal in each hand. The boys stood on the corner at the end of the block while I went back for the truck. The cops hadn’t shown yet. The big girl was still crouched over the body of her brother in the middle of the street, wailing like a banshee while her tiny groom ran around her like a moon orbiting a big planet.

I drove down to the corner and the boys threw everything in the back, willy-nilly. Then we hauled ass out of there. We averaged forty-

five miles an hour all the way back to Morgan, back roads or not, and either Scollay's goons must never have bothered to tip the cops to us, or else the cops didn't care, because we never heard from them.

We never got the two hundred bucks, either.

She came into Tommy Englander's about ten days later, a fat Irish girl in a black mourning dress. The black didn't look any better than the white satin.

Englander must have known who she was (her picture had been in the Chicago papers, next to Scollay's) because he showed her to a table himself and shushed a couple of drunks at the bar who had been snickering at her.

I felt badly for her, like I feel for Billy-Boy sometimes. It's tough to be on the outside. You don't have to be out there to know, although I'd have to agree that you can't know just what it's like. And she had been very sweet, the little I had talked to her.

When the break came, I went over to her table.

"I'm sorry about your brother," I said awkwardly. "I know he really cared for you, and—"

"I might as well have fired those guns myself," she said. She was looking down at her hands, and now that I noticed them I saw that they were really her best feature, small and comely. "Everything that little man said was true."

"Oh, say now," I replied—a non sequitur if ever there was one, but what else was there to say? I was sorry I'd come over, she talked so strangely. As if she was all alone, and crazy.

"I'm not going to divorce him, though," she went on. "I'd kill myself first, and damn my soul to hell."

"Don't talk that way," I said.

“Haven’t you ever wanted to kill yourself?” she asked, looking at me passionately. “Doesn’t it make you feel like that when people use you badly and then laugh at you? Or did no one ever do it to you? You may say so, but you’ll pardon me if I don’t believe it. Do you know what it feels like to eat and eat and hate yourself for it and then eat more? Do you know what it feels like to kill your own brother because you are fat?”

People were turning to look, and the drunks were sniggering again.

“I’m sorry,” she whispered.

I wanted to tell her I was sorry, too. I wanted to tell her ... oh, anything at all, I reckon, that would make her feel better. Holler down to where she was, inside all that flab. But I couldn’t think of a single thing.

So I just said, “I have to go. We have to play another set.”

“Of course,” she said softly. “Of course you must ... or they’ll start to laugh at you. But why I came was—will you play ‘Roses of Picardy’? I thought you played it very nicely at the reception. Will you do that?”

“Sure,” I said. “Be glad to.”

And we did. But she left halfway through the number, and since it was sort of schmaltzy for a place like Englander’s, we dropped it and swung into a ragtime version of “The Varsity Drag.” That one always tore them up. I drank too much the rest of the evening and by closing I had forgotten all about her. Well, almost.

Leaving for the night, it came to me. What I should have told her. Life goes on—that’s what I should have said. That’s what you say to people when a loved one dies. But, thinking it over, I was glad I didn’t. Because maybe that was what she was afraid of.

Of course now everyone knows about Maureen Romano and her husband Rico, who survives her as the taxpayers’ guest in the Illinois

State Penitentiary. How she took over Scollay's two-bit organization and turned it into a Prohibition empire that rivaled Capone's. How she wiped out two other North Side gang leaders and swallowed their operations. How she had the Greek brought before her and supposedly killed him by sticking a piece of piano wire through his left eye and into his brain as he knelt in front of her, blubbering and pleading for his life. Rico, the bewildered valet, became her first lieutenant, and was responsible for a dozen gangland hits himself.

I followed Maureen's exploits from the West Coast, where we were making some pretty successful records. Without Billy-Boy, though. He formed a band of his own not long after we left Englander's, an all-black combination that played Dixieland and ragtime. They did real well down south, and I was glad for them. It was just as well. Lots of places wouldn't even audition us with a Negro in the group.

But I was telling you about Maureen. She made great news copy, and not just because she was a kind of Ma Barker with brains, although that was part of it. She was awful big and she was awful bad, and Americans from coast to coast felt a strange sort of affection for her. When she died of a heart attack in 1933, some of the papers said she weighed five hundred pounds. I doubt it, though. No one gets that big, do they?

Anyway, her funeral made the front pages. It was more than you could say for her brother, who never got past page four in his whole miserable career. It took ten pallbearers to carry her coffin. There was a picture of them toting it in one of the tabloids. It was a horrible picture to look at. Her coffin was the size of a meat locker—which, in a way, I suppose it was.

Rico wasn't bright enough to hold things together by himself, and he fell for assault with intent to kill the very next year.

I've never been able to get her out of my mind, or the agonized, hangdog way Scollay had looked that first night when he talked about her. But I cannot feel too sorry for her, looking back. Fat people can always stop eating. Guys like Billy-Boy Williams can only

stop breathing. I still don't see any way I could have helped either of them, but I do feel sort of bad every now and then. Probably just because I've gotten a lot older and don't sleep as well as I did when I was a kid. That's all it is, isn't it?

Isn't it?

WEEDS

Stephen King

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Jordy Verrill's place was out on Bluebird Creek, and he was alone when the meteor traced low fire across the sky and hit on the creek's east bank. It was twilight, the sky still light in the west, purple overhead, and dark in the east where Venus glowed in the sky like a two-penny sparkler. It was the Fourth of July, and Jordy had been planning to go into town for the real fireworks show when he finished splitting and banding this last smidge of sugar maple.

But the meteor was even better than the two-pound whizzers they set off at the end of the town show. It slashed across the sky in a sullen red splutter, the head afire. When it hit the ground he felt the thump in his feet. Jordy started toward Bluebird Creek on a dead run, knowing what it was immediately, even before the flash of white light from over the hill. A by-God meteor, and some of those fellows from the college might pay a good piece of change for it.

He paused at the top of the rise, his small house with its two outbuildings behind him and the meandering, sunset-colored course of the Bluebird ahead of him. And close to its bank, where the punkies and cattails grew in the soft marshy ground, earth had been flung back from a crater-shaped depression four feet across. The grass on the slope was afire.

Jordy whirled and ran back to his shed. He got a big bucket and an old broom. A faucet jutted out from the side of the shed at the end of a rusty pipe; the ground underneath was the only place grass would grow in Jordy's dooryard, which was otherwise bald and littered with old auto parts.

He filled the bucket and ran back toward the creek, thinking it was good the twilight was so still. Otherwise he might have had bad trouble. Might even have had to call the volunteer fire department. But good luck came in batches. The fire was gaining slowly with no

wind to help it. It moved out from the crater in a semicircle, drawing a crescent of black on the summer-green bank.

Moving slowly, with no wasted motion—he had fought grass fires before—Jordy dipped his broom in the water and beat the flames with it. He worked one end of the fire-front and then the other, narrowing the burn zone to twenty feet, ten, nothing. Panting a little, soot on his thin cheeks like beardshadow, he turned around and saw four or five burning circles that had been lit by sparks. He went to each and slapped them out with his wet broom.

Now for that meteor. He walked down to the crater, leather boots sending up little puffs of ash, and hunkered down. It was in there all right, and it was the size of a volleyball. It was glowing red-white-molten, and Jordy thanked his lucky stars that it had landed here, where it was marshy, and not in the middle of his hayfield.

He poked it with his boot, a roundish hunk of rock melted jagged in places by its superhot ride from the reaches of the universe all the way into Jordy Verrill's New Hampshire farmstead on the Fourth of July.

He picked up his bucket again and doused the meteor with the water that remained. There was a baleful hiss and a cloud of steam. When it cleared away and Jordy saw what had happened, he dropped the bucket and slapped his forehead.

“There, you done it now, Jordy, you lunkhead.”

The meteor had broken neatly in two. And there was something inside.

Jordy bent forward. White stuff had fallen out of a central hollow, white flaky stuff that looked like Quaker Oats.

“Well, beat my ass,” Jordy muttered. He got down on his knees and poked at the white stuff.

“Yeee-ouch!”

He snatched his fingers away and sucked them, his eyes watering. He was going to have a crop of blisters, just as sure as shit grows under a privy.

A series of thunderclaps went off behind him and Jordy leaped to his feet, looking wildly at the sky. Then he relaxed. It was just the one-pound crackers they always started the fireworks show with. He hunkered down again, never minding the green starbursts spreading in the sky behind him. He had his own fireworks to worry about.

Jordy wasn't bright; he had a potato face and large, blocky hands that were as apt to hoe up the carrots as the weeds that grew between them, and he got along as best he could. He fixed cars and sold wood and in the winter he drove Christmas trees down to Boston. Thinking was hard work for him. Thinking hurt, because there was a dead short somewhere inside, and keeping at it for long made him want to take a nap or beat his meat and forget the whole thing.

For Jordy there were three types of thinking: plain thinking, like what you were going to have for supper or the best way to pull a motor with his old and balky chain fall; work thinking; and Big Thinking. Big Thinking was like when all the cows died and he was trying to figure if Mr. Warren down at the bank would give him an extension on his loan. Like when you had to decide which bills to pay at the end of the month. Like what he was going to do about this meteor.

He decided the best way to start would be to have some pictures. He went back to the house, got his Kodak, went back to the creek, and took two flash photos of the thing, lying there cracked open like an egg with Quaker Oats coming out of it instead of yolk. It was still too hot to touch.

That was all right. He would just leave her lie. If he took it up to the college in a towsack, maybe they would say Jordy Verrill, look what you done, you fuckin' lunkhead. You picked her up and bust her all to

hell. Yes, leave her lie, that was the ticket. It was on his land. If any of those college professors tried to take his meteor, he'd sic the county sheriff on them. If they wanted to cart it off and take pictures of it and measure it and feed little pieces of it to their guinea pigs, they'd have to pay him for the privilege.

"Twenty-five bucks or no meteor!" Jordy said. He stood to his full height. He listened. He shoved his chest up against the air. "You heard me! Twenty-five bucks! Cash on the nail!"

Huge, shattering thunderclaps in the sky.

He turned around. Lights glared in the sky over town, each one followed by a cannon report that echoed and vaulted off the hills. These were followed by sprays of iridescent color in fractured starburst patterns. It was the grand finale of the fireworks show, and the first time he'd missed seeing it on the town common, with a hot dog in one hand and a cone of spun sugar in the other, in more than fifteen years.

"It don't matter!" Jordy shouted at the sky. "I got the biggest damn firework Cleaves Mills ever seen! And it's on my land!"

Jordy went back to the house and was preparing to go into town when he remembered the drugstore would be closed because of the holiday. There was no way he could start getting his film developed until tomorrow. It seemed like there was nothing to do tonight but go to bed. That thought made him feel discontented and somehow sure that his luck hadn't changed after all; the gods of chance had been amused to haul him up by the scruff of the neck and show him twenty-five dollars and had then jammed him right back down in the dirt. After all, Verrill luck was Verrill luck, and you spelled that B-A-D. It had always been that way, why should it change? Jordy decided to go back out and look at his meteor, half convinced that it had probably disappeared by now.

The meteor was still there, but the heat seemed to have turned the Quaker Oats stuff to a runny liquid that looked like flour paste with

too much water added in. It was seeping into the ground, and it must have been some kind of hot, too, because steam was rising out of the burned crescent of ground beside the creek in little banners.

He decided to take the meteor halves back to the house after all, then changed his mind back again. He told himself he was afraid he'd break it into still more pieces, being as clumsy as he was, and he told himself that it might stay hot for a long time; it might melt right through whatever he put it in and put the house afire while he was sleeping. But that wasn't it. The truth was that he just didn't like it. Nasty goddamn thing, no telling where it had been or what that white stuff had been, that meteorshit inside it.

As Jordy pulled off his boots and got ready to go to bed, he winced at the pain in his fingers. They hurt like hell, and they had blistered up pretty much the way he had expected. Well, he wasn't going to let this get away, that was all.

He'd take those pictures in to get developed tomorrow and then he'd think about who might know someone at the college. Mr. Warren the banker probably did, except he still owed Mr. Warren seven hundred dollars and he'd probably take anything Jordy made as payment on his bill. Well, somebody else, then. He'd think it over in the morning.

He unbuttoned his shirt, doing it with his left hand because his right was such a misery, and hung it up. He took off his pants and his thermal underwear, which he wore year-round, and then went into the bathroom and took the Corn Huskers Lotion out of the medicine cabinet. He spread some of the pearly-colored fluid on the blisters that had raised up on his right fingers and then turned out the lights and went to bed. He tossed and turned for a long time and when sleep finally did come, it was thin and uneasy.

He woke at dawn, feeling sick and feverish, his throat as dry as an old chip, his head throbbing. His eyes kept wanting to see two of everything.

“God almighty damn,” he muttered, and swung his feet over onto the floor. It felt like he had the grippe. Good thing he had plenty of Bacardi rum and Vicks ointment. He would smear his chest up with Vicks and put a rag around his throat and stay in. Watch TV and drink Bacardi and just sweat her out.

“That’s the ticket,” Jordy said. “That’s—”

He saw his fingers.

The next few minutes were hysteria, and he didn’t come back to his wits until he was downstairs with the phone in his hand, listening to that answering service tell him Doc Condon wouldn’t be back until tomorrow afternoon. He hung up numbly. He looked down at his fingers again.

Green stuff was growing out of them.

They didn’t hurt anymore; they itched. The blisters had broken in the night, leaving raw-looking depressions in the pads of his fingers, and there was this green stuff growing in there like moss. Fuzzy short tendrils, not pale green like grass when it first comes up, but a darker, more vigorous green.

It came from touching that meteor, he thought. “I wisht I never saw it,” he said. “I wish it come down on somebody else’s property.”

But wish in one hand, spit in the other, as his daddy would have said. Things were what they were, and he was just going to have to sit down and do some Big Thinking about it. He would—

God, he had been rubbing his eyes!

That was the first thing he did every morning when he woke up, rubbed the sleepy seeds out of his eyes. It was the first thing anybody did, as far as he knew. You wiped your left eye with your left hand and your right eye with...with...

Jordy bolted for the living room, where there was a mirror bolted on the back of the closet door. He stared into his eyes. He looked for a long time, even going so far as to pull the lids away from the eyeballs. He did it with his left hand.

They were okay.

A little bloodshot, and scared for damn sure, but otherwise they were just Jordy Verrill's blue forty-six-year-old peepers, a little nearsighted now, so he had to wear specs when he read the seed catalog or one of his Louis L'Amour westerns or one of the dirty books he kept in the drawer of his night table.

Uttering a long sigh, he went back upstairs. He used half a package of Red Cross cotton, carefully bandaging his fingers. It took him quite a while, working only with his left hand, which was his dumb hand.

When he was done he knew it was time to sit down for a spell of Big Thinking, but he couldn't face that yet, so he went out to look at his meteor.

He groaned when he saw it; he couldn't help it.

The white stuff was all gone. The steam was gone. So was the burned crescent of ground. Where the burn had been there was now a fresh growth of dark green tendrils, already as high as clipped grass. It had begun to rain in the night, and the rain had brought it along fast.

Jordy shuddered just looking at it. The fingers of his right hand itched insanely, making him want to turn around and run back to the shed and turn on the faucet and rip off the cotton and stick his fingers under its cooling flow...

But that would make it worse. Look what just a little rain had done to this here.

He crept a little closer to the clear line of demarcation between yellow hay stubble and new green growth. He hunkered down and looked at it. He had never seen any plant that grew so thick, not even clover. Even with your nose practically touching the stuff you couldn't see the ground. It was the exact color of a flourishing, well-tended lawn, but the plants weren't blades. They were round instead of flat, and tiny tendrils sprouted from each stalk like branches from the bole of a tree. Except that they were more limber than branches. What they really reminded him of were arms...horrible boneless green arms.

Then Jordy's breath stopped in his throat. If anyone had been close enough to see him, they would have been reminded of that old saying, he had his ear to the ground. In this case it was literally true.

He could hear the stuff growing.

Very faintly the earth was groaning, as if in a sleep filled with pain. He could hear it being pulled apart and riddled by the strong thrust of this thing's root system. Pebbles clunked against pebbles. Clods crumbled into loose particles. And woven through these sounds was another: the rubbing of each tiny round stalk pushing itself up a little farther and a little farther. A grinding, squealing sound.

"Christ have mercy!" Jordy whined, and scrambled to his feet. He backed away. It wasn't the sound of plant growth that frightened him, exactly; once, long ago in his youth, he had heard the corn making. Nowadays the smartasses said that was just a story the rubes told each other, like holding frogs would bring on warts and stump liquor would charm them off. But when the summer was just right, hot every day and heavy showers at night, you could hear it. In August you could hear it for maybe two nights. Jordy's father had fetched him out of bed and they had stood on the back porch of the old place not even breathing, and sure enough, Jordy had heard that low, grinding rumble from their cornpatch.

He could remember the low, red-swollen moon casting dim fire on the broad green leaves, the jumbled scarecrow that fluttered and

dangled on the fence like a horrid and grinning Halloween treasure, the sound of crickets. And that...that other sound. It had scared him then, although his daddy said it was perfectly natural. It had scared him plenty. But it hadn't scared him like this.

This sound was like an earthquake whispering deep down in the earth, working itself up through bedrock, shunting boulders aside, moving the ground, getting ready to make plates waltz off their shelves and coffee cups tap-dance from counters to shatter on the linoleum. It was at the same time the smallest and the biggest sound he had ever heard.

Jordy turned and ran back to his house.

Now, you can explain why a smart man will do something, because a smart man goes by the facts. If a smart man gets car trouble, he goes to a service station. If he gets wasps in his house, he calls the exterminator. And if a smart man gets sick somehow, he calls the doctor.

Jordy Verrill wasn't a smart man. He wasn't feeble or retarded, but he sure wasn't going to win any Quiz Kid award, either. When God hands out the smart pills, he gives some people placebos, and Jordy was one of those. And you can't predict what a man will do in a given situation after he reaches a certain degree of dumbness, because the man himself doesn't know if he's going to shit or put his fingers in the fan.

Jordy didn't call another doctor, not even after lunch when he looked into the mirror on the back of the closet door and saw the green stuff growing out of his right eye.

There was another doctor in Cleaves Mills besides Dr. Condon. But Jordy had never been to Dr. Oakley, because he had heard that Dr. Oakley was a son of a bitch. Dr. Condon never acted that way, and Jordy like him. Also, Oakley was reputed to be fond of giving shots, and Jordy still retained his childhood fear of being injected. Doc Condon was more of a pill man, and usually he would give you the

pills free, from samples. Paying up, that was another thing. Jordy had heard that Doc Oakley had a little sign on his waiting room wall that said IT IS CUSTOMARY TO PAY CASH UNLESS ARRANGEMENTS HAVE BEEN MADE IN ADVANCE. That was hard scripture for an odd-job man like Jordy Verrill, especially with the hay as poor as it had been this year. But Doc Condon sent out bills only when he remembered to, which was rarely.

None of these are smart reasons for not going to the doctor, but Jordy had one other, so deep he could never say it in words. He didn't really want to go to see any doctor, because he was afraid to find out what was wrong with him. And what if it was so bad that Doc Oakley decided to stick him in the hospital? He was deadly afraid of that place, because when you went in it was only a matter of time before they lugged you out in a canvas bag.

Still, he might have gone to Doc Oakley if the answering service had said Doc Condon wasn't going to be back for a week. But just until tomorrow, that wasn't so bad. He could call Doc Condon tomorrow and get him to come out here, and not have to sit in anybody's waiting room where everyone could see that revolting green stuff growing out of his eye.

"That's the ticket," he whispered to himself. "That's what to do."

He went back to the TV, a glass of rum in a water glass by his hand. Tiny green fuzz was visible, growing on the white of his right eye like moss on a stone. Limber tendrils hung over the lower lid. It itched something dreadful.

And so the eye, of course, resorted to its old tried-and-true method of cleansing itself, and that's why Jordy, had he been a smart man, would have gotten over to Doc Oakley's office just as fast as his old Dodge pickup could travel.

His right eye was watering. A regular little sprinkling can.

He fell asleep halfway through the afternoon soap operas. When he woke up at five o'clock he was blind in his right eye. He looked in the mirror and moaned. His faded-blue right eye was gone. What was in the socket now was a waving green jungle of weeds, and some of the little creepers hung halfway down his cheek.

He put one hand up to his face before he could stop himself. He couldn't just rip the stuff out, the way you would hoe up the witchgrass in your tomato sets. He couldn't do that because his eye was still in there someplace.

Wasn't it?

—

Jordy screamed.

The scream echoed through his house, but there was no one to hear it because he was alone. He had never been so dreadfully alone in his life. It was eight o'clock in the evening and he had drunk the whole bottle of Bacardi and he still wasn't schnoekered. He wished he was schnoekered. He had never wanted so badly to be out of sobriety.

He had gone into the bathroom to piss off some of the rum, and that green stuff was growing out of his penis. Of course it was. It was wet down there, wasn't it? Almost always a little bit wet.

Jordy went just the same, but it itched and hurt so much that he couldn't tell which was worse. And maybe next time he wouldn't be able to go at all.

That wasn't what had made him scream. The thought of having that stuff inside him, that had made him scream. It was a million times worse than the time he had gotten the bat caught in his hair while he was insulating old Missus Carver's attic. Somehow the green plants had picked the two best parts of him, his eyes and his pecker. It

wasn't fair, it wasn't fair at all. It seemed like Jordy's luck was always in, and you spelled that kind of luck B-A-D.

He started to cry and made himself stop because that would only make it grow the faster.

He had no more hard liquor, but there was half a bottle of Ripple in the icebox so he filled his tumbler with that and sat down again, dully watching the TV with his good eye. He glanced down at his right hand and saw green tendrils had wriggled out from underneath the cotton...and some stalks had pushed right up through it.

"I'm growin'," he said emptily, and moaned again.

The wine made Jordy sleepy and he dozed off. When he woke up it was ten-thirty and at first he was so muzzy from everything he had drunk that he didn't remember what had happened to him. All he was sure of was that his mouth tasted funny, as if he had been chewing grass. Awful taste. It was like—

Jordy bolted for the mirror. Ran his tongue out. And screamed again.

His tongue was covered with the fuzzy green growth, the insides of his cheeks were downy with it, and even his teeth looked greenish, as if they were rotting.

And he itched. Itched like fire, all over. He remembered once when he had been deer hunting and he had to take a squat right that minute, or else. And he had gone and done it right in a patch of poison sumac—Jordy's luck was always in. That had been a bad itch, the rash he had gotten from that, but this was worse. This was a nightmare. His fingers, his eye, his pecker, and now his mouth.

Cold water!

The thought was so focused, so steely, that it didn't seem like his own at all. Commanding, it came again: Cold water!

He had a vision of filling up the old claw-foot bathtub upstairs with cold water, then ripping off all his clothes and jumping in, drowning the itch forever.

Madness. If he did that it would grow all over him, he would come out looking like a swamp log covered with moss. And yet the thought of cold water wouldn't go away; it was crazy, all right, but it would be so good, so good to just soak in cold water until the itch was all gone.

He started back to his chair and stopped.

Green stuff was sprouting from its overstuffed right arm. It was all over the worn and stringy brown fabric. On the table beside it, where there had been a ring of moisture from his glass, there was now a ring of green stalks and tendrils.

He went out into the kitchen and looked into the trash bag. More of the green stuff was growing all over the Bacardi bottle he had dropped in earlier. And a Del Monte pineapple chunks can next to the Bacardi bottle. And an empty Heinz ketchup bottle next to the Del Monte can. Even his garbage was being overrun.

Jordy ran for the phone, picked it up, then banged it back down. Who could he call? Did he really want anyone to see him like this?

He looked at his arms and saw that his own sweat glands were betraying him. Among the reddish-gold hairs on his forearms, a new growth was sprouting. It was green.

"I'm turnin' into a weed," he said distractedly, and looked around as if the walls would tell him what to do. They didn't, and he sat down in front of the TV again.

It was his eye—what had been his eye—that finally broke him down. The itching just seemed to be going deeper and deeper into his head, and creeping down his nose at the same time.

“I can’t help it,” he groaned. “Oh my Jesus, I can’t!”

He went upstairs, a grotesque, shambling figure with green arms and a forest growing out of one eye socket. He lurched into the bathroom, jammed the plug into the bathtub drain, and turned the cold water faucet on full. His jury-rigged plumbing thumped and groaned and clanked. The sound of cool water splashing into the tub made him tremble all over with eagerness. He tore his shirt off and was not much revolted by the new growth sprouting from his navel. He kicked his boots off, shoved his pants and thermals and skivvies down all at once. His upper thighs were forested with the growth and his pubic hair was twined with the limber green tendrils that sprouted from the plants’ central stalks. When the tub was three-quarters full, Jordy could no longer control himself. He jumped in.

It was heaven.

He rolled and flopped in the tub like some clumsy, greenish porpoise, sending water sheeting onto the floor. He ducked his head and sloshed water over the back of his neck. He shoved his face under and came up blowing water.

And he could feel the new growth spurt, could feel the weeds that had taken root in his body moving forward with amazing, terrifying speed.

Shortly after midnight, a slumped, slowly moving figure topped the rise between Jordy Verrill’s farm and Bluebird Creek. It stood looking down at the place where a meteor had impacted less than thirty hours before.

Jordy’s east pasture was a sea of growing green weeds. The hay was gone for a distance of a hundred and sixty yards in every direction. Already the growth nearest the creek was more than a foot and a half high, and the tendrils that sprouted from the stalks moved with a twisting, writhing movement that was almost sentient. At one point the Bluebird itself was gone; it flowed into a green marsh and

came out four feet farther downstream. A peninsula of green had already marched ten feet up the bank of Arlen McGinty's land.

The figure that stood looking down on this was really not Jordy Verrill anymore. It was hard to say what it might be. It was vaguely humanoid, the way a snowman that had begun to melt is humanoid. The shoulders were rounded. The head was a fuzzy green ball with no sign of a neck between it and the shoulders. Deep down in all that green, one faded-blue iris gleamed like a pale sapphire.

In the field, tendrils suddenly waved in the air like a thousand snakes coming out of a thousand Hindu fakirs' baskets, and pointed, trembling, at the figure standing on the knoll. And on the figure, tendrils suddenly pointed back. Momentarily Jordy had a semblance of humanity again: He looked like a man with his hair standing on end.

Jordy, his thoughts dimming with the tide of greenness that now grew from the very meat of his brain, understood that a kind of telepathy was going on.

Is the food good?

Yes, very good. Rich.

Is he the only food?

No, much food. His thoughts say so.

Does the food have a name?

Two names. Sometimes it is called Jordy-food. Sometimes it is called Cleaves Mills-food.

Jordy-food. Cleaves Mills-food. Rich. Good.

His thoughts say he wants to bang. Can he do that?

Don't know. Some Jordy-thing.

Good. Rich. Let him do what he wants.

The figure, like a badly controlled puppet on frayed strings, turned and lurched back toward the house.

In the glow of the kitchen light, Jordy was a monster. A monster in the true sense, nearly as ludicrous as it was terrifying. He looked like a walking privet hedge.

The hedge was crying.

It had no tears to cry, because the growth was mercilessly absorbing every bit of moisture that Jordy's failing systems could produce. But it cried just the same, in its fashion, as it pulled the .410 Remington from its hooks over the shed door.

It put the gun to what had been Jordy Verrill's head. It could not pull the trigger by itself, but the tendrils helped, perhaps curious to see if the bang would make the Jordy-food more tasty. They curled around the trigger and tightened until the hammer dropped.

A dry click.

Jordy's luck was always in.

Somehow it got the shells from the desk drawer in the living room. The tendrils curled around one of them, lifted it, dropped it into the chamber, and closed the slide mechanism. Again they helped to pull the trigger.

The gun banged. And Jordy Verrill's last thought was: Oh, thank God, lucky at last!

—

The weeds reached the edge of the highway by dawn and began to grow around a signpost that said CLEAVES MILLS, TWO MILES. The round stalks whispered and rubbed against each other in a light

dawn breeze. There was a heavy dew and the weeds sucked it up greedily.

Jordy-food.

A fine planet, a wet planet. A ripe planet.

Cleaves Mills-food.

The weeds began to grow toward town.

BASED ON A STORY BY STEPHEN KING

WILLA



WILLA

Stephen King

You don't see what's right in front of your eyes, she'd said, but sometimes he did. He supposed he wasn't entirely undeserving of her scorn, but he wasn't entirely blind, either. And as the dregs of sunset faded to bitter orange over the Wind River Range, David looked around the station and saw that Willa was gone. He told himself he wasn't sure, but that was only his head—his sinking stomach was sure enough.

He went to find Lander, who liked her a bit. Who called her spunky when Willa said Amtrak was full of shit for leaving them stranded like this. A lot of them didn't care for her at all, stranded by Amtrak or not.

"It smells like wet crackers in here!" Helen Palmer shouted at him as David walked past. She had found her way to the bench in the corner, as she always did, eventually. The Rhinehart woman was minding her for the time being, giving the husband a little break, and she gave David a smile.

"Have you seen Willa?" David asked.

The Rhinehart woman shook her head, still smiling.

"We got fish for supper!" Mrs. Palmer burst out furiously. A knuckle of blue veins beat in the hollow of her temple. A few people looked around. "First one t'ing an' den anudder!"

"Hush, Helen," the Rhinehart woman said. Maybe her first name was Sally, but David thought he would have remembered a name like that; there were so few Sallys these days. Now the world belonged to the Ambers, Ashleys, and Tiffanys. Willa was another endangered species, and just thinking that made his stomach sink down again.

"Like crackers!" Helen spat. "Them dirty old crackers up to camp!"

Henry Lander was sitting on a bench under the clock. He had his arm around his wife. He glanced up and shook his head before David could ask. "She's not here. Sorry. Gone into town if you're

lucky. Bugged out for good if you're not." And he made a hitchhiking gesture.

David didn't believe his fiancée would hitchhike west on her own—the idea was crazy—but he believed she wasn't here. Had known even before counting heads, actually, and a snatch of some old book or poem about winter occurred to him: A cry of absence, absence in the heart.

The station was a narrow wooden throat. Down its length, people either strolled aimlessly or simply sat on benches under the fluorescent lights. The shoulders of the ones who sat had that special slump you saw only in places like this, where people waited for whatever had gone wrong to be made right so the broken journey could be mended. Few people came to places like Crowheart Springs, Wyoming on purpose.

"Don't you go haring after her, David," Ruth Lander said. "It's getting dark, and there's plenty of critters out there. Not just coyotes, either. That book salesman with the limp says he saw a couple of wolves on the other side of the tracks, where the freight depot is."

"Biggers," Henry said. "That's his name."

"I don't care if his name is Jack D. Ripper," Ruth said. "The point is, you're not in Kansas anymore, David."

"But if she went—"

"She went while it was still daylight," Henry Lander said, as if daylight would stop a wolf (or a bear) from attacking a woman on her own. For all David knew, it might. He was an investment banker, not a wildlife expert. A young investment banker, at that.

"If the pick-up train comes and she's gone, she'll miss it." He couldn't seem to get this simple fact into their heads. It wasn't getting traction, in the current lingo of his office back in Chicago.

Henry raised his eyebrows. “Are you telling me that both of you missing it will improve things somehow?”

If they both missed it, they’d either catch a bus or wait for the next train together. Surely Henry and Ruth Lander saw that. Or maybe not. What David mostly saw when he looked at them—what was right in front of his eyes—was that special weariness reserved for people temporarily stuck in West Overalls. And who else cared for Willa? If she dropped out of sight in the High Plains, who besides David Sanderson would spare a thought? There was even some active dislike for her. That bitch Ursula Davis had told him once that if Willa’s mother had left the a off the end of her name, “it would have been just about perfect.”

“I’m going to town and look for her,” he said.

Henry sighed. “Son, that’s very foolish.”

“We can’t be married in San Francisco if she gets left behind in Crowheart Springs,” he said, trying to make a joke of it.

Dudley was walking by. David didn’t know if Dudley was the man’s first or last name, only that he was an executive with Staples office supply and had been on his way to Missoula for some sort of regional meeting. He was ordinarily very quiet, so the donkey heehaw of laughter he expelled into the growing shadows was beyond surprising; it was shocking. “If the train comes and you miss it,” he said, “you can hunt up a justice of the peace and get married right here. When you get back east, tell all your friends you had a real Western shotgun wedding. Yeehaw, partner.”

“Don’t do this,” Henry said. “We won’t be here much longer.”

“So I should leave her? That’s nuts.”

He walked on before Lander or his wife could reply. Georgia Andreeson was sitting on a nearby bench and watching her daughter caper up and down the dirty tile floor in her red traveling dress.

Pammy Andreeson never seemed to get tired. David tried to remember if he had seen her asleep since the train derailed at the Wind River junction point and they had wound up here like someone's forgotten package in the dead letter office. Once, maybe, with her head in her mother's lap. But that might be a false memory, created out of his belief that five-year-olds were supposed to sleep a lot.

Pammy hopped from tile to tile, a prank in motion, seeming to use the squares as a giant hopscotch board. Her red dress jumped around her plump knees. "I knew a man, his name was Danny," she chanted in a monotonous one-note holler. It made David's fillings ache. "He tripped and fell, on his fanny. I knew a man, his name was David. He tripped and fell, on his bavid." She giggled and pointed at David.

"Pammy, stop," Georgia Andreeson said. She smiled at David and brushed her hair from the side of her face. He thought the gesture unutterably weary, and thought she had a long road ahead with the high-spirited Pammy, especially with no Mr. Andreeson in evidence.

"Did you see Willa?" he asked.

"Gone," she said, and pointed to the door with the sign over it reading TO SHUTTLE, TO TAXIS, CALL AHEAD FROM COURTESY PHONE FOR HOTEL VACANCIES.

Here was Biggers, limping toward him. "I'd avoid the great outdoors, unless armed with a high-powered rifle. There are wolves. I've seen them."

"I knew a girl, her name was Willa," Pammy chanted. "She had a headache, and took a pill." She collapsed to the floor, shouting with laughter.

Biggers, the salesman, hadn't waited for a reply. He was limping back down the length of the station. His shadow grew long,

shortened in the glow of the hanging fluorescents, then grew long again.

Phil Palmer was leaning in the doorway beneath the sign about the shuttle and the taxis. He was a retired insurance man. He and his wife were on their way to Portland. The plan was to stay with their oldest son and his wife for a while, but Palmer had confided to David and Willa that Helen would probably never be coming back east. She had cancer as well as Alzheimer's. Willa called it a twofer. When David told her that was a little cruel, Willa had looked at him, started to say something, and then had only shaken her head.

Now Palmer asked, as he always did: "Hey, mutt—got a butt?"

To which David answered, as he always did: "I don't smoke, Mr. Palmer."

And Palmer finished: "Just testing you, kiddo."

As David stepped out onto the concrete platform where detraining passengers waited for the shuttle to Crowheart Springs, Palmer frowned. "Not a good idea, my young friend."

Something—it might have been a large dog but probably wasn't—lifted a howl from the other side of the railway station, where the sage and broom grew almost up to the tracks. A second voice joined it, creating harmony. They trailed off together.

"See what I mean, jellybean?" And Palmer smiled as if he'd conjured those howls just to prove his point.

David turned, his light jacket rippling around him in the keen breeze, and started down the steps. He went fast, before he could change his mind, and only the first step was really hard. After that he just thought about Willa.

"David," Palmer said, not joshing now, not joking around. "Don't."

“Why not? She did. Besides, the wolves are over there.” He jerked a thumb back over his shoulder. “If that’s what they are.”

“Course that’s what they are. And no, they probably won’t come at you—I doubt if they’re specially hungry this time of year. But there’s no need for both of you to spend another God-knows-how-long in the middle of nowhere just because she got to missing the bright lights.”

“You don’t seem to understand—she’s my girl.”

“I’m going to tell you a hard truth, my friend: If she really considered herself your girl, she wouldn’t have done what she did. You think?”

At first David said nothing, because he wasn’t sure what he thought. Possibly because he often didn’t see what was right in front of his eyes. Willa had said so. Finally he turned back to look at Phil Palmer leaning in the doorway above him. “I think you don’t leave your fiancée stranded in the middle of nowhere. That’s what I think.”

Palmer sighed. “I almost hope one of those trash-pine lobos does decide to put the bite on your city ass. It might smarten you up. Little Willa Stuart cares for nobody but herself, and everyone sees it but you.”

“If I pass a Nite Owl store or a 7-Eleven, you want me to pick you up a pack of cigarettes?”

“Why the fuck not?” Palmer said. Then, just as David was walking across NO PARKING TAXI ZONE painted on the empty curbleless street: “David!”

David turned back.

“The shuttle won’t be back until tomorrow, and it’s three miles to town. Says so, right on the back wall of the information booth. That’s six miles, round-trip. On foot. Take you two hours, and that’s not counting the time it might take you to track her down.”

David raised his hand to indicate he heard, but kept going. The wind was off the mountains, and cold, but he liked the way it rippled his clothes and combed back his hair. At first he watched for wolves, scanning one side of the road and then the other, but when he saw none, his thoughts returned to Willa. And really, his mind had been fixed on little else since the second or third time he had been with her.

She'd gotten to missing the bright lights; Palmer was almost certainly right about that much, but David didn't believe she cared for nobody but herself. The truth was she'd just gotten tired of waiting around with a bunch of sad old sacks moaning about how they were going to be late for this, that, and the other. The town over yonder probably didn't amount to much, but in her mind it must have held some possibility for fun, and that had outweighed the possibility of Amtrak sending a special to pick them up while she was gone.

And where, exactly, would she have gone looking for fun?

He was sure there were no what you'd call nightclubs in Crowheart Springs, where the passenger station was just a long green shed with WYOMING and "THE EQUALITY STATE" painted on the side in red, white, and blue. No nightclubs, no discos, but there were undoubtedly bars, and he thought she'd settle for one of those. If she couldn't go clubbin', she'd go jukin'.

Night came on and the stars unrolled across the sky from east to west like a rug with spangles in it. A half-moon rose between two peaks and sat there, casting a sickroom glow over this stretch of the highway and the open land on both sides of it. The wind whistled beneath the eaves of the station, but out here it made a strange open humming that was not quite a vibration. It made him think of Pammy Andreeson's hopscotch chant.

He walked listening for the sound of an oncoming train behind him. He didn't hear that; what he heard when the wind dropped was a minute but perfectly audible click-click-click. He turned and saw a wolf standing about twenty paces behind him on the broken passing

line of Route 26. It was almost as big as a calf, its coat as shaggy as a Russian hat. In the starshine its fur looked black, its eyes a dark urine yellow. It saw David looking and stopped. Its mouth dropped open in a grin, and it began to pant, the sound of a small engine.

There was no time to be afraid. He took a step toward it, clapped his hands, and shouted, "Get out of here! Go on, now!"

The wolf turned tail and fled, leaving a pile of steaming droppings behind on Route 26. David grinned but managed to keep from laughing out loud; he thought that would be tempting the gods. He felt both scared and absurdly, totally cool. He thought of changing his name from David Sanderson to Wolf Frightener. That would be quite the name for an investment banker.

Then he did laugh a little—he couldn't help it—and turned toward Crowheart Springs again. This time he walked looking over his shoulder as well as from side to side, but the wolf didn't come back. What came was a certainty that he would hear the shriek of the special coming to pick up the others; the part of their train that was still on the tracks would have been cleared away from the junction, and soon the people waiting in the station back there would be on their way again—the Palmers, the Landers, the limping Biggers, the dancing Pammy, and all the rest.

Well, so what? Amtrak would hold their luggage in San Francisco; surely they could be trusted to get that much right. He and Willa could find the local bus station. Greyhound must have discovered Wyoming.

He came upon a Budweiser can and kicked it awhile. Then he kicked it crooked, off into the scrub, and as he was debating whether or not to go after it, he heard faint music: a bass line and the cry of a pedal steel guitar, which always sounded to him like chrome teardrops. Even in happy songs.

She was there, listening to that music. Not because it was the closest place with music, but because it was the right place. He

knew it. So he left the beer can and walked on toward the pedal steel, his sneakers scuffing up dust that the wind whipped away. The sound of the drum kit came next, then a red neon arrow below a sign that just read 26. Well, why not? This was Route 26, after all. It was a perfectly logical name for a honky-tonk.

It had two parking lots, the one in front paved and packed with pickup trucks and cars, most American and most at least five years old. The lot on the left was gravel. In that one, ranks of long-haul semis stood under brilliant blue-white arc sodiums. By now David could also hear the rhythm and lead guitars, and read the marquee over the door: ONE NIGHT ONLY THE DERAILERS \$5 COVER SORRY.

The Derailers, he thought. Well, she certainly found the right group.

David had a five in his wallet, but the foyer of 26 was empty. Beyond it, a big hardwood dance floor was crammed with slow-dancing couples, most wearing jeans and cowboy boots and clutching each other's butts as the band worked its way deeper into "Wasted Days and Wasted Nights." It was loud, lachrymose, and—as far as David Sanderson could tell—note perfect. The smells of beer, sweat, Brut, and Wal-Mart perfume hit him like a punch in the nose. The laughter and conversation—even a footloose yeehaw cry from the far side of the dance floor—were like sounds heard in a dream you have again and again at certain critical turns of life: the dream of being unprepared for a big exam, the dream of being naked in public, the dream of falling, the dream in which you hurry toward a corner in some strange city, sure your fate lies on the far side.

David considered putting his five back in his wallet, then leaned into the ticket booth and dropped it on the desk in there, which was bare except for a pack of Lucky Strikes sitting on a Danielle Steel paperback. Then he went into the crowded main room.

The Derailers swung their way into something upbeat and the younger dancers began to pogo like kids at a punk show. To David's left, two dozen or so older couples began a pair of line dances. He

looked again and realized there was only one line-dancing group, after all. The far wall was a mirror, making the dance floor look twice as big as it really was.

A glass shattered. “You pay, partner!” the lead singer called as The Derailers hit the instrumental break, and the dancers applauded his wit, which probably seemed fairly sparkling, David thought, if you were running hot on the tequila highway.

The bar was a horseshoe with a neon replica of the Wind River Range floating overhead. It was red, white, and blue; in Wyoming, they did seem to love their red, white, and blue. A neon sign in similar colors proclaimed YOU ARE IN GOD’S COUNTRY PARTNER. It was flanked by the Budweiser logo on the left and the Coors logo on the right. The crowd waiting to be served was four-deep. A trio of bartenders in white shirts and red vests flashed cocktail shakers like six-guns.

It was a barn of a place—there had to be five hundred people whooping it up—but he had no concerns about finding Willa. My mojo’s working, he thought as he cut a corner of the dance floor, almost dancing himself as he avoided various gyrating cowboys and cowgirls.

Beyond the bar and the dance floor was a dark little lounge with high-backed booths. Quartets were crammed into most of these, usually with a pitcher or two for sustenance, their reflections in the mirrored wall turning each party of four into eight. Only one of the booths wasn’t full up. Willa sat by herself, her high-necked flower-print dress looking out of place among the Levi’s, denim skirts, and pearl-button shirts. Nor had she bought herself a drink or anything to eat—the table was bare.

She didn’t see him at first. She was watching the dancers. Her color was high, and there were deep dimples at the corners of her mouth. She looked nine miles out of place, but he had never loved her more. This was Willa on the edge of a smile.

“Hi, David,” she said as he slid in beside her. “I was hoping you’d come. I thought you would. Isn’t the band great? They’re so loud!” She almost had to yell to be heard, but he could see she liked that, too. And after her initial glance at him, she went back to looking at the dancers.

“They’re good, all right,” he said. They were, too. He could feel himself responding in spite of his anxiety, which had returned. Now that he’d actually found her, he was worried all over again about missing that damned pick-up train. “The lead singer sounds like Buck Owens.”

“Does he?” She looked at him, smiling. “Who’s Buck Owens?”

“It doesn’t matter. We ought to go back to the station. Unless you want to be stranded here another day, that is.”

“That might not be so bad. I kind of like this pla—whoa, look out!”

A glass arched across the dance floor, sparkling briefly green and gold in the stage gels, and shattered somewhere out of sight. There were cheers and some applause—Willa was also applauding—but David saw a couple of beefcakes with the words SECURITY and SERENITY printed on their T-shirts moving in on the approximate site of the missile launch.

“This is the kind of place where you can count on four fistfights in the parking lot before eleven,” David said, “and often one free-for-all inside just before last call.”

She laughed, pointed her forefingers at him like guns. “Good! I want to see!”

“And I want us to go back,” he said. “If you want to go honky-tonking in San Francisco, I’ll take you. It’s a promise.”

She stuck out her lower lip and shook back her sandy-blond hair. “It wouldn’t be the same. It wouldn’t, and you know it. In San Francisco

they probably drink. . I don't know ... macrobiotic beer.”

That made him laugh. As with the idea of an investment banker named Wolf Frightener, the idea of macrobiotic beer was just too rich. But the anxiety was there, under the laughter; in fact, wasn't it fueling the laughter?

“We're gonna take a short break and be right back,” the lead singer said, wiping his brow. “Y'all drink up, now, and remember—I'm Tony Villanueva, and we are The Derailers.”

“That's our cue to put on our diamond shoes and depart,” David said, and took her hand. He slid out of the booth, but she didn't come. She didn't let go of his hand, either, though, and he sat down again feeling a touch of panic. Thinking he now knew how a fish felt when it realized it couldn't throw the hook, that old hook was in good and tight and Mr. Trout was bound for the bank, where he would flop his final flop. She was looking at him with those same killer blue eyes and deep dimples: Willa on the edge of a smile, his wife-to-be, who read novels in the morning and poetry at night and thought the TV news was ... what did she call it? Ephemera.

“Look at us,” she said, and turned her head away from him.

He looked at the mirrored wall on their left. There he saw a nice young couple from the East Coast, stranded in Wyoming. In her print dress she looked better than he did, but he guessed that was always going to be the case. He looked from the mirror-Willa to the real thing with his eyebrows raised.

“No, look again,” she said. The dimples were still there, but she was serious now—as serious as she could be in this party atmosphere, anyway. “And think about what I told you.”

It was on his lips to say, You've told me many things, and I think about all of them, but that was a lover's reply, pretty and essentially meaningless. And because he knew what thing she meant, he looked again without saying anything. This time he really looked, and

there was no one in the mirror. He was looking at the only empty booth in 26. He turned to Willa, flabbergasted ... yet somehow not surprised.

“Didn’t you even wonder how a presentable female could be sitting here all by herself when the place is juiced and jumping?” she asked.

He shook his head. He hadn’t. There were quite a few things he hadn’t wondered, at least until now. When he’d last had something to eat or drink, for instance. Or what time it was, or when it had last been daylight. He didn’t even know exactly what had happened to them. Only that the Northern Flyer had left the tracks and now they were by some coincidence here listening to a country-western group called—

“I kicked a can,” he said. “Coming here I kicked a can.”

“Yes,” she said, “and you saw us in the mirror the first time you looked, didn’t you? Perception isn’t everything, but perception and expectation together?” She winked, then leaned toward him. Her breast pressed against his upper arm as she kissed his cheek, and the sensation was lovely—surely the feel of living flesh. “Poor David. I’m sorry. But you were brave to come. I really didn’t think you would, that’s the truth.”

“We need to go back and tell the others.”

Her lips pressed together. “Why?”

“Because—”

Two men in cowboy hats led two laughing women in jeans, Western shirts, and ponytails toward their booth. As they neared it, an identical expression of puzzlement—not quite fear—touched their faces, and they headed back toward the bar instead. They feel us, David thought. Like cold air pushing them away—that’s what we are now.

“Because it’s the right thing to do.”

Willa laughed. It was a weary sound. “You remind me of the old guy who used to sell the oatmeal on TV.”

“Hon, they think they’re waiting for a train to come and pick them up!”

“Well, maybe there is!” He was almost frightened by her sudden ferocity. “Maybe the one they’re always singing about, the gospel train, the train to glory, the one that don’t carry no gamblers or midnight ramblers”

“I don’t think Amtrak runs to heaven,” David said. He was hoping to make her laugh, but she looked down at her hands almost sullenly, and he had a sudden intuition. “Is there something else you know? Something we should tell them? There is, isn’t there?”

“I don’t know why we should bother when we can just stay here,” she said, and was that petulance in her voice? He thought it was. This was a Willa he had never even suspected. “You may be a little nearsighted, David, but at least you came. I love you for that.” And she kissed him again.

“There was a wolf, too,” he said. “I clapped my hands and scared it off. I’m thinking of changing my name to Wolf Frightener.”

She stared at him for a moment with her mouth open, and David had time to think: I had to wait until we were dead to really surprise the woman I love. Then she dropped against the padded back of the booth, roaring with laughter. A waitress who happened to be passing dropped a full tray of beers with a crash and swore colorfully.

“Wolf Frightener!” Willa cried. “I want to call you that in bed! ‘Oh, oh, Wolf Frightener, you so big! You so hairy!’”

The waitress was staring down at the foaming mess, still cursing like a sailor on shore leave. All the while keeping well away from that one empty booth.

David said, "Do you think we still can? Make love, I mean?"

Willa wiped at her streaming eyes and said, "Perception and expectation, remember? Together they can move mountains." She took his hand again. "I still love you, and you still love me. Don't you?"

"Am I not Wolf Frightener?" he asked. He could joke, because his nerves didn't believe he was dead. He looked past her, into the mirror, and saw them. Then just himself, his hand holding nothing. Then they were both gone. And still ... he breathed, he smelled beer and whiskey and perfume.

A busboy had come from somewhere and was helping the waitress mop up the mess. "Felt like I stepped down," David heard her saying. Was that the kind of thing you heard in the afterlife?

"I guess I'll go back with you," she said, "but I'm not staying in that boring station with those boring people when this place is around."

"Okay," he said.

"Who's Buck Owens?"

"I'll tell you all about him," David said. "Roy Clark, too. But first tell me what else you know."

"Most of them I don't even care about," she said, "but Henry Lander's nice. So's his wife."

"Phil Palmer's not bad, either."

She wrinkled her nose. "Phil the Pill."

"What do you know, Willa?"

"You'll see for yourself, if you really look."

"Wouldn't it be simpler if you just—"

Apparently not. She rose until her thighs pressed against the edge of the table, and pointed. “Look! The band is coming back!”

*

The moon was high when he and Willa walked back to the road, holding hands. David didn’t see how that could be—they had stayed for only the first two songs of the next set—but there it was, floating all the way up there in the spangled black. That was troubling, but something else troubled him even more.

“Willa,” he said, “what year is it?”

She thought it over. The wind rippled her dress as it would the dress of any live woman. “I don’t exactly remember,” she said at last. “Isn’t that odd?”

“Considering I can’t remember the last time I ate a meal or drank a glass of water? Not too odd. If you had to guess, what would you say? Quick, without thinking.”

“Nineteen ... eighty-eight?”

He nodded. He would have said 1987 himself. “There was a girl in there wearing a T-shirt that said CROWHEART SPRINGS HIGH SCHOOL, CLASS OF ‘03. And if she was old enough to be in a roadhouse—”

“Then ‘03 must have been at least three years ago.”

“That’s what I was thinking.” He stopped. “It can’t be 2006, Willa, can it? I mean, the twenty-first century?”

Before she could reply, they heard the click-click-click of toenails on asphalt. This time more than just one set; this time there were four wolves behind them on the highway. The biggest, standing in front of the others, was the one that had come up behind David on his walk toward Crowheart Springs. He would have known that shaggy black

pelt anywhere. Its eyes were brighter now. A half-moon floated in each like a drowned lamp.

“They see us!” Willa cried in a kind of ecstasy. “David, they see us!” She dropped to one knee on a white dash of the broken passing line and held out her right hand. She made a clucking noise and said, “Here, boy! Come on!”

“Willa, I don’t think that’s such a good idea.”

She paid no attention, a very Willa thing to do. Willa had her own ideas about things. It was she who had wanted to go from Chicago to San Francisco by rail—because, she said, she wanted to know what it felt like to fuck on a train. Especially one that was going fast and rocking a little.

“Come on, big boy, come to your mama!”

The big lobo came, trailed by its mate and their two ... did you call them yearlings? As it stretched its muzzle (and all those shining teeth) toward the slim outstretched hand, the moon filled its eyes perfectly for a moment, turning them silver. Then, just before its long snout could touch her skin, the wolf uttered a series of piercing yips and flung itself backward so sharply that for a moment it rose on its rear legs, front paws boxing the air and the white plush on its belly exposed. The others scattered. The big lobo executed a midair twist and ran into the scrubland to the right of the road, still yipping, with his tail tucked. The rest followed.

Willa rose and looked at David with an expression of hard grief that was too much to bear. He dropped his eyes to his feet instead. “Is this why you brought me out into the dark when I was listening to music?” she asked. “To show me what I am now? As if I didn’t know!”

“Willa, I’m sorry.”

“Not yet, but you will be.” She took his hand again. “Come on, David.”

Now he risked a glance. “You’re not mad at me?”

“Oh, a little—but you’re all I’ve got now, and I’m not letting you go.”

Shortly after seeing the wolves, David spied a Budweiser can lying on the shoulder of the road. He was almost positive it was the one he had kicked along ahead of him until he’d kicked it crooked, out into the sage. Here it was again, in its original position ... because he had never kicked it at all, of course. Perception isn’t everything, Willa had said, but perception and expectation together? Put them together and you had a Reese’s peanut butter cup of the mind.

He kicked the can out into the scrubland, and when they were past that spot, he looked back and there it lay, right where it had been since some cowboy—maybe on his way to 26—had chucked it from the window of his pickup truck. He remembered that on Hee Haw—that old show starring Buck Owens and Roy Clark—they used to call pickup trucks cowboy Cadillacs.

“What are you smiling about?” Willa asked him.

“Tell you later. Looks like we’re going to have plenty of time.”

*

They stood outside the Crowheart Springs railway station, holding hands in the moonlight like Hansel and Gretel outside the candy house. To David the long building’s green paint looked ashy gray in the moonlight, and although he knew WYOMING and “THE EQUALITY STATE” were printed in red, white, and blue, they could have been any colors at all. He noticed a sheet of paper, protected from the elements by plastic, stapled to one of the posts flanking the wide steps leading up to the double doors. Phil Palmer still leaned there.

“Hey, mutt!” Palmer called down. “Got a butt?”

“Sorry, Mr. Palmer,” David said.

“Thought you were going to bring me back a pack.”

“I didn’t pass a store,” David said.

“They didn’t sell cigarettes where you were, doll?” Palmer asked. He was the kind of man who called all women of a certain age doll; you knew that just looking at him, as you knew that if you happened to pass the time of day with him on a steamy August afternoon, he’d tip his hat back on his head to wipe his brow and tell you it wasn’t the heat, it was the humidity.

“I’m sure they did,” Willa said, “but I would have had trouble buying them.”

“Want to tell me why, sugarpie?”

“Why do you think?”

But Palmer crossed his arms over his narrow chest and said nothing. From somewhere inside, his wife cried, “We got fish for supper! First one t’ing an’ den anudder! I hate the smell of this place! Crackers!”

“We’re dead, Phil,” David said. “That’s why. Ghosts can’t buy cigarettes.”

Palmer looked at him for several seconds, and before he laughed, David saw that Palmer more than believed him: Palmer had known all along. “I’ve heard plenty of reasons for not bringing someone what he asked for,” he said, “but I have to think that takes the prize.”

“Phil—”

From inside: “Fish for supper! Oh, gah-dammit!”

“Excuse me, kiddies,” Palmer said. “Duty calls.” And he was gone. David turned to Willa, thinking she’d ask him what else he had expected, but Willa was looking at the notice posted beside the stairs.

“Look at that,” she said. “Tell me what you see.”

At first he saw nothing, because the moon was shining on the protective plastic. He took a step closer, then one to the left, moving Willa aside to do it.

“At the top it says NO SOLICITING BY ORDER OF SUBLETTE COUNTY SHERIFF, then some fine print—blah-blah-blah—and at the bottom—”

She gave him an elbow. Not gently, either. “Stop shitting around and look at it, David. I don’t want to be here all night.”

You don’t see what’s right in front of your eyes.

He turned away from the station and stared at the railroad tracks shining in the moonlight. Beyond them was a thick white neck of stone with a flat top—that thar’s a mesa, pardner, jest like in them old John Ford movies.

He looked back at the posted notice, and wondered how he ever could have mistaken TRESPASSING for SOLICITING, a big bad investment banker like Wolf Frightener Sanderson.

“It says NO TRESPASSING BY ORDER OF SUBLETTE COUNTY SHERIFF,” he said.

“Very good. And under the blah-blah-blah, what about there?”

At first he couldn’t read the two lines at the bottom at all; at first those two lines were just incomprehensible symbols, possibly because his mind, which wanted to believe none of this, could find no innocuous translation. So he looked away to the railroad tracks once more and wasn’t exactly surprised to see that they no longer gleamed in the moonlight; now the steel was rusty, and weeds were growing between the ties. When he looked back again, the railway station was a slumped derelict with its windows boarded up and most of the shingles on its roof gone. NO PARKING TAXI ZONE had

disappeared from the asphalt, which was crumbling and full of potholes. He could still read WYOMING and “THE EQUALITY STATE” on the side of the building, but now the words were ghosts. Like us, he thought.

“Go on,” Willa said—Willa, who had her own ideas about things, Willa who saw what was in front of her eyes and wanted you to see too, even when seeing was cruel. “That’s your final exam. Read those two lines at the bottom and then we can get this show on the road.”

He sighed. “It says THIS PROPERTY IS CONDEMNED. And then DEMOLITION SCHEDULED IN JUNE 2007.”

“You get an A. Now let’s go see if anyone else wants to go to town and hear The Derailers. I’ll tell Palmer to look on the bright side—we can’t buy cigarettes, but for people like us there’s never a cover charge.”

*

Only nobody wanted to go to town.

“What does she mean, we’re dead? Why does she want to say an awful thing like that?” Ruth Lander asked David, and what killed him (so to speak) wasn’t the reproach in her voice but the look in her eyes before she pressed her face against the shoulder of Henry’s corduroy jacket. Because she knew too.

“Ruth,” he said, “I’m not telling you this to upset you—”

“Then stop!” she cried, her voice muffled.

David saw that all of them but Helen Palmer were looking at him with anger and hostility. Helen was nodding and muttering between her husband and the Rhinehart woman, whose first name was probably Sally. They were standing under the fluorescents in little groups ... only when he blinked, the fluorescents were gone. Then the

stranded passengers were just dim figures standing in the shattered moonlight that managed to find its way in through the boarded-up windows. The Landers weren't sitting on a bench; they were sitting on a dusty floor near a little cluster of empty crack vials—yes, it seemed that crack had managed to find its way even out here to John Ford country—and there was a faded circle on one wall not far from the corner where Helen Palmer squatted and muttered. Then David blinked again and the fluorescents were back. So was the big clock, hiding that faded circle.

Henry Lander said, "Think you better go along now, David."

"Listen a minute, Henry," Willa said.

Henry switched his gaze to her, and David had no trouble reading the distaste that was there. Any liking Henry might once have had for Willa Stuart was gone now.

"I don't want to listen," Henry said. "You're upsetting my wife."

"Yeah," a fat young man in a Seattle Mariners cap said. David thought his name was O'Casey. Something Irish with an apostrophe in it, anyway. "Zip it, baby girl!"

Willa bent toward Henry, and Henry recoiled from her slightly, as if her breath were bad. "The only reason I let David drag me back here is because they are going to demolish this place! Can you say wrecking ball, Henry? Surely you're bright enough to get your head around that concept."

"Make her stop!" Ruth cried, her voice muffled.

Willa leaned even closer, eyes bright in her narrow, pretty face. "And when the wrecking ball leaves and the dump trucks haul away the crap that used to be this railway station—this old railway station—where will you be?"

"Leave us alone, please," Henry said.

“Henry—as the chorus girl said to the archbishop, denial is not a river in Egypt.”

Ursula Davis, who had disliked Willa from the first, stepped forward, leading with her chin. “Fuck off, you troublesome bitch.”

Willa swung around. “Don’t any of you get it? You’re dead, we’re all dead, and the longer you stay in one place, the harder it’s going to be to ever go anywhere else!”

“She’s right,” David said.

“Yeah, and if she said the moon was cheese, you’d say provolone,” Ursula said. She was a tall, forbiddingly handsome woman of about forty. “Pardon my French, but she’s got you so pussy-whipped it isn’t funny.”

Dudley let out that startling donkey bray again, and the Rhinehart woman began to sniffle.

“You’re upsetting the passengers, you two.” This was Rattner, the little conductor with the apologetic face. He hardly ever spoke. David blinked, the station lensed dark and moonlit again for another moment, and he saw that half of Rattner’s head was gone. The rest of his face had been burned black.

“They’re going to demolish this place and you’ll have nowhere to go!” Willa cried. “Fucking ... nowhere!” She dashed angry tears from her cheeks with both fists. “Why don’t you come to town with us? We’ll show you the way. At least there are people ... and lights ... and music.”

“Mumma, I want to hear some music,” Pammy Andreeson said.

“Hush,” her mother said.

“If we were dead, we’d know it,” Biggers said.

“He’s got you there, son,” Dudley said, and dropped David a wink. “What happened to us? How did we get dead?”

“I ... don’t know,” David said. He looked at Willa. Willa shrugged her shoulders and shook her head.

“You see?” Rattner said. “It was a derailment. Happens ... well, I was going to say all the time, but that’s not true, even out here where the rail system needs a fair amount of work, but every now and then, at one of the junction points—”

“We faw down,” Pammy Andreeson said. David looked at her, really looked, and for a moment saw a corpse, burned bald, in a rotting rag of a dress. “Down and down and down. Then—” She made a growling, rattling sound in her throat, put her small, grimy hands together, and tossed them apart: every child’s sign language for explosion.

She seemed about to say something more, but before she could, her mother suddenly slapped her across the face hard enough to expose her teeth in a momentary sneer and drive spit from the corner of her mouth. Pammy stared up for a moment in shocked disbelief, then broke into a strident, one-note wail even more painful than her hopscotch chant.

“What do we know about lying, Pamela?” Georgia Andreeson yelled, grabbing the child by her upper arm. Her fingers sank in almost out of sight.

“She’s not lying!” Willa said. “We went off the tracks and into the gorge! Now I remember, and you do too! Don’t you? Don’t you? It’s on your face! It’s on your fucking face!”

Without looking in her direction, Georgia Andreeson flipped Willa the bird. Her other hand shook Pammy back and forth. David saw a child flop in one direction, a charred corpse in the other. What had caught fire? Now he remembered the drop, but what had caught fire? He didn’t remember, perhaps because he didn’t want to remember.

“What do we know about lying?” Georgia Andreeson shouted.

“It’s wrong, Mama!” the child blubbered.

The woman dragged her off into the darkness, the child still screaming that one monotonous note.

There was a moment of silence in their wake—all of them listening to Pammy being dragged into exile—and then Willa turned to David.

“Had enough?”

“Yes,” he said. “Let’s go.”

“Don’t let the doorknob hitcha where the good Lord splitcha!” Biggers advised, madly exuberant, and Dudley yodeled laughter.

David let Willa lead him toward the double doors, where Phil was leaning just inside, his arms still crossed on his chest. Then David pulled free of Willa’s hand and went to Helen Palmer sitting in the corner, rocking back and forth. She looked up at him with dark, bewildered eyes. “We got fish for supper,” she said in what was little more than a whisper.

“I don’t know about that,” he said, “but you were right about the smell of the place. Old dirty crackers.” He looked back and saw the rest of them staring at him and Willa in the moonlit dimness that could be fluorescent light if you wanted it to be badly enough. “It’s the smell places get when they’ve been closed up a long time, I guess,” he said.

“Better buzz, cuz,” Phil Palmer said. “No one wants to buy what you’re selling.”

“Don’t I know it,” David said, and followed Willa into the moonlit dark. Behind him, like a rueful whisper of wind, he heard Helen Palmer say, “First one t’ing an’ den anudder.”

*

The miles back to 26 made their score nine for the night, but David wasn't a bit tired. He supposed ghosts didn't get tired, just as they didn't get hungry or thirsty. Besides, it was a different night. The moon was full now, shining like a silver dollar high in the sky, and 26's front parking lot was empty. In the gravel lot around to the side, a few semis stood silent, and one rumbled sleepily with its running lights glowing. The marquee sign now read: COMING THIS WEEKEND THE NIGHTHAWKS BRING YOUR HONEY SPEND YOUR MONEY.

"That's cute," Willa said. "Will you bring me, Wolf Frightener? Am I not your honey?"

"You are and I will," David said. "The question is what do we do now? Because the honky-tonk is closed."

"We go in anyway, of course," she said.

"It'll be locked up."

"Not if we don't want it to be. Perception, remember? Perception and expectation."

He remembered, and when he tried the door, it opened. The barroom smells were still there, now mixed with the pleasant odor of some pine-scented cleaner. The stage was empty and the stools were on the bar with their legs sticking up, but the neon replica of the Wind River Range was still on, either because the management left it that way after closing or because that was the way he and Willa wanted it. That seemed more likely. The dance floor seemed very big now that it was empty, especially with the mirror wall to double it. The neon mountains shimmered upside down in its polished depths.

Willa breathed deep. "I smell beer and perfume," she said. "A hot rod smell. It's lovely."

"You're lovely," he said.

She turned to him. “Then kiss me, cowboy.”

He kissed her there on the edge of the dance floor, and judging by what he was feeling, lovemaking wasn't out of the question. Not at all.

She kissed both corners of his mouth, then stepped back. “Put a quarter in the jukebox, would you? I want to dance.”

David went over to the juke at the end of the bar, dropped a quarter, and played D19—“Wasted Days and Wasted Nights,” the Freddy Fender version. Out in the parking lot, Chester Dawson, who had decided to lay over here a few hours before resuming his journey to Seattle with a load of electronics, raised his head, thinking he heard music, decided it was part of a dream he'd been having, and went back to sleep.

David and Willa moved slowly around the empty floor, sometimes reflected in the mirror wall and sometimes not.

“Willa—”

“Hush a little, David. Baby wants to dance.”

David hushed. He put his face in her hair and let the music take him. He thought they would stay here now, and that from time to time people would see them. 26 might even get a reputation for being haunted, but probably not; people didn't think of ghosts much while they were drinking, unless they were drinking alone. Sometimes when they were closing up, the bartender and the last waitress (the one with the most seniority, the one responsible for splitting the tips) might have an uneasy sense of being watched. Sometimes they'd hear music even after the music had stopped, or catch movement in the mirror next to the dance floor or the one in the lounge. Usually just from the tail of the eye. David thought they could have finished up in better places, but on the whole, 26 wasn't bad. Until closing there were people. And there would always be music.

He did wonder what would become of the others when the wrecking ball tore apart their illusion—and it would. Soon. He thought of Phil Palmer trying to shield his terrified, howling wife from falling debris that couldn't hurt her because she was not, properly speaking, even there. He thought of Pammy Andreeson cowering in her shrieking mother's arms. Rattner, the soft-spoken conductor, saying, Just be calm, folks, in a voice that couldn't be heard over the roar of the big yellow machines. He thought of the book salesman, Biggers, trying to run away on his bad leg, lurching and finally falling while the wrecking ball swung and the dozers snarled and bit and the world came down.

He liked to think their train would come before then—that their combined expectation would make it come—but he didn't really believe it. He even considered the idea that the shock might extinguish them and they'd simply whiff out like candle flames in a strong gust of wind, but he didn't believe that, either. He could see them too clearly after the bulldozers and dump trucks and back-end loaders were gone, standing by the rusty disused railway tracks in the moonlight while a wind blew down from the foothills, whining around the mesa and beating at the broomgrass. He could see them huddled together under a billion High Country stars, still waiting for their train.

“Are you cold?” Willa asked him.

“No—why?”

“You shivered.”

“Maybe a goose walked over my grave,” he said. He closed his eyes, and they danced together on the empty floor. Sometimes they were in the mirror, and when they slipped from view there was only a country song playing in an empty room lit by a neon mountain range.



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out ... he's the only
one that can help.

**THE WOMAN
IN ROOM
THE R**

Directed by Frank Darabont

THE WOMAN IN THE ROOM

Stephen King

The question is: Can he do it?

He doesn't know. He knows that she chews them sometimes, her face wrinkling at the awful orange taste, and a sound comes from her mouth like splintering popsicle sticks. But these are different pills ... gelatin capsules. The box says DARVON COMPLEX on the outside. He found them in her medicine cabinet and turned them over in his hands, thinking. Something the doctor gave her before she had to go back to the hospital. Something for the ticking nights. The medicine cabinet is full of remedies, neatly lined up like a voodoo doctor's cures. Gris-gris of the Western world. FLEET SUPPOSITORIES. He has never used a suppository in his life and the thought of putting a waxy something in his rectum to soften by body heat makes him feel ill. There is no dignity in putting things up your ass. PHILLIPS MILK OF MAGNESIA. ANACIN ARTHRITIS PAIN FORMULA. PEPTO-BISMOL. More. He can trace the course of her illness through the medicines.

But these pills are different. They are like regular Darvon only in that they are gray gelatin capsules. But they are bigger, what his dead father used to call hosscock pills. The box says Asp. 350 gr, Darvon 100 gr, and could she chew them even if he was to give them to her? Would she? The house is still running; the refrigerator runs and shuts off, the furnace kicks in and out, every now and then the cuckoo bird pokes grumpily out of the clock to announce an hour or a half. He supposes that after she dies it will fall to Kevin and him to break up housekeeping. She's gone, all right. The whole house says so. She

is in the Central Maine Hospital, in Lewiston. Room 312. She went when the pain got so bad she could no longer go out to the kitchen and make her own coffee. At times, when he visited, she cried without knowing it.

The elevator creaks going up, and he finds himself examining the blue elevator certificate. The certificate makes it clear that the elevator is safe, creaks or no creaks. She has been here for nearly

three weeks now and today they gave her an operation called a “cortotomy.” He is not sure if that is how it’s spelled, but that is how it sounds. The doctor has told her that the “cortotomy” involves sticking a needle into her neck and then into her brain. The doctor has told her that this is like sticking a pin into an orange and spearing a seed. When the needle has poked into her pain center, a radio signal will be sent down to the tip of the needle and the pain center will be blown out. Like unplugging a TV. Then the cancer in her belly will stop being such a nuisance.

The thought of this operation makes him even more uneasy than the thought of suppositories melting warmly in his anus. It makes him think of a book by Michael Crichton called *The Terminal Man*, which deals with putting wires in people’s heads. According to Crichton, this can be a very bad scene. You better believe it.

The elevator door opens on the third floor and he steps out. This is the old wing of the hospital, and it smells like the sweet-smelling sawdust they sprinkle over puke at a county fair. He has left the pills in the glove compartment of his car. He has not had anything to drink before this visit.

The walls up here are two-tone: brown on the bottom and white on top. He thinks that the only two-tone combination in the whole world that might be more depressing than brown and white would be pink and black. Hospital corridors like giant Good ‘n’ Plentys. The thought makes him smile and feel nauseated at the same time.

Two corridors meet in a T in front of the elevator, and there is a drinking fountain where he always stops to put things off a little. There are pieces of hospital equipment here and there, like strange playground toys. A litter with chrome sides and rubber wheels, the sort of thing they use to wheel you up to the “OR” when they are ready to give you your “cortotomy.” There is a large circular object whose function is unknown to him. It looks like the wheels you sometimes see in squirrel cages. There is a rolling IV tray with two bottles hung from it, like a Salvador Dali dream of tits. Down one of

the two corridors is the nurses' station, and laughter fueled by coffee drifts out to him.

He gets his drink and then saunters down toward her room. He is scared of what he may find and hopes she will be sleeping. If she is, he will not wake her up.

Above the door of every room there is a small square light. When a patient pushes his call button this light goes on, glowing red. Up and down the hall patients are walking slowly, wearing cheap hospital robes over their hospital underwear. The robes have blue and white pinstripes and round collars. The hospital underwear is called a "johnny." The "johnnies" look all right on the women but decidedly strange on the men because they are like knee-length dresses or slips. The men always seem to wear brown imitation-leather slippers on their feet. The women favor knitted slippers with balls of yarn on them. His mother has a pair of these and calls them "mules."

The patients remind him of a horror movie called *The Night of the Living Dead*. They all walk slowly, as if someone had unscrewed the tops of their organs like mayonnaise jars and liquids were sloshing around inside. Some of them use canes. Their slow gait as they promenaded up and down the halls is frightening but also dignified. It is the walk of people who are going nowhere slowly, the walk of college students in caps and gowns filing into a convocation hall.

Ectoplasmic music drifts everywhere from transistor radios. Voices babble. He can hear Black Oak Arkansas singing "Jim Dandy" ("Go Jim Dandy, go Jim Dandy!" a falsetto voice screams merrily at the slow hall walkers). He can hear a talk-show host discussing Nixon in tones that have been dipped in acid like smoking quills. He can hear a polka with French lyrics—Lewiston is still a French-speaking town and they love their jigs and reels almost as much as they love to cut each other in the bars on lower Lisbon Street.

He pauses outside his mother's room and

for a while there he was freaked enough to come drunk. It made him ashamed to be drunk in front of his mother even though she was too doped and full of Elavil to know. Elavil is a tranquilizer they give to cancer patients so it won't bother them so much that they're dying.

The way he worked it was to buy two six-packs of Black Label beer at Sonny's Market in the afternoon. He would sit with the kids and watch their afternoon programs on TV. Three beers with "Sesame Street," two beers during "Mister Rogers," one beer during "Electric Company." Then one with supper.

He took the other five beers in the car. It was a twenty-two-mile drive from Raymond to Lewiston, via Routes 302 and 202, and it was possible to be pretty well in the bag by the time he got to the hospital, with one or two beers left over. He would bring things for his mother and leave them in the car so there would be an excuse to go back and get them and also drink another half beer and keep the high going.

It also gave him an excuse to piss outdoors, and somehow that was the best of the whole miserable business. He always parked in the side lot, which was rutted, frozen November dirt, and the cold night air assured full bladder contraction. Pissing in one of the hospital bathrooms was too much like an apotheosis of the whole hospital experience: the nurse's call button beside the hopper, the chrome handle bolted at a 45-degree angle, the bottle of pink disinfectant over the sink. Bad news. You better believe it.

The urge to drink going home was nil. So leftover beers collected in the icebox at home and when there were six of them, he would

never have come if he had known it was going to be this bad. The first thought that crosses his mind is She's no orange and the second thought is She's really dying quick now, as if she had a train to catch out there in nullity. She is straining in the bed, not moving except for her eyes, but straining inside her body, something is moving in there. Her neck has been smeared orange with stuff that looks like Mercurochrome, and there is a bandage below her left ear

where some humming doctor put the radio needle in and blew out 60 per cent of her motor controls along with the pain center. Her eyes follow him like the eyes of a paint-by-the-numbers Jesus.

—I don't think you better see me tonight, Johnny. I'm not so good. Maybe I'll be better tomorrow.

—What is it?

—It itches. I itch all over. Are my legs together?

He can't see if her legs are together. They are just a raised V under the ribbed hospital sheet. It's very hot in the room. No one is in the other bed right now. He thinks: Roommates come and roommates go, but my mom stays on forever. Christ!

—They're together, Mom.

—Move them down, can you, Johnny? Then you better go. I've never been in a fix like this before. I can't move anything. My nose itches. Isn't that a pitiful way to be, with your nose itching and not able to scratch it?

He scratches her nose and then takes hold of her calves through the sheet and pulls them down. He can put one hand around both calves with no trouble at all, although his hands are not particularly large. She groans. Tears are running down her cheeks to her ears.

—Momma?

—Can you move my legs down?

—I just did.

—Oh. That's all right, then. I think I'm crying. I don't mean to cry in front of you. I wish I was out of this. I'd do anything to be out of this.

—Would you like a smoke?

—Could you get me a drink of water first, Johnny? I'm as dry as an old chip.

—Sure.

He takes her glass with a flexible straw in it out and around the corner to the drinking fountain. A fat man with an elastic bandage on one leg is sailing slowly down the corridor. He isn't wearing one of the pinstriped robes and is holding his "johnny" closed behind him.

He fills the glass from the fountain and goes back to Room 312 with it. She has stopped crying. Her lips grip the straw in a way that reminds him of camels he has seen in travelogues. Her face is scrawny. His most vivid memory of her in the life he lived as her son is of a time when he was twelve. He and his brother Kevin and this woman had moved to Maine so that she could take care of her parents. Her mother was old and bedridden. High blood pressure had made his grandmother senile, and, to add insult to injury, had struck her blind. Happy eighty-sixth birthday. Here's one to grow on. And she lay in a bed all day long, blind and senile, wearing large diapers and rubber pants, unable to remember what breakfast had been but able to recite all the Presidents right up to Ike. And so the three generations of them had lived together in that house where he had so recently found the pills (although both grandparents are now long since dead) and at twelve he had been lipping off about something at the breakfast table, he doesn't remember what, but something, and his mother had been washing out her mother's pissy diapers and then running them through the wringer of her ancient washing machine, and she had turned around and laid into him with one of them, and the first snap of the wet, heavy diaper had upset his bowl of Special K and sent it spinning wildly across the table like a large blue tiddlywink, and the second blow had stropped his back, not hurting but stunning the smart talk out of his mouth and the woman now lying shrunken in this bed in this room had whopped him again and again, saying: You keep your big mouth shut, theres nothing big about you right now but your mouth and so you keep it shut until the rest of you grows the same size, and each italicized

word was accompanied by a strop of his grandmother's wet diaper—WHACKO!—and any other smart things he might have had to say just evaporated. There was not a chance in the world for smart talk. He had discovered on that day and for all time that there is nothing in the world so perfect to set a twelve-year-old's impression of his place in the scheme of things into proper perspective as being beaten across the back with a wet grandmother-diaper. It had taken four years after that day to relearn the art of smarting off.

She chokes on the water a little and it frightens him even though he has been thinking about giving her pills. He asks her again if she would like a cigarette and she says:

—If it's not any trouble. Then you better go. Maybe I'll be better tomorrow.

He shakes a Kool out of one of the packages scattered on the table by her bed and lights it. He holds it between the first and second fingers of his right hand, and she puffs it, her lips stretching to grasp the filter. Her inhale is weak. The smoke drifts from her lips.

—I had to live sixty years so my son could hold my cigarettes for me.

—I don't mind.

She puffs again and holds the filter against her lips so long that he glances away from it to her eyes and sees they are closed.

—Mom?

The eyes open a little, vaguely.

—Johnny?

—Right.

—How long have you been here?

—Not long. I think I better go. Let you sleep.

—Hnnnnn.

He snuffs the cigarette in her ashtray and slinks from the room, thinking: I want to talk to that doctor. Goddamn it, I want to talk to the doctor who did that.

Getting into the elevator he thinks that the word “doctor” becomes a synonym for “man” after a certain degree of proficiency in the trade has been reached, as if it was an expected, provisioned thing that doctors must be cruel and thus attain a special degree of humanity. But

“I don’t think she can really go on much longer,” he tells his brother later that night. His brother lives in Andover, seventy miles west. He only gets to the hospital once or twice a week.

“But is her pain better?” Kev asks.

“She says she itches.” He has the pills in his sweater pocket. His wife is safely asleep. He takes them out, stolen loot from his mother’s empty house, where they all once lived with the grandparents. He turns the box over and over in his hand as he talks, like a rabbit’s foot.

“Well then, she’s better.” For Kev everything is always better, as if life moved toward some sublime vertex. It is a view the younger brother does not share.

“She’s paralyzed.”

“Does it matter at this point?”

“Of course it matters!” he bursts out, thinking of her legs under the white ribbed sheet.

“John, she’s dying.”

“She’s not dead yet.” This in fact is what horrifies him. The conversation will go around in circles from here, the profits accruing

to the telephone company, but this is the nub. Not dead yet. Just lying in that room with a hospital tag on her wrist, listening to phantom radios up and down the hall. And

she's going to have to come to grips with time, the doctor says. He is a big man with a red, sandy beard. He stands maybe six foot four, and his shoulders are heroic. The doctor led him tactfully out into the hall when she began to nod off.

The doctor continues:

—You see, some motor impairment is almost unavoidable in an operation like the “cortotomy.” Your mother has some movement in the left hand now. She may reasonably expect to recover her right hand in two to four weeks.

—Will she walk?

The doctor looks at the drilled-cork ceiling of the corridor judiciously. His beard crawls all the way down to the collar of his plaid shirt, and for some ridiculous reason Johnny thinks of Algernon Swinburne; why, he could not say. This man is the opposite of poor Swinburne in every way.

—I should say not. She's lost too much ground.

—She's going to be bedridden for the rest of her life?

—I think that's a fair assumption, yes.

He begins to feel some admiration for this man who he hoped would be safely hateful. Disgust follows the feeling; must he accord admiration for the simple truth?

—How long can she live like that?

—It's hard to say. (That's more like it.) The tumor is blocking one of her kidneys now. The other one is operating fine. When the tumor blocks it, she'll go to sleep.

—A uremic coma?

—Yes, the doctor says, but a little more cautiously. “Uremia” is a techno-pathological term, usually the property of doctors and medical examiners alone. But Johnny knows it because his grandmother died of the same thing, although there was no cancer involved. Her kidneys simply packed it in and she died floating in internal piss up to her ribcage. She died in bed, at home, at dinnertime. Johnny was the one who first suspected she was truly dead this time, and not just sleeping in the comatose, open-mouthed way that old people have. Two small tears had squeezed out of her eyes. Her old toothless mouth was drawn in, reminding him of a tomato that has been hollowed out, perhaps to hold egg salad, and then left forgotten on the kitchen shelf for a stretch of days. He held a round cosmetic mirror to her mouth for a minute, and when the glass did not fog and hide the image of her tomato mouth, he called for his mother. All of that had seemed as right as this did wrong.

—She says she still has pain. And that she itches.

The doctor taps his head solemnly, like Victor DeGroot in the old psychiatrist cartoons.

—She imagines the pain. But it is nonetheless real. Real to her. That is why time is so important. Your mother can no longer count time in terms of seconds and minutes and hours. She must restructure those units into days and weeks and months.

He realizes what this burly man with the beard is saying, and it boggles him. A bell dings softly. He cannot talk more to this man. He is a technical man. He talks smoothly of time, as though he has gripped the concept as easily as a fishing rod. Perhaps he has.

—Can you do anything more for her?

—Very little.

But his manner is serene, as if this were right. He is, after all, “not offering false hope.”

—Can it be worse than a coma?

—Of course it can. We can't chart these things with any real degree of accuracy. It's like having a shark loose in your body. She may bloat.

—Bloat?

—Her abdomen may swell and then go down and then swell again. But why dwell on such things now? I believe we can safely say

that they would do the job, but suppose they don't? Or suppose they catch me? I don't want to go to court on a mercy-killing charge. Not even if I can beat it. I have no causes to grind. He thinks of newspaper headlines screaming MATRICIDE and grimaces.

Sitting in the parking lot, he turns the box over and over in his hands. DARVON COMPLEX. The question still is: Can he do it? Should he? She has said: I wish I were out of this. I'd do anything to be out of this. Kevin is talking of fixing her a room at his house so she won't die in the hospital. The hospital wants her out. They gave her some new pills and she went on a raving bummer. That was four days after the “cortotomy.” They'd like her someplace else because no one has perfected a really fool-proof “cancerectomy” yet. And at this point if they got it all out of her she'd be left with nothing but her legs and her head.

He has been thinking of how time must be for her, like something that has gotten out of control, like a sewing basket full of threaded spools spilled all over the floor for a big mean tomcat to play with. The days in Room 312. The night in Room 312. They have run a string from the call button and tied it to her left index finger because she can no longer move her hand far enough to press the button if she thinks she needs the bedpan.

It doesn't matter too much anyway because she can't feel the pressure down there; her midsection might as well be a sawdust pile. She moves her bowels in the bed and pees in the bed and only knows when she smells it. She is down to ninety-five pounds from one-fifty and her body's muscles are so unstrung that it's only a loose bag tied to her brain like a child's sack puppet. Would it be any different at Kev's? Can he do murder? He knows it is murder. The worst kind, matricide, as if he were a sentient fetus in an early Ray Bradbury horror story, determined to turn the tables and abort the animal that has given it life. Perhaps it is his fault anyway. He is the only child to have been nurtured inside her, a change-of-life baby. His brother was adopted when another smiling doctor told her she would never have any children of her own. And of course, the cancer now in her began in the womb like a second child, his own darker twin. His life and her death began in the same place. Should he not do what the other is doing already, so slowly and clumsily?

He has been giving her aspirin on the sly for the pain she imagines she has. She has them in a Secrets box in her hospital-table drawer, along with her get-well cards and her reading glasses that no longer work. They have taken away her dentures because they are afraid she might pull them down her throat and choke on them, so now she simply sucks the aspirin until her tongue is slightly white.

Surely he could give her the pills; three or four would be enough. Fourteen hundred grains of aspirin and four hundred grains of Darvon administered to a woman whose body weight has dropped 33 per cent over five months.

No one knows he has the pills, not Kevin, not his wife. He thinks that maybe they've put someone else in Room 312's other bed and he won't have to worry about it. He can cop out safely. He wonders if that wouldn't be best, really. If there is another woman in the room, his options will be gone and he can regard the fact as a nod from Providence. He thinks

—You're looking better tonight.

—Am I?

—Sure. How do you feel?

—Oh, not so good. Not so good tonight.

—Let's see you move your right hand.

She raises it off the counterpane. It floats splay-fingered in front of her eyes for a moment, then drops. Thump. He smiles and she smiles back. He asks her,

—Did you see the doctor today?

—Yes, he came in. He's good to come every day. Will you give me a little water, John?

He gives her some water from the flexible straw.

—You're good to come as often as you do, John. You're a good son.

She's crying again. The other bed is empty, accusingly so. Every now and then one of the blue and white pinstriped bath-robés sails by them up the hall. The door stands open halfway. He takes the water gently away from her, thinking idiotically: Is this glass half empty or half full?

—How's your left hand?

—Oh, pretty good.

—Let's see.

She raises it. It has always been her smart hand, and perhaps that is why it has recovered as well as it has from the devastating effects of the "cortotomy." She clenches it. Flexes it. Snaps the fingers weakly. Then it falls back to the counterpane. Thump. She complains,

—But there's no feeling in it.

—Let me see something.

He goes to her wardrobe, opens it, and reaches behind the coat she came to the hospital in to get at her purse. She keeps it in here because she is paranoid about robbers; she has heard that some of the orderlies are rip-off artists who will lift anything they can get their hands on. She has heard from one of her roommates who has since gone home that a woman in the new wing lost five hundred dollars which she kept in her shoe. His mother is paranoid about a great many things lately, and has once told him a man sometimes hides under her bed in the late-at-night. Part of it is the combination of drugs they are trying on her. They make the bennies he occasionally dropped in college look like Excedrin. You can have your pick from the locked drug cabinet at the end of the corridor just past the nurses' station: ups and downs, highs and bummers. Death, maybe, merciful death like a sweet black blanket. The wonders of modern science.

He takes the purse back to her bed and opens it.

—Can you take something out of here?

—Oh, Johnny, I don't know ...

He says persuasively:

—Try it. For me.

The left hand rises from the counterpane like a crippled helicopter. It cruises. Dives. Comes out of the purse with a single wrinkled Kleenex. He applauds:

—Good! Good!

—But she turns her face away.

—Last year I was able to pull two full dish trucks with these hands.

If there's to be a time, it's now. It is very hot in the room but the sweat on his forehead is cold. He thinks: If she doesn't ask for aspirin, I won't. Not tonight. And he knows if it isn't tonight it's never. Okay.

Her eyes flick to the half-open door slyly.

—Can you sneak me a couple of my pills, Johnny?

It is how she always asks. She is not supposed to have any pills outside of her regular medication because she has lost so much body weight and she has built up what his druggie friends of his college days would have called “a heavy thing.” The body's immunity stretches to within a fingernail's breadth of lethal dosage. One more pill and you're over the edge. They say it is what happened to Marilyn Monroe.

—I brought some pills from home.

—Did you?

—They're good for pain.

He holds the box out to her. She can only read very close. She frowns over the large print and then says,

—I had some of that Darvon stuff before. It didn't help me.

—This is stronger.

Her eyes rise from the box to his own. Idly she says,

—Is it?

He can only smile foolishly. He cannot speak. It is like the first time he got laid, it happened in the back of some friend's car and when he came home his mother asked him if he had a good time and he could only smile this same foolish smile.

—Can I chew them?

—I don't know. You could try one.

—All right. Don't let them see.

He opens the box and pries the plastic lid off the bottle. He pulls the cotton out of the neck. Could she do all that with the crippled helicopter of her left hand? Would they believe it? He doesn't know. Maybe they don't either. Maybe they wouldn't even care.

He shakes six of the pills into his hand. He watches her watching him. It is many too many, even she must know that. If she says anything about it, he will put them all back and offer her a single Arthritis Pain Formula.

A nurse glides by outside and his hand twitches, clicking the gray capsules together, but the nurse doesn't look in to see how the "cortotomy kid" is doing.

His mother doesn't say anything, only looks at the pills like they were perfectly ordinary pills (if there is such a thing). But on the other hand, she has never liked ceremony; she would not crack a bottle of champagne on her own boat.

—Here you go,

he says in a perfectly natural voice, and pops the first one into her mouth.

She gums it reflectively until the gelatin dissolves, and then she winces.

—Taste bad? I won't ...

—No, not too bad.

He gives her another. And another. She chews them with that same reflective look. He gives her a fourth. She smiles at him and he sees

with horror that her tongue is yellow. Maybe if he hits her in the belly she will bring them up. But he can't. He could never hit his mother.

—Will you see if my legs are together?

—Just take these first.

He gives her a fifth. And a sixth. Then he sees if her legs are together. They are. She says,

—I think I'll sleep a little now.

—All right. I'm going to get a drink.

—You've always been a good son, Johnny.

He puts the bottle in the box and tucks the box into her purse, leaving the plastic top on the sheet beside her. He leaves the open purse beside her and thinks: She asked for her purse. I brought it to her and opened it just before I left. She said she could get what she wanted out of it. She said she'd get the nurse to put it back in the wardrobe.

He goes out and gets his drink. There is a mirror over the fountain, and he runs out his tongue and looks at it.

When he goes back into the room, she is sleeping with her hands pressed together. The veins in them are big, rambling. He gives her a kiss and her eyes roll behind their lids, but do not open.

Yes.

He feels no different, either good or bad.

He starts out of the room and thinks of something else. He goes back to her side, takes the bottle out of the box, and rubs it all over his shirt. Then he presses the limp fingertips of her sleeping left hand on the bottle. Then he puts it back and goes out of the room quickly, without looking back.

He goes home and waits for the phone to ring and wishes he had given her another kiss. While he waits, he watches TV and drinks a lot of water.

BILINGUE

STEPHEN KING



L'Ordinateur des dieux

**Word Processor
of the Gods**

POCKET

DELETE



WORD PROCESSOR OF THE GODS

Stephen King

At first glance it looked like a Wang word processor—it had a Wang keyboard and a Wang casing. It was only on second glance that Richard Hagstrom saw that the casing had been split open (and not gently, either; it looked to him as if the job had been done with a hacksaw blade) to admit a slightly larger IBM cathode tube. The archive discs which had come with this odd mongrel were not floppy at all; they were as hard as the 45's Richard had listened to as a kid.

“What in the name of God is that?” Lina asked as he and Mr. Nordhoff lugged it over to his study piece by piece. Mr. Nordhoff had lived next door to Richard Hagstrom's brother's family ... Roger, Belinda, and their boy, Jonathan.

“Something Jon built,” Richard said. “Meant for me to have it, Mr. Nordhoff says. It looks like a word processor.”

“Oh yeah,” Nordhoff said. He would not see his sixties again and he was badly out of breath. “That's what he said it was, the poor kid ... think we could set it down for a minute, Mr. Hagstrom? I'm pooped.”

“You bet,” Richard said, and then called to his son, Seth, who was tooling odd, atonal chords out of his Fender guitar downstairs—the room Richard had envisioned as a “family room” when he had first paneled it had become his son's “rehearsal hall” instead.

“Seth!” he yelled. “Come give us a hand!”

Downstairs, Seth just went on warping chords out of the Fender. Richard looked at Mr. Nordhoff and shrugged, ashamed and unable to hide it. Nordhoff shrugged back as if to say Kids! Who expects anything better from them these days? Except they both knew that Jon—poor doomed Jon Hagstrom, his crazy brother's son—had been better.

“You were good to help me with this,” Richard said.

Nordhoff shrugged. “What else has an old man got to do with his time? And I guess it was the least I could do for Jonny. He used to cut my lawn gratis, do you know that? I wanted to pay him, but the kid wouldn’t take it. He was quite a boy.” Nordhoff was still out of breath. “Do you think I could have a glass of water, Mr. Hagstrom?”

“You bet.” He got it himself when his wife didn’t move from the kitchen table, where she was reading a bodice-ripper paperback and eating a Twinkie. “Seth!” he yelled again. “Come on up here and help us, okay?”

But Seth just went on playing muffled and rather sour bar chords on the Fender for which Richard was still paying.

He invited Nordhoff to stay for supper, but Nordhoff refused politely. Richard nodded, embarrassed again but perhaps hiding it a little better this time. What’s a nice guy like you doing with a family like that? his friend Bernie Epstein had asked him once, and Richard had only been able to shake his head, feeling the same dull embarrassment he was feeling now. He was a nice guy. And yet somehow this was what he had come out with—an overweight, sullen wife who felt cheated out of the good things in life, who felt that she had backed the losing horse (but who would never come right out and say so), and an uncommunicative fifteen-year-old son who was doing marginal work in the same school where Richard taught ... a son who played weird chords on the guitar morning, noon and night (mostly night) and who seemed to think that would somehow be enough to get him through.

“Well, what about a beer?” Richard asked. He was reluctant to let Nordhoff go—he wanted to hear more about Jon.

“A beer would taste awful good,” Nordhoff said, and Richard nodded gratefully.

“Fine,” he said, and went back to get them a couple of Buds.

His study was in a small shedlike building that stood apart from the house—like the family room, he had fixed it up himself. But unlike the family room, this was a place he thought of as his own—a place where he could shut out the stranger he had married and the stranger she had given birth to.

Lina did not, of course, approve of him having his own place, but she had not been able to stop it—it was one of the few little victories he had managed over her. He supposed that in a way she had backed a losing horse—when they had gotten married sixteen years before, they had both believed he would write wonderful, lucrative novels and they would both soon be driving around in Mercedes-Benzes. But the one novel he had published had not been lucrative, and the critics had been quick to point out that it wasn't very wonderful, either. Lina had seen things the critics' way, and that had been the beginning of their drifting apart.

So the high school teaching job which both of them had seen as only a stepping-stone on their way to fame, glory, and riches, had now been their major source of income for the last fifteen years—one helluva long stepping-stone, he sometimes thought. But he had never quite let go of his dream. He wrote short stories and the occasional article. He was a member in good standing of the Authors Guild. He brought in about \$5,000 in additional income with his typewriter each year, and no matter how much Lina might grouse about it, that rated him his own study ... especially since she refused to work.

"You've got a nice place here," Nordhoff said, looking around the small room with the mixture of old-fashioned prints on the walls. The mongrel word processor sat on the desk with the CPU tucked underneath. Richard's old Olivetti electric had been put aside for the time being on top of one of the filing cabinets.

"It serves the purpose," Richard said. He nodded at the word processor. "You don't suppose that thing really works, do you? Jon was only fourteen."

“Looks funny, doesn’t it?”

“It sure does,” Richard agreed.

Nordhoff laughed. “You don’t know the half of it,” he said. “I peeked down into the back of the video unit. Some of the wires are stamped IBM, and some are stamped Radio Shack. There’s most of a Western Electric telephone in there. And believe it or not, there’s a small motor from an Erector Set.” He sipped his beer and said in a kind of afterthought: “Fifteen. He just turned fifteen. A couple of days before the accident.” He paused and said it again, looking down at his bottle of beer. “Fifteen.” He didn’t say it loudly.

“Erector Set?” Richard blinked at the old man.

“That’s right. Erector Set puts out an electric model kit. Jon had one of them, since he was ... oh, maybe six. I gave it to him for Christmas one year. He was crazy for gadgets even then. Any kind of gadget would do him, and did that little box of Erector Set motors tickle him? I guess it did. He kept it for almost ten years. Not many kids do that, Mr. Hagstrom.”

“No,” Richard said, thinking of the boxes of Seth’s toys he had lugged out over the years—discarded, forgotten, or wantonly broken. He glanced at the word processor. “It doesn’t work, then.”

“I wouldn’t bet on that until you try it,” Nordhoff said. “The kid was damn near an electrical genius.”

“That’s sort of pushing it, I think. I know he was good with gadgets, and he won the State Science Fair when he was in the sixth grade —”

“Competing against kids who were much older—high school seniors some of them,” Nordhoff said. “Or that’s what his mother said.”

“It’s true. We were all very proud of him.” Which wasn’t exactly true. Richard had been proud, and Jon’s mother had been proud; the

boy's father didn't give a shit at all. "But Science Fair projects and building your very own hybrid word-cruncher—" He shrugged.

Nordhoff set his beer down. "There was a kid back in the fifties," he said, "who made an atom smasher out of two soup cans and about five dollars' worth of electrical equipment. Jon told me about that. And he said there was a kid out in some hick town in New Mexico who discovered tachyons—negative particles that are supposed to travel backwards through time—in 1954. A kid in Waterbury, Connecticut—eleven years old—who made a pipe-bomb out of the celluloid he scraped off the backs of a deck of playing cards. He blew up an empty doghouse with it. Kids're funny sometimes. The supersmart ones in particular. You might be surprised."

"Maybe. Maybe I will be. "

"He was a fine boy, regardless."

"You loved him a little, didn't you?"

"Mr. Hagstrom," Nordhoff said, "I loved him a lot. He was a genuinely all-right kid."

And Richard thought how strange it was—his brother, who had been an utter shit since the age of six, had gotten a fine woman and a fine bright son. He himself, who had always tried to be gentle and good (whatever "good" meant in this crazy world), had married Lina, who had developed into a silent, piggy woman, and had gotten Seth by her. Looking at Nordhoff's honest, tired face, he found himself wondering exactly how that had happened and how much of it had been his own fault, a natural result of his own quiet weakness.

"Yes," Richard said. "He was, wasn't he?"

"Wouldn't surprise me if it worked," Nordhoff said. "Wouldn't surprise me at all."

After Nordhoff had gone, Richard Hagstrom plugged the word processor in and turned it on. There was a hum, and he waited to see if the letters IBM would come up on the face of the screen. They did not. Instead, eerily, like a voice from the grave, these words swam up, green ghosts, from the darkness:

HAPPY BIRTHDAY, UNCLE RICHARD! JON.

“Christ,” Richard whispered, sitting down hard. The accident that had killed his brother, his wife, and their son had happened two weeks before—they had been coming back from some sort of day trip and Roger had been drunk. Being drunk was a perfectly ordinary occurrence in the life of Roger Hagstrom. But this time his luck had simply run out and he had driven his dusty old van off the edge of a ninety-foot drop. It had crashed and burned. Jon was fourteen—no, fifteen. Just turned fifteen a couple of days before the accident, the old man said. Another three years and he would have gotten free of that hulking, stupid bear. His birthday ... and mine coming up soon.

A week from today. The word processor had been Jon’s birthday present for him.

That made it worse, somehow. Richard could not have said precisely how, or why, but it did. He reached out to turn off the screen and then withdrew his hand.

Some kid made an atom smasher out of two soup cans and five dollars’ worth of auto electrical parts.

Yeah, and the New York City sewer system is full of alligators and the U.S. Air Force has the body of an alien on ice somewhere in Nebraska. Tell me a few more. It’s bullshit. But maybe that’s something I don’t want to know for sure.

He got up, went around to the back of the VDT, and looked through the slots. Yes, it was as Nordhoff had said. Wires stamped RADIO SHACK MADE IN TAIWAN. Wires stamped WESTERN ELECTRIC and WESTREX and ERECTOR SET, with the little circled trademark

r. And he saw something else, something Nordhoff had either missed or hadn't wanted to mention. There was a Lionel Train transformer in there, wired up like the Bride of Frankenstein.

"Christ," he said, laughing but suddenly near tears. "Christ, Jonny, what did you think you were doing?"

But he knew that, too. He had dreamed and talked about owning a word processor for years, and when Lina's laughter became too sarcastic to bear, he had talked about it to Jon. "I could write faster, rewrite faster, and submit more," he remembered telling Jon last summer—the boy had looked at him seriously, his light blue eyes, intelligent but always so carefully wary, magnified behind his glasses. "It would be great ... really great."

"Then why don't you get one, Uncle Rich?"

"They don't exactly give them away," Richard had said, smiling. "The Radio Shack model starts at around three grand. From there you can work yourself up into the eighteen-thousand-dollar range."

"Well, maybe I'll build you one sometime," Jon had said.

"Maybe you just will," Richard had said, clapping him on the back. And until Nordhoff had called, he had thought no more about it.

Wires from hobby-shop electrical models.

A Lionel Train transformer.

Christ.

He went around to the front again, meaning to turn it off, as if to actually try to write something on it and fail would somehow defile what his earnest, fragile

(doomed)

nephew had intended.

Instead, he pushed the EXECUTE button on the board. A funny little chill scraped across his spine as he did it—EXECUTE was a funny word to use, when you thought of it. It wasn't a word he associated with writing; it was a word he associated with gas chambers and electric chairs ... and, perhaps, with dusty old vans plunging off the sides of roads.

EXECUTE.

The CPU was humming louder than any he had ever heard on the occasions when he had window-shopped word processors; it was, in fact, almost roaring. What's in the memory-box, Jon? he wondered. Bed springs? Train transformers all in a row? Soup cans? He thought again of Jon's eyes, of his still and delicate face. Was it strange, maybe even sick, to be jealous of another man's son?

But he should have been mine. I knew it ... and I think he knew it, too. And then there was Belinda, Roger's wife. Belinda who wore sunglasses too often on cloudy days. The big ones, because those bruises around the eyes have a nasty way of spreading. But he looked at her sometimes, sitting there still and watchful in the loud umbrella of Roger's laughter, and he thought almost the exact same thing: She should have been mine.

It was a terrifying thought, because they had both known Belinda in high school and had both dated her. He and Roger had been two years apart in age and Belinda had been perfectly between them, a year older than Richard and a year younger than Roger. Richard had actually been the first to date the girl who would grow up to become Jon's mother. Then Roger had stepped in, Roger who was older and bigger, Roger who always got what he wanted, Roger who would hurt you if you tried to stand in his way.

I got scared. I got scared and I let her get away. Was it as simple as that? Dear God help me, I think it was. I'd like to have it a different way, but perhaps it's best not to lie to yourself about such things as cowardice. And shame.

And if those things were true—if Lina and Seth had somehow belonged with his no-good of a brother and if Belinda and Jon had somehow belonged with him, what did that prove? And exactly how was a thinking person supposed to deal with such an absurdly balanced screw-up? Did you laugh? Did you scream? Did you shoot yourself for a yellow dog?

Wouldn't surprise me if it worked. Wouldn't surprise me at all.

EXECUTE.

His fingers moved swiftly over the keys. He looked at the screen and saw these letters floating green on the surface of the screen:

MY BROTHER WAS A WORTHLESS DRUNK.

They floated there and Richard suddenly thought of a toy he had had when he was a kid. It was called a Magic Eight-Ball. You asked it a question that could be answered yes or no and then you turned the Magic Eight-Ball over to see what it had to say on the subject—its phony yet somehow entrancingly mysterious responses included such things as IT IS ALMOST CERTAIN, I WOULD NOT PLAN ON IT, and ASK AGAIN LATER.

Roger had been jealous of that toy, and finally, after bullying Richard into giving it to him one day, Roger had thrown it onto the sidewalk as hard as he could, breaking it. Then he had laughed. Sitting here now, listening to the strangely choppy roar from the CPU cabinet Jon had jury-rigged, Richard remembered how he had collapsed to the sidewalk, weeping, unable to believe his brother had done such a thing.

“Bawl-baby, bawl-baby, look at the baby bawl,” Roger had taunted him. “It wasn't nothing but a cheap, shitty toy anyway, Richie. Lookit there, nothing in it but a bunch of little signs and a lot of water.”

“I'M TELLING!” Richard had shrieked at the top of his lungs. His head felt hot. His sinuses were stuffed shut with tears of outrage.

“I’M TELLING ON YOU, ROGER! I’M TELLING MOM!”

“You tell and I’ll break your arm,” Roger said, and in his chilling grin Richard had seen he meant it. He had not told.

MY BROTHER WAS A WORTHLESS DRUNK.

Well, weirdly put together or not, it screen-printed. Whether it would store information in the CPU still remained to be seen, but Jon’s mating of a Wang board to an IBM screen had actually worked. Just coincidentally it called up some pretty crappy memories, but he didn’t suppose that was Jon’s fault.

He looked around his office, and his eyes happened to fix on the one picture in here that he hadn’t picked and didn’t like. It was a studio portrait of Lina, her Christmas present to him two years ago. I want you to hang it in your study, she’d said, and so of course he had done just that. It was, he supposed, her way of keeping an eye on him even when she wasn’t here. Don’t forget me, Richard. I’m here. Maybe I backed the wrong horse, but I’m still here. And you better remember it.

The studio portrait with its unnatural tints went oddly with the amiable mixture of prints by Whistler, Homer, and N. C. Wyeth. Lina’s eyes were half-lidded, the heavy Cupid’s bow of her mouth composed in something that was not quite a smile. Still here, Richard, her mouth said to him. And don’t you forget it.

He typed:

MY WIFE’S PHOTOGRAPH HANGS ON THE WEST WALL OF MY STUDY.

He looked at the words and liked them no more than he liked the picture itself. He punched the DELETE button. The words vanished. Now there was nothing at all on the screen but the steadily pulsing cursor.

He looked up at the wall and saw that his wife's picture had also vanished.

He sat there for a very long time—it felt that way, at least—looking at the wall where the picture had been. What finally brought him out of his daze of utter unbelieving shock was the smell from the CPU—a smell he remembered from his childhood as clearly as he remembered the Magic Eight-Ball Roger had broken because it wasn't his. The smell was essence of electric train transformer. When you smelled that you were supposed to turn the thing off so it could cool down.

And so he would.

In a minute.

He got up and walked over to the wall on legs which felt numb. He ran his fingers over the Armstrong paneling. The picture had been here, yes, right here. But it was gone now, and the hook it had hung on was gone, and there was no hole where he had screwed the hook into the paneling.

Gone.

The world abruptly went gray and he staggered backwards, thinking dimly that he was going to faint. He held on grimly until the world swam back into focus.

He looked from the blank place on the wall where Lina's picture had been to the word processor his dead nephew had cobbled together.

You might be surprised, he heard Nordhoff saying in his mind. You might be surprised, you might be surprised, oh yes, if some kid in the fifties could discover particles that travel backwards through time, you might be surprised what your genius of a nephew could do with a bunch of discarded word processor elements and some wires and electrical components. You might be so surprised that you'll feel as if you're going insane.

The transformer smell was richer, stronger now, and he could see wisps of smoke rising from the vents in the screen housing. The noise from the CPU was louder, too. It was time to turn it off—smart as Jon had been, he apparently hadn't had time to work out all the bugs in the crazy thing.

But had he known it would do this?

Feeling like a figment of his own imagination, Richard sat down in front of the screen again and typed:

MY WIFE'S PICTURE IS ON THE WALL.

He looked at this for a moment, looked back at the keyboard, and then hit the EXECUTE key.

He looked at the wall.

Lina's picture was back, right where it had always been.

"Jesus," he whispered. "Jesus Christ."

He rubbed a hand up his cheek, looked at the keyboard (blank again now except for the cursor), and then typed:

MY FLOOR IS BARE.

He then touched the INSERT button and typed:

EXCEPT FOR TWELVE TWENTY-DOLLAR GOLD PIECES IN A SMALL COTTON SACK.

He pressed EXECUTE.

He looked at the floor, where there was now a small white cotton sack with a drawstring top. WELLS FARGO was stenciled on the bag in faded black ink.

“Dear Jesus,” he heard himself saying in a voice that wasn’t his.
“Dear Jesus, dear good Jesus—”

He might have gone on invoking the Savior’s name for minutes or hours if the word processor had not started beeping at him steadily. Flashing across the top of the screen was the word OVERLOAD.

Richard turned off everything in a hurry and left his study as if all the devils of hell were after him.

But before he went he scooped up the small drawstring sack and put it in his pants pocket.

When he called Nordhoff that evening, a cold November wind was playing tuneless bagpipes in the trees outside. Seth’s group was downstairs, murdering a Bob Seger tune. Lina was out at Our Lady of Perpetual Sorrows, playing bingo.

“Does the machine work?” Nordhoff asked.

“It works, all right,” Richard said. He reached into his pocket and brought out a coin. It was heavy—heavier than a Rolex watch. An eagle’s stern profile was embossed on one side, along with the date 1871. “It works in ways you wouldn’t believe.”

“I might,” Nordhoff said evenly. “He was a very bright boy, and he loved you very much, Mr. Hagstrom. But be careful. A boy is only a boy, bright or otherwise, and love can be misdirected. Do you take my meaning?”

Richard didn’t take his meaning at all. He felt hot and feverish. That day’s paper had listed the current market price of gold at \$514 an ounce. The coins had weighed out at an average of 4.5 ounces each on his postal scale. At the current market rate that added up to \$27,756. And he guessed that was perhaps only a quarter of what he could realize for those coins if he sold them as coins.

“Mr. Nordhoff, could you come over here? Now? Tonight?”

“No,” Nordhoff said. “No, I don’t think I want to do that, Mr. Hagstrom. I think this ought to stay between you and Jon.”

“But—”

“Just remember what I said. For Christ’s sake, be careful.” There was a small click and Nordhoff was gone.

He found himself out in his study again half an hour later, looking at the word processor. He touched the ON/OFF key but didn’t turn it on just yet. The second time Nordhoff said it, Richard had heard it. For Christ’s sake, be careful. Yes. He would have to be careful. A machine that could do such a thing—

How could a machine do such a thing?

He had no idea ... but in a way, that made the whole crazy thing easier to accept. He was an English teacher and sometime writer, not a technician, and he had a long history of not understanding how things worked: phonographs, gasoline engines, telephones, televisions, the flushing mechanism in his toilet. His life had been a history of understanding operations rather than principles. Was there any difference here, except in degree?

He turned the machine on. As before it said: HAPPY BIRTHDAY, UNCLE RICHARD! JON. He pushed EXECUTE and the message from his nephew disappeared.

This machine is not going to work for long, he thought suddenly. He felt sure that Jon must have still been working on it when he died, confident that there was time, Uncle Richard’s birthday wasn’t for three weeks, after all—

But time had run out for Jon, and so this totally amazing word processor, which could apparently insert new things or delete old things from the real world, smelled like a frying train transformer and started to smoke after a few minutes. Jon hadn’t had a chance to perfect it. He had been—

Confident that there was time?

But that was wrong. That was all wrong. Richard knew it. Jon's still, watchful face, the sober eyes behind the thick spectacles ... there was no confidence there, no belief in the comforts of time. What was the word that had occurred to him earlier that day? Doomed. It wasn't just a good word for Jon; it was the right word. That sense of doom had hung about the boy so palpably that there had been times when Richard had wanted to hug him, to tell him to lighten up a little bit, that sometimes there were happy endings and the good didn't always die young.

Then he thought of Roger throwing his Magic Eight-Ball at the sidewalk, throwing it just as hard as he could; he heard the plastic splinter and saw the Eight-Ball's magic fluid—just water after all—running down the sidewalk. And this picture merged with a picture of Roger's mongrel van, HAGSTROM'S WHOLESALE DELIVERIES written on the side, plunging over the edge of some dusty, crumbling cliff out in the country, hitting dead squat on its nose with a noise that was, like Roger himself, no big deal. He saw—although he didn't want to—the face of his brother's wife disintegrate into blood and bone. He saw Jon burning in the wreck, screaming, turning black.

No confidence, no real hope. He had always exuded a sense of time running out. And in the end he had turned out to be right.

"What does that mean?" Richard muttered, looking at the blank screen.

How would the Magic Eight-Ball have answered that? ASK AGAIN LATER? OUTCOME IS MURKY? Or perhaps IT IS CERTAINLY SO?

The noise coming from the CPU was getting louder again, and more quickly than this afternoon. Already he could smell the train transformer Jon had lodged in the machinery behind the screen getting hot.

Magic dream machine.

Word processor of the gods.

Was that what it was? Was that what Jon had intended to give his uncle for his birthday? The space-age equivalent of a magic lamp or a wishing well?

He heard the back door of the house bang open and then the voices of Seth and the other members of Seth's band. The voices were too loud, too raucous. They had either been drinking or smoking dope.

"Where's your old man, Seth?" he heard one of them ask.

"Goofing off in his study, like usual, I guess," Seth said. "I think he—" The wind rose again then, blurring the rest, but not blurring their vicious tribal laughter.

Richard sat listening to them, his head cocked a little to one side, and suddenly he typed:

MY SON IS SETH ROBERT HAGSTROM.

His finger hovered over the DELETE button.

What are you doing? his mind screamed at him. Can you be serious? Do you intend to murder your own son?

"He must do somethin in there," one of the others said.

"He's a goddam dimwit," Seth answered. "You ask my mother sometime. She'll tell you. He—"

I'm not going to murder him. I'm going to ... to DELETE him.

His finger stabbed down on the button.

"—ain't never done nothing but—"

The words MY SON IS SETH ROBERT HAGSTROM vanished from the screen.

Outside, Seth's words vanished with them.

There was no sound out there now but the cold November wind, blowing grim advertisements for winter.

Richard turned off the word processor and went outside. The driveway was empty. The group's lead guitarist, Norm somebody, drove a monstrous and somehow sinister old LTD station wagon in which the group carried their equipment to their infrequent gigs. It was not parked in the driveway now. Perhaps it was somewhere in the world, tooling down some highway or parked in the parking lot of some greasy hamburger hangout, and Norm was also somewhere in the world, as was Davey, the bassist, whose eyes were frighteningly blank and who wore a safety pin dangling from one earlobe, as was the drummer, who had no front teeth. They were somewhere in the world, somewhere, but not here, because Seth wasn't here, Seth had never been here.

Seth had been DELETED.

"I have no son," Richard muttered. How many times had he read that melodramatic phrase in bad novels? A hundred? Two hundred? It had never rung true to him. But here it was true. Now it was true. Oh yes.

The wind gusted, and Richard was suddenly seized by a vicious stomach cramp that doubled him over, gasping. He passed explosive wind.

When the cramps passed, he walked into the house.

The first thing he noticed was that Seth's ratty tennis shoes—he had four pairs of them and refused to throw any of them out—were gone from the front hall. He went to the stairway banister and ran his thumb over a section of it. At age ten (old enough to know better, but Lina had refused to allow Richard to lay a hand on the boy in spite of that), Seth had carved his initials deeply into the wood of that banister, wood which Richard had labored over for almost one whole

summer. He had sanded and filled and revarnished, but the ghost of those initials had remained.

They were gone now.

Upstairs. Seth's room. It was neat and clean and un-lived-in, dry and devoid of personality. It might as well have had a sign on the doorknob reading GUEST ROOM.

Downstairs. And it was here that Richard lingered the longest. The snarls of wire were gone; the amplifiers and microphones were gone; the litter of tape recorder parts that Seth was always going to "fix up" were gone (he did not have Jon's hands or concentration). Instead the room bore the deep (if not particularly pleasant) stamp of Lina's personality—heavy, florid furniture and saccharin velvet tapestries (one depicting a Last Supper at which Christ looked like Wayne Newton, another showing deer against a sunset Alaskan skyline), a glaring rug as bright as arterial blood. There was no longer the faintest sense that a boy named Seth Hagstrom had once inhabited this room. This room, or any of the other rooms in the house.

Richard was still standing at the foot of the stairs and looking around when he heard a car pull into the driveway.

Lina, he thought, and felt a surge of almost frantic guilt. It's Lina, back from bingo, and what's she going to say when she sees that Seth is gone? What ... what ...

Murderer! he heard her screaming. You murdered my boy!

But he hadn't murdered Seth.

"I DELETED him," he muttered, and went upstairs to meet her in the kitchen.

Lina was fatter.

He had sent a woman off to bingo who weighed a hundred and eighty pounds or so. The woman who came back in weighed at least three hundred, perhaps more; she had to twist slightly sideways to get in through the back door. Elephantine hips and thighs rippled in tidal motions beneath polyester slacks the color of overripe green olives. Her skin, merely sallow three hours ago, was now sickly and pale. Although he was no doctor, Richard thought he could read serious liver damage or incipient heart disease in that skin. Her heavy-lidded eyes regarded Richard with a steady, even contempt.

She was carrying the frozen corpse of a huge turkey in one of her flabby hands. It twisted and turned within its cellophane wrapper like the body of a bizarre suicide.

“What are you staring at, Richard?” she asked.

You, Lina. I’m staring at you. Because this is how you turned out in a world where we had no children. This is how you turned out in a world where there was no object for your love—poisoned as your love might be. This is how Lina looks in a world where everything comes in and nothing at all goes out. You, Lina. That’s what I’m staring at. You.

“That bird, Lina,” he managed finally. “That’s one of the biggest damn turkeys I’ve ever seen.”

“Well don’t just stand there looking at it, idiot! Help me with it!”

He took the turkey and put it on the counter, feeling its waves of cheerless cold. It sounded like a block of wood.

“Not there!” she cried impatiently, and gestured toward the pantry. “It’s not going to fit in there! Put it in the freezer!”

“Sorry,” he murmured. They had never had a freezer before. Never in the world where there had been a Seth.

He took the turkey into the pantry, where a long Amana freezer sat under cold white fluorescent tubes like a cold white coffin. He put it inside along with the cryogenically preserved corpses of other birds and beasts and then went back into the kitchen. Lina had taken the jar of Reese's peanut butter cups from the cupboard and was eating them methodically, one after the other.

"It was the Thanksgiving bingo," she said. "We had it this week instead of next because next week Father Phillips has to go in hospital and have his gall-bladder out. I won the coverall." She smiled. A brown mixture of chocolate and peanut butter dripped and ran from her teeth.

"Lina," he said, "are you ever sorry we never had children?"

She looked at him as if he had gone utterly crazy. "What in the name of God would I want a rug-monkey for?" she asked. She shoved the jar of peanut butter cups, now reduced by half, back into the cupboard. "I'm going to bed. Are you coming, or are you going back out there and moon over your typewriter some more?"

"I'll go out for a little while more, I think," he said. His voice was surprisingly steady. "I won't be long."

"Does that gadget work?"

"What—" Then he understood and he felt another flash of guilt. She knew about the word processor, of course she did. Seth's DELETION had not affected Roger and the track that Roger's family had been on. "Oh. Oh, no. It doesn't do anything. "

She nodded, satisfied. "That nephew of yours. Head always in the clouds. Just like you, Richard. If you weren't such a mouse, I'd wonder if maybe you'd been putting it where you hadn't ought to have been putting it about fifteen years ago." She laughed a coarse, surprisingly powerful laugh—the laugh of an aging, cynical bawd—and for a moment he almost leaped at her. Then he felt a smile

surface on his own lips—a smile as thin and white and cold as the Amana freezer that had replaced Seth on this new track.

“I won’t be long,” he said. “I just want to note down a few things.”

“Why don’t you write a Nobel Prize-winning short story, or something?” she asked indifferently. The hall floorboards creaked and muttered as she swayed her huge way toward the stairs. “We still owe the optometrist for my reading glasses and we’re a payment behind on the Betamax. Why don’t you make us some damn money?”

“Well,” Richard said, “I don’t know, Lina. But I’ve got some good ideas tonight. I really do.”

She turned to look at him, seemed about to say something sarcastic—something about how none of his good ideas had put them on easy street but she had stuck with him anyway—and then didn’t. Perhaps something about his smile deterred her. She went upstairs. Richard stood below, listening to her thundering tread. He could feel sweat on his forehead. He felt simultaneously sick and exhilarated.

He turned and went back out to his study.

This time when he turned the unit on, the CPU did not hum or roar; it began to make an uneven howling noise. That hot train transformer smell came almost immediately from the housing behind the screen, and as soon as he pushed the EXECUTE button, erasing the HAPPY BIRTHDAY, UNCLE RICHARD! message, the unit began to smoke.

Not much time, he thought. No ... that’s not right. No time at all. Jon knew it, and now I know it, too.

The choices came down to two: Bring Seth back with the INSERT button (he was sure he could do it; it would be as easy as creating the Spanish doubloons had been) or finish the job.

The smell was getting thicker, more urgent. In a few moments, surely no more, the screen would start blinking its OVERLOAD message.

He typed:

MY WIFE IS ADELINA MABEL WARREN HAGSTROM.

He punched the DELETE button.

He typed:

I AM A MAN WHO LIVES ALONE.

Now the word began to blink steadily in the upper right-hand corner of the screen: OVERLOAD OVERLOAD OVERLOAD.

Please. Please let me finish. Please, please, please ...

The smoke coming from the vents in the video cabinet was thicker and grayer now. He looked down at the screaming CPU and saw that smoke was also coming from its vents ... and down in that smoke he could see a sullen red spark of fire.

Magic Eight-Ball, will I be healthy, wealthy, or wise? Or will I live alone and perhaps kill myself in sorrow? Is there time enough?

CANNOT SEE NOW. TRY AGAIN LATER.

Except there was no later.

He struck the INSERT button and the screen went dark, except for the constant OVERLOAD message, which was now blinking at a frantic, stuttery rate.

He typed:

EXCEPT FOR MY WIFE, BELINDA, AND MY SON, JONATHAN.

Please. Please.

He hit the EXECUTE button.

The screen went blank. For what seemed like ages it remained blank, except for OVERLOAD, which was now blinking so fast that, except for a faint shadow, it seemed to remain constant, like a computer executing a closed loop of command. Something inside the CPU popped and sizzled, and Richard groaned.

Then green letters appeared on the screen, floating mystically on the black:

I AM A MAN WHO LIVES ALONE EXCEPT FOR MY WIFE,
BELINDA, AND MY SON, JONATHAN.

He hit the EXECUTE button twice.

Now, he thought. Now I will type: ALL THE BUGS IN THIS WORD PROCESSOR WERE FULLY WORKED OUT BEFORE MR. NORDHOFF BROUGHT IT OVER HERE. Or I'll type: I HAVE IDEAS FOR AT LEAST TWENTY BEST-SELLING NOVELS. Or I'll type: MY FAMILY AND I ARE GOING TO LIVE HAPPILY EVER AFTER. Or I'll type—

But he typed nothing. His fingers hovered stupidly over the keys as he felt—literally felt—all the circuits in his brain jam up like cars grid-locked into the worst Manhattan traffic jam in the history of internal combustion.

The screen suddenly filled up with the word:

LOADOVERLOADOVERLOADOVERLOADOVERL OADOVERLOADOVERLOAD

There was another pop, and then an explosion from the CPU. Flames belched out of the cabinet and then died away. Richard leaned back in his chair, shielding his face in case the screen should implode. It didn't. It only went dark.

He sat there, looking at the darkness of the screen.

CANNOT TELL FOR SURE. ASK AGAIN LATER.

“Dad?”

He swiveled around in his chair, heart pounding so hard he felt that it might actually tear itself out of his chest.

Jon stood there, Jon Hagstrom, and his face was the same but somehow different—the difference was subtle but noticeable. Perhaps, Richard thought, the difference was the difference in paternity between two brothers. Or perhaps it was simply that that wary, watching expression was gone from the eyes, slightly overmagnified by thick spectacles (wire-rims now, he noticed, not the ugly industrial horn-rims that Roger had always gotten the boy because they were fifteen bucks cheaper).

Maybe it was something even simpler: that look of doom was gone from the boy's eyes.

“Jon?” he said hoarsely, wondering if he had actually wanted something more than this. Had he? It seemed ridiculous, but he supposed he had. He supposed people always did. “Jon, it's you, isn't it?”

“Who else would it be?” He nodded toward the word processor. “You didn't hurt yourself when that baby went to data heaven, did you?”

Richard smiled. "No. I'm fine."

Jon nodded. "I'm sorry it didn't work. I don't know what ever possessed me to use all those cruddy parts." He shook his head. "Honest to God I don't. It's like I had to. Kid's stuff."

"Well," Richard said, joining his son and putting an arm around his shoulders, "you'll do better next time, maybe."

"Maybe. Or I might try something else."

"That might be just as well."

"Mom said she had cocoa for you, if you wanted it."

"I do," Richard said, and the two of them walked together from the study to a house into which no frozen turkey won in a bingo coverall game had ever come. "A cup of cocoa would go down just fine right now."

"I'll cannibalize anything worth cannibalizing out of that thing tomorrow and then take it to the dump," Jon said.

Richard nodded. "Delete it from our lives," he said, and they went into the house and the smell of hot cocoa, laughing together.

**I've given up thinking - it
keeps getting me into
trouble. ~You Know
They've Got A Hell Of A
Band in Nightmares and
Dreamscapes.**

YOU KNOW THEY GOT A HELL OF A BAND

Stephen King

When Mary woke up, they were lost. She knew it, and Clark knew it, too, although he didn't want to admit it at first; he was wearing his I'm Pissed So Don't Fuck with Me look, where his mouth kept getting smaller and smaller until you thought it might disappear altogether. And "lost" wasn't how Clark would put it; Clark would say they had "taken a wrong turn somewhere," and it would just about kill him to go even that far.

They'd set off from Portland the day before. Clark worked for a computer company—one of the giants—and it had been his idea that they should see something of the Oregon which lay outside the pleasant but humdrum upper-middle-class suburb of Portland where they lived—an area that was known to its inhabitants as Software City. "They say it's beautiful out there in the boonies," he had told her. "You want to go take a look? I've got a week, and the transfer rumors have already started. If we don't see some of the real Oregon, I think the last sixteen months are going to be nothing but a black hole in my memory."

She had agreed willingly enough (school had let out ten days before and she had no summer classes to teach), enjoying the pleasantly haphazard, catch-as-catch-can feel of the trip, forgetting that spur-of-the-moment vacations often ended up just like this, with the vacationers lost along some back road which blundered its way up the overgrown butt-crack of nowhere. It was an adventure, she supposed—at least you could look at it that way if you wanted—but she had turned thirty-two in January, and she thought thirty-two was maybe just a little too old for adventures. These days her idea of a really nice vacation was a motel with a clean pool, bathrobes on the beds, and a hair-dryer that worked in the bathroom.

Yesterday had been fine, though, the countryside so gorgeous that even Clark had several times been awed to an unaccustomed silence. They had spent the night at a nice country inn just west of Eugene, had made love not once but twice (something she was most definitely not too old to enjoy), and this morning had headed south, meaning to spend the night in Klamath Falls. They had begun the

day on Oregon State Highway 58, and that was all right, but then, over lunch in the town of Oakridge, Clark had suggested they get off the main highway, which was pretty well clogged with RVs and logging trucks.

“Well, I don’t know ...” Mary spoke with the dubiousness of a woman who has heard many such proposals from her man, and endured the consequences of a few. “I’d hate to get lost out there, Clark. It looks pretty empty.” She had tapped one neatly shaped nail on a spot of green marked Boulder Creek Wilderness Area. “That word is wilderness, as in no gas stations, no rest rooms, and no motels.”

“Aw, come on,” he said, pushing aside the remains of his chicken-fried steak. On the juke, Steve Earle and the Dukes were singing “Six Days on the Road,” and outside the dirt-streaked windows, a bunch of bored-looking kids were doing turns and pop-outs on their skateboards. They looked as if they were just marking time out there, waiting to be old enough to blow this town for good, and Mary knew exactly how they felt. “Nothing to it, babe. We take 58 a few more miles east ... then turn south on State Road 42 ... see it?”

“Uh-huh.” She also saw that, while Highway 58 was a fat red line, State Road 42 was only a squiggle of black thread. But she’d been full of meatloaf and mashed potatoes, and hadn’t wanted to argue with Clark’s pioneering instinct while she felt like a boa constrictor that has just swallowed a goat. What she’d wanted, in fact, was to tilt back the passenger seat of their lovely old Mercedes and take a snooze.

“Then,” he pushed on, “there’s this road here. It’s not numbered, so it’s probably only a county road, but it goes right down to Toketee Falls. And from there it’s only a hop and a jump over to U.S. 97. So—what do you think?”

“That you’ll probably get us lost,” she’d said—a wisecrack she rather regretted later. “But I guess we’ll be all right as long as you can find a place wide enough to turn the Princess around in.”

“Sold American!” he said, beaming, and pulled his chicken-fried steak back in front of him. He began to eat again, congealed gravy and all.

“Uck-a-doo,” she said, holding one hand up in front of her face and wincing. “How can you?”

“It’s good,” Clark said in tones so muffled only a wife could have understood him. “Besides, when one is travelling, one should eat the native dishes.”

“It looks like someone sneezed a mouthful of snuff onto a very old hamburger,” she said. “I repeat: uck-a-doo.”

They left Oakridge in good spirits, and at first all had gone swimmingly. Trouble hadn’t set in until they turned off S.R. 42 and onto the unmarked road, the one Clark had been so sure was going to breeze them right into Toketee Falls. It hadn’t seemed like trouble at first; county road or not, the new way had been a lot better than Highway 42, which had been potholed and frost-heaved, even in summer. They had gone along famously, in fact, taking turns plugging tapes into the dashboard player. Clark was into people like Wilson Pickett, Al Green, and Pop Staples. Mary’s taste lay in entirely different directions.

“What do you see in all these white boys?” he asked as she plugged in her current favorite—Lou Reed’s New York.

“Married one, didn’t I?” she asked, and that made him laugh.

The first sign of trouble came fifteen minutes later, when they came to a fork in the road. Both forks looked equally promising.

“Holy crap,” Clark said, pulling up and popping the glove compartment open so he could get at the map. He looked at it for a long time. “That isn’t on the map.”

“Oh boy, here we go,” Mary said. She had been on the edge of a doze when Clark pulled up at the unexpected fork, and she was feeling a little irritated with him. “Want my advice?”

“No,” he said, sounding a little irritated himself, “but I suppose I’ll get it. And I hate it when you roll your eyes at me that way, in case you didn’t know.”

“What way is that, Clark?”

“Like I was an old dog that just farted under the dinner table. Go on, tell me what you think. Lay it on me. It’s your nickel.”

“Go back while there’s still time. That’s my advice.”

“Uh-huh. Now if you only had a sign that said REPENT.”

“Is that supposed to be funny?”

“I don’t know, Mare,” he said in a glum tone of voice, and then just sat there, alternating looks through the bugsplattered windshield with a close examination of the map. They had been married for almost fifteen years, and Mary knew him well enough to believe he would almost certainly insist on pushing on ... not in spite of the unexpected fork in the road, but because of it.

When Clark Willingham’s balls are on the line, he doesn’t back down, she thought, and then put a hand over her mouth to hide the grin that had surfaced there.

She was not quite quick enough. Clark glanced at her, one eyebrow raised, and she had a sudden discomfiting thought: if she could read him as easily as a child’s storybook after all this time, then maybe he could do the same with her. “Something?” he asked, and his voice was just a little too thin. It was at that moment—even before she had fallen asleep, she now realized—that his mouth had started to get smaller. “Want to share, sweetheart?”

She shook her head. “Just clearing my throat.”

He nodded, pushed his glasses up on his ever-expanding forehead, and brought the map up until it was almost touching the tip of his nose. “Well,” he said, “it’s got to be the left-hand fork, because that’s the one that goes south, toward Toketee Falls. The other one heads east. It’s probably a ranch road, or something.”

“A ranch road with a yellow line running down the middle of it?”

Clark’s mouth grew a little smaller. “You’d be surprised how well-off some of these ranchers are,” he said.

She thought of pointing out to him that the days of the scouts and pioneers were long gone, that his testicles were not actually on the line, and then decided she wanted a little doze-off in the afternoon sun a lot more than she wanted to squabble with her husband, especially after the lovely double feature last night. And, after all, they were bound to come out somewhere, weren’t they?

With that comforting thought in her mind and Lou Reed in her ears, singing about the last great American whale, Mary Willingham dozed off. By the time the road Clark had picked began to deteriorate, she was sleeping shallowly and dreaming that they were back in the Oakridge cafe where they had eaten lunch. She was trying to put a quarter in the jukebox, but the coin-slot was plugged with something that looked like flesh. One of the kids who had been outside in the parking lot walked past her with his skateboard under his arm and his Trailblazers hat turned around on his head.

What’s the matter with this thing? Mary asked him.

The kid came over, took a quick look, and shrugged. Aw, that ain’t nothing, he said. That’s just some guy’s body, broken for you and for many. This is no rinky-dink operation we got here; we’re talking mass culture, sugar-muffin.

Then he reached up, gave the tip of her right breast a tweak—not a very friendly one, either—and walked away. When she looked back at the jukebox, she saw it had filled up with blood and shadowy floating things that looked suspiciously like human organs.

Maybe you better give that Lou Reed album a rest, she thought, and within the pool of blood behind the glass, a record floated down onto the turntable—as if at her thought—and Lou began to sing “Busload of Faith.”

*

While Mary was having this steadily more unpleasant dream, the road continued to worsen, the patches spreading until it was really all patch. The Lou Reed album—a long one—came to an end, and began to recycle. Clark didn’t notice. The pleasant look he had started the day with was entirely gone. His mouth had shrunk to the size of a rosebud. If Mary had been awake, she would have coaxed him into turning around miles back. He knew this, just as he knew how she would look at him if she woke up now and saw this narrow swatch of crumbling hot-top—a road only if one thought in the most charitable of terms—with piney woods pressing in close enough on both sides to keep the patched tar in constant shadow. They had not passed a car headed in the other direction since leaving S.R. 42.

He knew he should turn around—Mary hated it when he got into shit like this, always forgetting the many times he had found his way unerringly along strange roads to their planned destinations (Clark Willingham was one of those millions of American men who are firmly convinced they have a compass in their heads)—but he continued to push on, at first stubbornly convinced that they must come out in Toketee Falls, then just hoping. Besides, there really was no place to turn around. If he tried to do it, he would mire the Princess to her hubcaps in one of the marshy ditches which bordered this miserable excuse for a road ... and God knew how long it would take to get a tow-truck in here, or how far he’d have to walk just to call one.

Then, at last, he did come to a place where he could have turned around—another fork in the road—and elected not to do so. The reason was simple: although the right fork was rutted gravel with grass growing up the middle, the leftward-tending branch was once again wide, well-paved, and divided by a bright stroke of yellow. According to the compass in Clark's head, this fork headed due south. He could all but smell Toketee Falls. Ten miles, maybe fifteen, twenty at the outside.

He did at least consider turning back, however. When he told Mary so later, he saw doubt in her eyes, but it was true. He decided to go on because Mary was beginning to stir, and he was quite sure that the bumpy, potholed stretch of road he'd just driven would wake her up if he turned back ... and then she would look at him with those wide, beautiful blue eyes of hers. Just look. That would be enough.

Besides, why should he spend an hour and a half going back when Toketee Falls was just a spin and a promise away? Look at that road, he thought. You think a road like that is going to just peter out?

He put the Princess back in gear, started down the left fork, and sure enough, the road petered out. Over the first hill, the yellow line disappeared again. Over the second, the paving gave out and they were on a rutted dirt track with the dark woods pressing even closer on either side and the sun—Clark was aware of this for the first time—now sliding down the wrong side of the sky.

The pavement ended too suddenly for Clark to brake and baby the Princess onto the new surface, and there was a hard, spring-jarring thud that woke Mary. She sat up with a jerk and looked around with wide eyes. "Where—" she began, and then, to make the afternoon utterly perfect and complete, the smoky voice of Lou Reed sped up until he was gabbling out the lyrics to "Good Evening, Mr. Waldheim" at the speed of Alvin and the Chipmunks.

"Oh!" she said, and punched the eject button. The tape belched out, followed by an ugly brown afterbirth—coils of shiny tape.

The Princess hit a nearly bottomless pothole, lurched hard to the left, and then threw herself up and out like a clipper ship corkscrewing through a stormwave.

“Clark?”

“Don’t say anything,” he said through clenched teeth. “We’re not lost. This will turn back to tar in just a minute or two—probably over the next hill. We are not lost.”

Still upset by her dream (even though she could not quite remember what it had been), Mary held the ruined tape in her lap, mourning it. She supposed she could buy another one... but not out here. She looked at the brooding trees which seemed to belly right up to the road like starving guests at a banquet and guessed it was a long way to the nearest Tower Records.

She looked at Clark, noted his flushed cheeks and nearly nonexistent mouth, and decided it would be politic to keep her own mouth shut, at least for the time being. If she was quiet and nonaccusatory, he would be more likely to come to his senses before this miserable excuse for a road petered out in a gravel pit or quicksand bog.

“Besides, I can’t very well turn around,” he said, as if she had suggested that very thing.

“I can see that,” she replied neutrally.

He glanced at her, perhaps wanting to fight, perhaps just feeling embarrassed and hoping to see she wasn’t too pissed at him—at least not yet—and then looked back through the windshield. Now there were weeds and grass growing up the center of this road, too, and the way was so narrow that if they did happen to meet another car, one of them would have to back up. Nor was that the end of the fun. The ground beyond the wheelruts looked increasingly untrustworthy; the scrubby trees seemed to be jostling each other for position in the wet ground.

There were no power-poles on either side of the road. She almost pointed this out to Clark, then decided it might be smarter to hold her tongue about that, too. He drove on in silence until they came around a down-slanting curve. He was hoping against hope that they would see a change for the better on the far side, but the overgrown track only went on as it had before. It was, if anything, a little fainter and a little narrower, and had begun to remind Clark of roads in the fantasy epics he liked to read—stories by people like Terry Brooks, Stephen Donaldson, and, of course, J. R. R. Tolkien, the spiritual father of them all. In these tales, the characters (who usually had hairy feet and pointed ears) took these neglected roads in spite of their own gloomy intuitions, and usually ended up battling trolls or boggarts or mace-wielding skeletons.

“Clark—”

“I know,” he said, and hammered the wheel suddenly with his left hand—a short, frustrated stroke that succeeded only in honking the horn. “I know.” He stopped the Mercedes, which now straddled the entire road (road? hell, lane was now too grand a word for it), slammed the transmission into park, and got out. Mary got out on the other side, more slowly.

The balsam smell of the trees was heavenly, and she thought there was something beautiful about the silence, unbroken as it was by the sound of any motor (even the far-off drone of an airplane) or human voice ... but there was something spooky about it, as well. Even the sounds she could hear—the tu-whit! of a bird in the shadowy firs, the sigh of the wind, the rough rumble of the Princess’s diesel engine—served to emphasize the wall of quiet encircling them.

She looked across the Princess’s gray roof at Clark, and it was not reproach or anger in her gaze but appeal: Get us out of this, all right? Please?

“Sorry, hon,” he said, and the worry she saw in his face did nothing to soothe her. “Really.”

She tried to speak, but at first no sound came out of her dry throat. She cleared it and tried again. “What do you think about backing up, Clark?”

He considered it for several moments—the tu-whit! bird had time to call again and be answered from somewhere deeper in the forest—before shaking his head. “Only as a last resort. It’s at least two miles back to the last fork in the road—”

“You mean there was another one?”

He winced a little, dropped his eyes, and nodded. “Backing up ... well, you see how narrow the road is, and how mucky the ditches are. If we went off ...” He shook his head and sighed.

“So we go on.”

“I think so. If the road goes entirely to hell, of course, I’ll have to try it.”

“But by then we’ll be in even deeper, won’t we?” So far she was managing, and quite well, she thought, to keep a tone of accusation from creeping into her voice, but it was getting harder and harder to do. She was pissed at him, quite severely pissed, and pissed at herself, as well—for letting him get them into this in the first place, and then for coddling him the way she was now.

“Yes, but I like the odds on finding a wide place up ahead better than I like the odds on reversing for a couple of miles along this piece of crap. If it turns out we do have to back out, I’ll take it in stages—back up for five minutes, rest for ten, back up for five more.” He smiled lamely. “It’ll be an adventure.”

“Oh yes, it’ll be that, all right,” Mary said, thinking again that her definition for this sort of thing was not adventure but pain in the ass. “Are you sure you aren’t pressing on because you believe in your heart that we’re going to find Toketee Falls right over the next hill?”

For a moment his mouth seemed to disappear entirely and she braced for an explosion of righteous male wrath. Then his shoulders sagged and he only shook his head. In that moment she saw what he was going to look like thirty years from now, and that frightened her a lot more than getting caught on a back road in the middle of nowhere.

“No,” he said. “I guess I’ve given up on Toketee Falls. One of the great rules of travel in America is that roads without electrical lines running along at least one side of them don’t go anywhere.”

So he had noticed, too.

“Come on,” he said, getting back in. “I’m going to try like hell to get us out of this. And next time I’ll listen to you.”

Yeah, yeah, Mary thought with a mixture of amusement and tired resentment. I’ve heard that one before. But before he could pull the transmission stick on the console down from park to drive, she put her hand over his. “I know you will,” she said, turning what he’d said into a promise. “Now get us out of this mess.”

“Count on it,” Clark said.

“And be careful.”

“You can count on that, too.” He gave her a small smile that made her feel a little better, then engaged the Princess’s transmission. The big gray Mercedes, looking very out of place in these deep woods, began to creep down the shadowy track again.

*

They drove another mile by the odometer and nothing changed but the width of the cart-track they were on: it grew narrower still. Mary thought the scruffy firs now looked not like hungry guests at a banquet but morbidly curious spectators at the site of a nasty accident. If the track got any narrower, they would begin to hear the

squall of branches along the sides of the car. The ground under the trees, meanwhile, had gone from mucky to swampy; Mary could see patches of standing water, dusty with pollen and fallen pine needles, in some of the dips. Her heart was beating much too fast, and twice she had caught herself gnawing at her nails, a habit she thought she had given up for good the year before she married Clark. She had begun to realize that if they got stuck now, they would almost certainly spend the night camped out in the Princess. And there were animals in these woods—she had heard them crashing around out there. Some of them sounded big enough to be bears. The thought of meeting a bear while they stood looking at their hopelessly mired Mercedes made her swallow something that felt and tasted like a large lintball.

“Clark, I think we’d better give it up and try backing. It’s already past three o’clock and—”

“Look,” he said, pointing ahead. “Is it a sign?”

She squinted. Ahead, the lane rose toward the crest of a deeply wooded hill. There was a bright blue oblong standing near the top. “Yes,” she said. “It’s a sign, all right.”

“Great! Can you read it?”

“Uh-huh—it says IF YOU CAME THIS FAR, YOU REALLY FUCKED UP.”

He shot her a complex look of amusement and irritation. “Very funny, Mare.”

“Thank you, Clark. I try.”

“We’ll go to the top of the hill, read the sign, and see what’s over the crest. If we don’t see anything hopeful, we’ll try backing. Agreed?”

“Agreed.”

He patted her leg, then drove cautiously on. The Mercedes was moving so slowly now that they could hear the soft sound of the weeds on the crown of the road whickering against the undercarriage. Mary really could make out the words on the sign now, but at first she rejected them, thinking she had to be mistaken—it was just too crazy. But they drew closer still, and the words didn't change.

“Does it say what I think it does?” Clark asked her.

Mary gave a short, bewildered laugh. “Sure ... but it must be someone's idea of a joke. Don't you think?”

“I've given up thinking—it keeps getting me into trouble. But I see something that isn't a joke. Look, Mary!”

Twenty or thirty feet beyond the sign—just before the crest of the hill—the road widened dramatically and was once more both paved and lined. Mary felt worry roll off her heart like a boulder.

Clark was grinning. “Isn't that beautiful?”

She nodded happily, grinning herself.

They reached the sign and Clark stopped. They read it again:

Welcome to

Rock and Roll Heaven, Ore.

WE COOK WITH GAS! SO WILL YOU!

Jaycees *Chamber of Commerce* Lions * Elks

“It’s got to be a joke,” she repeated.

“Maybe not.”

“A town called Rock and Roll Heaven? Puh-leeze, Clark.”

“Why not? There’s Truth or Consequences, New Mexico, Dry Shark, Nevada, and a town in Pennsylvania called Intercourse. So why not a Rock and Roll Heaven in Oregon?”

She laughed giddily. The sense of relief was really incredible. “You made that up.”

“What?”

“Intercourse, Pennsylvania.”

“I didn’t. Ralph Ginzberg once tried to send a magazine called Eros from there. For the postmark. The Feds wouldn’t let him. Swear. And who knows? Maybe the town was founded by a bunch of communal back-to-the-land hippies in the sixties. They went establishment—Lions, Elks, Jaycees—but the original name stayed.” He was quite taken with the idea; he found it both funny and oddly sweet.

“Besides, I don’t think it matters. What matters is we found some honest-to-God pavement again, honey. The stuff you drive on.”

She nodded. “So drive on it ... but be careful.”

“You bet.” The Princess nosed up onto the pavement, which was not asphalt but a smooth composition surface without a patch or

expansion-joint to be seen. “Careful’s my middle n—”

Then they reached the crest of the hill and the last word died in his mouth. He stamped on the brake-pedal so hard that their seatbelts locked, then jammed the transmission lever back into park.

“Holy wow!” Clark said.

They sat in the idling Mercedes, open-mouthed, looking down at the town below.

*

It was a perfect jewel of a town nestled in a small, shallow valley like a dimple. Its resemblance to the paintings of Norman Rockwell and the small-town illustrations of Currier & Ives was, to Mary, at least, inescapable. She tried to tell herself it was just the geography; the way the road wound down into the valley, the way the town was surrounded by deep green-black forest—leagues of old, thick firs growing in unbroken profusion beyond the outlying fields—but it was more than the geography, and she supposed Clark knew it as well as she did. There was something too sweetly balanced about the church steeples, for instance—one on the north end of the town common and the other on the south end. The barn-red building off to the east had to be the school-house, and the big white one off to the west, the one with the bell-tower on top and the satellite dish to one side, had to be the town hall. The homes all looked impossibly neat and cozy, the sorts of domiciles you saw in the house-beautiful ads of pre-World War II magazines like *The Saturday Evening Post* and *American Mercury*.

There should be smoke curling from a chimney or two, Mary thought, and after a little examination, she saw that there was. She suddenly found herself remembering a story from Ray Bradbury’s *The Martian Chronicles*. “Mars Is Heaven,” it had been called, and in it the Martians had cleverly disguised the slaughterhouse so it had looked like everybody’s fondest hometown dream.

“Turn around,” she said abruptly. “It’s wide enough here, if you’re careful.”

He turned slowly to look at her, and she didn’t care much for the expression on his face. He was eyeing her as if he thought she had gone crazy. “Honey, what are you—”

“I don’t like it, that’s all.” She could feel her face growing warm, but she pushed on in spite of the heat. “It makes me think of a scary story I read when I was a teenager.” She paused. “It also makes me think of the candy-house in ‘Hansel and Gretel.’ “

He went on giving her that patented I Just Don’t Believe It stare of his, and she realized he meant to go down there—it was just another part of the same wretched testosterone blast that had gotten them off the main road in the first place. He wanted to explore, by Christ. And he wanted a souvenir, of course. A tee-shirt bought in the local drugstore would do, one that said something cute like I’VE BEEN TO ROCK AND ROLL HEAVEN AND YOU KNOW THEY GOT A HELL OF A BAND

“Honey—” It was the soft, tender voice he used when he intended to jolly her into something or die trying.

“Oh, stop. If you want to do something nice for me, turn us around and drive us back to Highway 58. If you do that, you can have some more sugar tonight. Another double helping, even, if you’re up to it.”

He fetched a deep sigh, hands on the steering wheel, eyes straight ahead. At last, not looking at her, he said: “Look across the valley, Mary. Do you see the road going up the hill on the far side?”

“Yes, I do.”

“Do you see how wide it is? How smooth? How nicely paved?”

“Clark, that is hardly—”

“Look! I believe I even see an honest-to-God bus on it.” He pointed at a yellow bug trundling along the road toward town, its metal hide glittering hotly in the afternoon sunlight. “That’s one more vehicle than we’ve seen on this side of the world.”

“I still—”

He grabbed the map which had been lying on the console, and when he turned to her with it, Mary realized with dismay that the jolly, coaxing voice had temporarily concealed the fact that he was seriously pissed at her. “Listen, Mare, and pay attention, because there may be questions later. Maybe I can turn around here and maybe I can’t—it’s wider, but I’m not as sure as you are that it’s wide enough. And the ground still looks pretty squelchy to me.”

“Clark, please don’t yell at me. I’m getting a headache.”

He made an effort and moderated his voice. “If we do get turned around, it’s twelve miles back to Highway 58, over the same shitty road we just travelled—”

“Twelve miles isn’t so much.” She tried to sound firm, if only to herself, but she could feel herself weakening. She hated herself for it, but that didn’t change it. She had a horrid suspicion that this was how men almost always got their way: not by being right but by being relentless. They argued like they played football, and if you hung in there, you almost always finished the discussion with cleat-marks all over your psyche.

“No, twelve miles isn’t so much,” he was saying in his most sweetly reasonable I-am-trying-not-to-strangle-you-Mary voice, “but what about the fifty or so we’ll have to tack on going around this patch of woods once we get back on 58?”

“You make it sound as if we had a train to catch, Clark!”

“It just pisses me off, that’s all. You take one look down at a nice little town with a cute little name and say it reminds you of Friday the

13th, Part XX or some damn thing and you want to go back. And that road over there”—he pointed across the valley—“heads due south. It’s probably less than half an hour from here to Toketee Falls by that road.”

“That’s about what you said back in Oakridge—before we started off on the Magical Mystery Tour segment of our trip.”

He looked at her a moment longer, his mouth tucked in on itself like a cramp, then grabbed the transmission lever. “Fuck it,” he snarled. “We’ll go back. But if we meet one car on the way, Mary, just one, we’ll end up backing into Rock and Roll Heaven. So—”

She put her hand over his before he could disengage the transmission for the second time that day.

“Go on,” she said. “You’re probably right and I’m probably being silly.” Rolling over like this has got to be bred in the goddam bone, she thought. Either that, or I’m just too tired to fight.

She took her hand away, but he paused a moment longer, looking at her. “Only if you’re sure,” he said.

And that was really the most ludicrous thing of all, wasn’t it? Winning wasn’t enough for a man like Clark; the vote also had to be unanimous. She had voiced that unanimity many times when she didn’t feel very unanimous in her heart, but she discovered that she just wasn’t capable of it this time.

“But I’m not sure,” she said. “If you’d been listening to me instead of just putting up with me, you’d know that. Probably you’re right and probably I’m just being silly—your take on it makes more sense than mine does, I admit that much, at least, and I’m willing to soldier along—but that doesn’t change the way I feel. So you’ll just have to excuse me if I decline to put on my little cheerleader’s skirt and lead the Go Clark Go cheer this time.”

“Jesus!” he said. His face was wearing an uncertain expression that made him look uncharacteristically—and somehow hatefully—boyish. “You’re in some mood, aren’t you, honeybunch?”

“I guess I am,” she said, hoping he couldn’t see how much that particular term of endearment grated on her. She was thirty-two, after all, and he was almost forty-one. She felt a little too old to be anyone’s honeybunch and thought Clark was a little too old to need one.

Then the troubled look on his face cleared and the Clark she liked—the one she really believed she could spend the second half of her life with—was back. “You’d look cute in a cheerleader’s skirt, though,” he said, and appeared to measure the length of her thigh. “You would.”

“You’re a fool, Clark,” she said, and then found herself smiling at him almost in spite of herself.

“That’s correct, ma’am,” he said, and put the Princess in gear.

*

The town had no outskirts, unless the few fields which surrounded it counted. At one moment they were driving down a gloomy, tree-shaded lane; at the next there were broad tan fields on either side of the car; at the next they were passing neat little houses.

The town was quiet but far from deserted. A few cars moved lazily back and forth on the four or five intersecting streets that made up downtown, and a handful of pedestrians strolled the sidewalks. Clark lifted a hand in salute to a bare-chested, potbellied man who was simultaneously watering his lawn and drinking a can of Olympia. The potbellied man, whose dirty hair straggled to his shoulders, watched them go by but did not raise his own hand in return.

Main Street had that same Norman Rockwell ambience, and here it was so strong that it was almost a feeling of *deja vu*. The walks were

shaded by robust, mature oaks, and that was somehow just right. You didn't have to see the town's only watering hole to know that it would be called The Dew Drop Inn and that there would be a lighted clock displaying the Budweiser Clydesdales over the bar. The parking spaces were the slanting type; there was a red-white-and-blue barber pole turning outside The Cutting Edge; a mortar and pestle hung over the door of the local pharmacy, which was called The Tuneful Druggist. The pet shop (with a sign in the window saying WE HAVE SIAMESE IF YOU PLEASE) was called White Rabbit. Everything was so right you could just shit. Most right of all was the town common at the center of town. There was a sign hung on a guy-wire above the bandshell, and Mary could read it easily, although they were a hundred yards away. CONCERT TONIGHT, it said.

She suddenly realized that she knew this town—had seen it many times on late-night TV. Never mind Ray Bradbury's hellish vision of Mars or the candy-house in "Hansel and Gretel"; what this place resembled more than either was The Peculiar Little Town people kept stumbling into in various episodes of The Twilight Zone.

She leaned toward her husband and said in a low, ominous voice: "We're travelling not through a dimension of sight and sound, Clark, but of mind. Look!" She pointed at nothing in particular, but a woman standing outside the town's Western Auto saw the gesture and gave her a narrow, mistrustful glance.

"Look at what?" he asked. He sounded irritated again, and she guessed that this time it was because he knew exactly what she was talking about.

"There's a signpost up ahead! We're entering—"

"Oh, cut it out, Mare," he said, and abruptly swung into an empty parking slot halfway down Main Street.

"Clark!" she nearly screamed. "What are you doing?"

He pointed through the windshield at an establishment with the somehow not-cute name of The Rock-a-Boogie Restaurant.

“I’m thirsty. I’m going in there and getting a great big Pepsi to go. You don’t have to come. You can sit right here. Lock all the doors, if you want.” So saying, he opened his own door. Before he could swing his legs out, she grabbed his shoulder.

“Clark, please don’t.”

He looked back at her, and she saw at once that she should have canned the crack about The Twilight Zone—not because it was wrong but because it was right. It was that macho thing again. He wasn’t stopping because he was thirsty, not really; he was stopping because this freaky little burg had scared him, too. Maybe a little, maybe a lot, she didn’t know that, but she did know that he had no intention of going on until he had convinced himself he wasn’t afraid, not one little bit.

“I won’t be a minute. Do you want a ginger ale, or something?”

She pushed the button that unlocked her seatbelt. “What I want is not to be left alone.”

He gave her an indulgent, I-knew-you’d-come look that made her feel like tearing out a couple of swatches of his hair.

“And what I also want is to kick your ass for getting us into this situation in the first place,” she finished, and was pleased to see the indulgent expression turn to one of wounded surprise. She opened her own door. “Come on. Piddle on the nearest hydrant, Clark, and then we’ll get out of here.”

“Piddle ... ? Mary, what in the hell are you talking about?”

“Sodas!” she nearly screamed, all the while thinking that it was really amazing how fast a good trip with a good man could turn bad. She glanced across the street and saw a couple of longhaired young

guys standing there. They were also drinking Olly and checking out the strangers in town. One was wearing a battered top-hat. The plastic daisy stuck in the band nodded back and forth in the breeze. His companion's arms crawled with faded blue tattoos. To Mary they looked like the sort of fellows who dropped out of high school their third time through the tenth grade in order to spend more time meditating on the joys of drive-train linkages and date rape.

Oddly enough, they also looked somehow familiar to her.

They saw her looking. Top-Hat solemnly raised his hand and twiddled his fingers at her. Mary looked away hurriedly and turned to Clark. "Let's get our cold drinks and get the hell out of here."

"Sure," he said. "And you didn't need to shout at me, Mary. I mean, I was right beside you, and—"

"Clark, do you see those two guys across the street?"

"What two guys?"

She looked back in time to see Top-Hat and Tattoos slipping through the barber-shop doorway. Tattoos glanced back over his shoulder, and although Mary wasn't sure, she thought he tipped her a wink.

"They're just going into the barber shop. See them?"

Clark looked, but only saw a closing door with the sun reflecting eye-watering shards of light from the glass: "What about them?"

"They looked familiar to me."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah. But I find it somehow hard to believe that any of the people I know moved to Rock and Roll Heaven, Oregon, to take up rewarding, high-paying jobs as street-corner hoodlums."

Clark laughed and took her elbow. "Come on," he said, and led her into The Rock-a-Boogie Restaurant.

*

The Rock-a-Boogie went a fair distance toward allaying Mary's fears. She had expected a greasy spoon, not much different from the dim (and rather dirty) pit-stop in Oakridge where they'd eaten lunch. They entered a sun-filled, agreeable little diner with a funky fifties feel instead: blue-tiled walls; chrome-chased pie case; tidy yellow-oak floor; wooden paddle fans turning lazily overhead. The face of the wall-clock was circled with thin tubes of red and blue neon. Two waitresses in aqua-colored rayon uniforms that looked to Mary like costumes left over from American Graffiti were standing by the stainless-steel pass-through between the restaurant and the kitchen. One was young—no more than twenty and probably not that—and pretty in a washed-out way. The other, a short woman with a lot of frizzy red hair, had a brassy look that struck Mary as both harsh and desperate ... and there was something else about her, as well: for the second time in as many minutes, Mary had the strong sensation that she knew someone in this town.

A bell over the door tinkled as she and Clark entered. The waitresses glanced over. "Hi, there," the younger one said. "Be right with you."

"Naw; might take awhile," the redhead disagreed. "We're awful busy. See?" She swept an arm at the room, deserted as only a small-town restaurant can be as the afternoon balances perfectly between lunch and dinner, and laughed cheerily at her own witticism. Like her voice, the laugh had a husky, splintered quality that Mary associated with Scotch and cigarettes. But it's a voice I know, she thought. I'd swear it is.

She turned to Clark and saw he was staring at the waitresses, who had resumed their conversation, as if hypnotized. She had to tug his sleeve to get his attention, then tug it again when he headed for the tables grouped on the left side of the room. She wanted them to sit

at the counter. She wanted to get their damned sodas in take-out cups and then blow this joint.

“What is it?” she whispered.

“Nothing,” he said. “I guess.”

“You looked like you swallowed your tongue, or something.”

“For a second or two it felt like I had,” he said, and before she could ask him to explain, he had diverted to look at the jukebox.

Mary sat down at the counter.

“Be right with you, ma’am,” the younger waitress repeated, and then bent closer to hear something else her whiskey-voiced colleague was saying. Looking at her face, Mary guessed the younger woman wasn’t really very interested in what the older one had to say.

“Mary, this is a great juke!” Clark said, sounding delighted. “It’s all fifties stuff! The Moonglows ... The Five Satins ... Shep and the Limelites ... La Vern Baker! Jeez, La Vern Baker singing ‘Tweedlee Dee’! I haven’t heard that one since I was a kid!”

“Well, save your money. We’re just getting take-out drinks, remember?”

“Yeah, yeah.”

He gave the Rock-Ola one last look, blew out an irritated breath, and then joined her at the counter. Mary pulled a menu out of the bracket by the salt and pepper shakers, mostly so she wouldn’t have to look at the frown-line between his eyes and the way his lower lip stuck out. Look, he was saying without saying a word (this, she had discovered, was one of the more questionable long-term effects of being married). I won our way through the wilderness while you slept, killed the buffalo, fought the Injuns, brought you safe and

sound to this nifty little oasis in the wilderness, and what thanks do I get? You won't even let me play "Tweedlee Dee" on the jukebox!

Never mind, she thought. We'll be gone soon, so never mind.

Good advice. She followed it by turning her full attention to the menu. It harmonized with the rayon uniforms, the neon clock, the juke, and the general decor (which, while admirably subdued, could still only be described as Mid-Century Rebob). The hot dog wasn't a hot dog; it was a Hound Dog. The cheeseburger was a Chubby Checker and the double cheeseburger was a Big Bopper. The specialty of the house was a loaded pizza; the menu promised "Everything on It But the (Sam) Cooke!"

"Cute," she said. "Poppa-ooo-mow-mow, and all that."

"What?" Clark asked, and she shook her head.

The young waitress came over, taking her order pad out of her apron pocket. She gave them a smile, but Mary thought it was perfunctory; the woman looked both tired and unwell. There was a cold sore perched above her upper lip, and her slightly bloodshot eyes moved restlessly about the room. They touched on everything, it seemed, but her customers.

"Help you folks?"

Clark moved to take the menu from Mary's hand. She held it away from him and said, "A large Pepsi and a large ginger ale. To go, please."

"Y'all oughtta try the cherry pie!" the redhead called over in her hoarse voice. The younger woman flinched at the sound of it. "Rick just made it! You gonna think you died and went to heaven!" She grinned at them and placed her hands on her hips. "Well, y'all are in Heaven, but you know what I mean."

"Thank you," Mary said, "but we're really in a hurry, and—"

“Sure, why not?” Clark said in a musing, distant voice. “Two pieces of cherry pie.”

Mary kicked his ankle—hard—but Clark didn’t seem to notice. He was staring at the redhead again, and now his mouth was hung on a spring. The redhead was clearly aware of his gaze, but she didn’t seem to mind. She reached up with one hand and lazily fluffed her improbable hair.

“Two sodas to go, two pieces of pie for here,” the young waitress said. She gave them another nervous smile while her restless eyes examined Mary’s wedding ring, the sugar shaker, one of the overhead fans. “You want that pie a la mode?” She bent and put two napkins and two forks on the counter.

“Y—” Clark began, and Mary overrode him firmly and quickly. “No.”

The chrome pie case was behind the far end of the counter. As soon as the waitress walked away in that direction, Mary leaned over and hissed: “Why are you doing this to me, Clark? You know I want to get out of here!”

“That waitress. The redhead. Is she—”

“And stop staring at her!” Mary whispered fiercely. “You look like a kid trying to peek up some girl’s skirt in study hall!”

He pulled his eyes away ... but with an effort. “Is she the spit-image of Janis Joplin, or am I crazy?”

Startled, Mary cast another glance at the redhead. She had turned away slightly to speak to the short-order cook through the pass-through, but Mary could still see at least two-thirds of her face, and that was enough. She felt an almost audible click in her head as she superimposed the face of the redhead over the face on record albums she still owned—vinyl albums pressed in a year when nobody owned Sony Walkmen and the concept of the compact disc would have seemed like science fiction, record albums now packed

away in cardboard boxes from the neighborhood liquor mart and stowed in some dusty attic alcove; record albums with names like Big Brother and the Holding Company, Cheap Thrills, and Pearl. And the face of Janis Joplin—that sweet, homely face which had grown old and harsh and wounded far too soon. Clark was right; this woman’s face was the spitting image of the face on those old albums.

Except it was more than the face, and Mary felt fear swarm into her chest, making her heart feel suddenly light and stuttery and dangerous.

It was the voice.

In the ear of her memory she heard Janis’s chilling, spiraling howl at the beginning of “Piece of My Heart.” She laid that bluesy, boozy shout over the redhead’s Scotch-and-Marlboros voice, just as she had laid one face over the other, and knew that if the waitress began to sing that song, her voice would be identical to the voice of the dead girl from Texas.

Because she is the dead girl from Texas. Congratulations, Mary—you had to wait until you were thirty-two, but you’ve finally made the grade; you’ve finally seen your first ghost.

She tried to dispute the idea, tried to suggest to herself that a combination of factors, not the least of them being the stress of getting lost, had caused her to make too much of a chance resemblance, but these rational thoughts had no chance against the dead certainty in her guts: she was seeing a ghost.

Life within her body underwent a strange and sudden sea-change. Her heart sped up from a beat to a sprint; it felt like a pumped-up runner bursting out of the blocks in an Olympic heat. Adrenaline dumped, simultaneously tightening her stomach and heating her diaphragm like a swallow of brandy. She could feel sweat in her armpits and moisture at her temples. Most amazing of all was the way color seemed to pour into the world, making everything—the

neon around the clock-face, the stainless-steel pass-through to the kitchen, the sprays of revolving color behind the juke's facade— seem simultaneously unreal and too real. She could hear the fans paddling the air overhead, a low, rhythmic sound like a hand stroking silk, and smell the aroma of old fried meat rising from the unseen grill in the next room. And at the same time, she suddenly felt herself on the edge of losing her balance on the stool and swooning to the floor in a dead faint.

Get hold of yourself, woman! she told herself frantically. You're having a panic attack, that's all—no ghosts, no goblins, no demons, just a good old-fashioned whole-body panic attack, you've had them before, at the start of big exams in college, the first day of teaching at school, and that time before you had to speak to the P.T.A. You know what it is and you can deal with it. No one's going to do any fainting around here, so just get hold of yourself, do you hear me?

She crossed her toes inside her low-topped sneakers and squeezed them as hard as she could, concentrating on the sensation, using it in an effort to draw herself back to reality and away from that too-bright place she knew was the threshold of a faint.

“Honey?” Clark's voice, from far away. “You all right?”

“Yes, fine.” Her voice was also coming from far away ... but she knew it was closer than it would have been if she'd tried to speak even fifteen seconds ago. Still pressing her crossed toes tightly together, she picked up the napkin the waitress had left, wanting to feel its texture—it was another connection to the world and another way to break the panicky, irrational (it was irrational, wasn't it? surely it was) feeling which had gripped her so strongly. She raised it toward her face, meaning to wipe her brow with it, and saw there was something written on the underside in ghostly pencil strokes that had torn the fragile paper into little puffs. Mary read this message, printed in jagged capital letters:

GET OUT WHILE YOU STILL CAN.

“Mare? What is it?”

The waitress with the cold sore and the restless, scared eyes was coming back with their pie. Mary dropped the napkin into her lap. “Nothing,” she said calmly. As the waitress set the plates in front of them, Mary forced herself to catch the girl’s eyes with her own. “Thank you,” she said.

“Don’t mention it,” the girl mumbled, looking directly at Mary for only a moment before her eyes began to skate aimlessly around the room again.

“Changed your mind about the pie, I see,” her husband was saying in his most infuriatingly indulgent Clark Knows Best voice. Women! this tone said. Gosh, aren’t they something? Sometimes just leading them to the waterhole isn’t enough—you gotta hold their heads down to get em started. All part of the job. It isn’t easy being a man, but I do my goldurn best.

“Well, it looks awfully good,” she said, marvelling at the even tone of her voice. She smiled at him brightly, aware that the redhead who looked like Janis Joplin was keeping an eye on them.

“I can’t get over how much she looks like—” Clark began, and this time Mary kicked his ankle as hard as she could, no fooling around. He drew in a hurt, hissing breath, eyes popping wide, but before he could say anything, she shoved the napkin with its penciled message into his hand.

He bent his head. Looked at it. And Mary found herself praying—really, really praying—for the first time in perhaps twenty years. Please, God, make him see it’s not a joke. Make him see it’s not a joke because that woman doesn’t just look like Janis Joplin, that woman is Janis Joplin, and I’ve got a horrible feeling about this town, a really horrible feeling.

He raised his head and her heart sank. There was confusion on his face, and exasperation, but nothing else. He opened his mouth to

speak ... and it went right on opening until it looked as if someone had removed the pins from the place where his jaws connected.

Mary turned in the direction of his gaze. The short-order cook, dressed in immaculate whites and wearing a little paper cap cocked over one eye, had come out of the kitchen and was leaning against the tiled wall with his arms folded across his chest. He was talking to the redhead while the younger waitress stood by, watching them with a combination of terror and weariness.

If she doesn't get out of here soon, it'll just be weariness, Mary thought. Or maybe apathy.

The cook was almost impossibly handsome—so handsome that Mary found herself unable to accurately assess his age. Between thirty-five and forty-five, probably, but that was the best she could do. Like the redhead, he looked familiar. He glanced up at them, disclosing a pair of wide-set blue eyes fringed with gorgeous thick lashes, and smiled briefly at them before returning his attention to the redhead. He said something that made her caw raucous laughter.

“My God, that's Rick Nelson,” Clark whispered. “It can't be, it's impossible, he died in a plane crash six or seven years ago, but it is.”

Mary opened her mouth to say he must be mistaken, ready to brand such an idea ludicrous even though she herself now found it impossible to believe that the redheaded waitress was anyone but the years-dead blues shouter Janis Joplin. Before she could say anything, that click—the one which turned vague resemblance into positive identification—came again. Clark had been able to put the name to the face first because Clark was nine years older, Clark had been listening to the radio and watching American Bandstand back when Rick Nelson had been Ricky Nelson and songs like “Be-Bop Baby” and “Lonesome Town” were happening hits, not just dusty artifacts restricted to the golden oldie stations which catered to the now-graying baby boomers. Clark saw it first, but now that he had pointed it out to her, she could not unsee it.

What had the redheaded waitress said? Y'all oughtta try the cherry pie! Rick just made it!

There, not twenty feet away, the fatal plane crash victim was telling a joke—probably a dirty one, from the looks on their faces—to the fatal drug o.d.

The redhead threw back her head and bellowed her rusty laugh at the ceiling again. The cook smiled, the dimples at the corners of his full lips deepening prettily. And the younger waitress, the one with the coldsore and the haunted eyes, glanced over at Clark and Mary, as if to ask Are you watching this? Are you seeing this?

Clark was still staring at the cook and the waitress with that alarming expression of dazed knowledge, his face so long and drawn that it looked like something glimpsed in a funhouse mirror.

They'll see that, if they haven't already, Mary thought, and we'll lose any chance we still have of getting out of this nightmare. I think you better take charge of this situation, kiddo, and quick. The question is, what are you going to do?

She reached for his hand, meaning to grab it and squeeze it, then decided that wouldn't do enough to alter his slack-jawed expression. She reached further and squeezed his balls instead... as hard as she dared. Clark jerked as if someone had zapped him with a laser and swung toward her so fast he almost fell off his stool.

"I left my wallet in the car," she said. Her voice sounded brittle and too loud in her own ears. "Would you get it for me, Clark?"

She looked at him, lips smiling, eyes locked on his with complete concentration. She had read, probably in some shit-intensive woman's magazine while waiting to get her hair done, that when you lived with the same man for ten or twenty years, you forged a low-grade telepathic link with your partner. This link, the article went on to suggest, came in mighty handy when your hubby was bringing the boss home to dinner without phoning ahead or when you wanted him

to bring a bottle of Amaretto from the liquor store and a carton of whipping cream from the supermarket. Now she tried—tried with all her might—to send a far more important message.

Go, Clark. Please go. I'll give you ten seconds, then come on the run. And if you're not in the driver's seat with the key in the ignition, I have a feeling we could be seriously fucked here.

And at the same time, a deeper Mary was saying timidly: This is all a dream, isn't it? I mean ... it is, isn't it?

Clark was looking at her carefully, his eyes watering from the tweak she had given him ... but at least he wasn't complaining about it. His eyes shifted to the redhead and the short-order cook for a moment, saw they were still deep in their own conversation (now she appeared to be the one who was telling a joke), and then shifted back to her.

"It might have slid under the seat," she said in her too-loud, too-brittle voice before he could reply. "It's the red one."

After another moment of silence—one that seemed to last forever—Clark nodded slightly. "Okay," he said, and she could have blessed him for his nicely normal tone, "but no fair stealing my pie while I'm gone."

"Just get back before I finish mine and you'll be okay," she said, and tucked a forkful of cherry pie into her mouth. It had absolutely no taste at all to her, but she smiled. God, yes. Smiled like the Miss New York Apple Queen she had once been.

Clark started to get off his stool, and then, from somewhere outside, came a series of amplified guitar chops—not chords but only open strums. Clark jerked, and Mary shot out one hand to clutch his arm. Her heart, which had been slowing down, broke into that nasty, scary sprint again.

The redhead and the cook—even the younger waitress, who, thankfully, didn't look like anyone famous—glanced casually toward the plate-glass windows of the Rock-a-Boogie.

“Don't let it get you, hon,” the redhead said. “They're just startin to tune up for the concert tonight.”

“That's right,” the short-order cook said. He regarded Mary with his drop-dead blue eyes. “We have a concert here in town most every night.”

Yes, Mary thought. Of course. Of course you do.

A voice both toneless and godlike rolled across from the town common, a voice almost loud enough to rattle the windows. Mary, who had been to her share of rock shows, was able to place it in a clear context at once—it called up images of bored, longhaired roadies strolling around the stage before the lights went down, picking their way with easy grace between the forests of amps and mikes, kneeling every now and then to patch two power-cords together.

“Test!” this voice cried. “Test-one, test-one, test-one!”

Another guitar chop, still not a chord but close this time. Then a drum-run. Then a fast trumpet riff lifted from the chorus of “Instant Karma,” accompanied by a light rumble of bongos. CONCERT TONIGHT, the Norman Rockwell sign over the Norman Rockwell town common had said, and Mary, who had grown up in Elmira, New York, had been to quite a few free concerts-on-the-green as a child. Those really had been Norman Rockwell concerts, with the band (made up of guys wearing their Volunteer Fire Department kit in lieu of the band uniforms they couldn't afford) tootling their way through slightly off-key Sousa marches and the local Barber Shop Quartet (Plus Two) harmonizing on things like “Shenandoah” and “I've Got a Gal from Kalamazoo.”

She had an idea that the concerts in Rock and Roll Heaven might be quite different from those childhood musicales where she and her friends had run around waving sparklers as twilight drew on for night.

She had an idea that these concerts-on-the-green might be closer to Goya than to Rockwell.

“I’ll go get your wallet,” he said. “Enjoy your pie.”

“Thank you, Clark.” She put another tasteless forkful of pie in her mouth and watched him head for the door. He walked in an exaggerated slow-motion saunter that struck her feverish eye as absurd and somehow horrid: I don’t have the slightest idea that I’m sharing this room with a couple of famous corpses, Clark’s ambling, sauntering stride was saying. What, me worry?

Hurry up! she wanted to scream. Forget about the gunslinger strut and move your ass!

The bell jingled and the door opened as Clark reached for the knob, and two more dead Texans came in. The one wearing the dark glasses was Roy Orbison. The one wearing the hornrims was Buddy Holly.

All my exes come from Texas, Mary thought wildly, and waited for them to lay their hands on her husband and drag him away.

” “Scuse me, sir,” the man in the dark glasses said politely, and instead of grabbing Clark, he stepped aside for him. Clark nodded without speaking—Mary was suddenly quite sure he couldn’t speak—and stepped out into the sunshine.

Leaving her alone in here with the dead. And that thought seemed to lead naturally to another one, even more horrible: Clark was going to drive off without her. She was suddenly sure of it. Not because he wanted to, and certainly not because he was a coward—this situation went beyond questions of courage and cowardice, and she supposed that the only reason they both weren’t gibbering and

drooling on the floor was because it had developed so fast—but because he just wouldn't be able to do anything else. The reptile that lived on the floor of his brain, the one in charge of self-preservation, would simply slither out of its hole in the mud and take charge of things.

You've got to get out of here, Mary, the voice in her mind—the one that belonged to her own reptile—said, and the tone of that voice frightened her. It was more reasonable than it had any right to be, given the situation, and she had an idea that sweet reason might give way to shrieks of madness at any moment.

Mary took one foot off the rail under the counter and put it on the floor, trying to ready herself mentally for flight as she did so, but before she could gather herself, a narrow hand fell on her shoulder and she looked up into the smiling, knowing face of Buddy Holly.

He had died in 1959, a piece of trivia she remembered from that movie where he had been played by Gary Busey. 1959 was over thirty years gone, but Buddy Holly was still a gawky twenty-three-year-old who looked seventeen, his eyes swimming behind his glasses and his adam's apple bobbing up and down like a monkey on a stick. He was wearing an ugly plaid jacket and a string tie. The tie's clasp was a large chrome steer-head. The face and the taste of a country bumpkin, you would have said, but there was something in the set of the mouth that was too wise, somehow, too dark, and for a moment the hand gripped her shoulder so tightly she could feel the tough pads of callus on the ends of the fingers—guitar calluses.

“Hey there, sweet thang,” he said, and she could smell clove gum on his breath. There was a silvery crack, hair-thin, zigzagging across the left lens of his glasses. “Ain't seen you roun' these parts before.”

Incredibly, she was lifting another forkful of pie toward her mouth, her hand not hesitating even when a clot of cherry filling plopped back onto her plate. More incredibly, she was slipping the fork through a small, polite smile.

“No,” she said. She was somehow positive that she couldn’t let this man see she had recognized him; if he did, any small chance she and Clark might still have would evaporate. “My husband and I are just ... you know, passing through.”

And was Clark passing through even now, desperately keeping to the posted speed limit while the sweat trickled down his face and his eyes rolled back and forth from the mirror to the windshield and back to the mirror again? Was he?

The man in the plaid sportcoat grinned, revealing teeth that were too big and much too sharp. “Yep, I know how that is, all right—y’all seen hoot, n now you’re on your way to holler. That about the size of it?”

“I thought this was hoot,” Mary said primly, and that made the newcomers first look at each other, eyebrows raised, and then shout with laughter. The young waitress looked from one to the other with her frightened, bloodshot eyes.

“That ain’t half-bad,” Buddy Holly said. “You and y’man ought to think about hangin on a little while, though. Stay for the concert tonight, at least. We put on one heckuva show, if I do say so myself.” Mary suddenly realized that the eye behind the cracked lens had filled up with blood. As Holly’s grin widened, pushing the corners of his eyes into a squint, a single scarlet drop spilled over his lower lid and tracked down his cheek like a tear. “Isn’t that right, Roy?”

“Yes, ma’am, it is,” the man in the shades said. “You have to see it to believe it.”

“I’m sure that’s true,” Mary said faintly. Yes, Clark was gone. She was sure of it now. The Testosterone Kid had run like a rabbit, and she supposed that soon enough the frightened young girl with the cold sore would lead her into the back room, where her own rayon uniform and order pad would be waiting.

“It’s somethin to write home about,” Holly told her proudly. “I mean to say.” The drop of blood fell from his face and pinked onto the seat of

the stool Clark had so recently vacated. “Stick around. You’ll be glad y’did.” He looked to his friend for support.

The man in the dark glasses had joined the cook and the waitresses; he dropped his hand onto the hip of the redhead, who put her own hand over it and smiled up at him. Mary saw that the nails on the woman’s short, stubby fingers had been gnawed to the quick. A Maltese cross hung in the open V of Roy Orbison’s shirt. He nodded and flashed a smile of his own. “Love to have you, ma’am, and not just for the night, either—draw up and set a spell, we used to say down home.”

“I’ll ask my husband,” she heard herself saying, and completed the thought in her mind: If I ever see him again, that is.

“You do that, sugarpie!” Holly told her. “You just do that very thing!” Then, incredibly, he was giving her shoulder one final squeeze and walking away, leaving her a clear path to the door. Even more incredibly, she could see the Mercedes’s distinctive grille and peace-sign hood ornament still outside.

Buddy joined his friend Roy, winked at him (producing another bloody tear), then reached behind Janis and goosed her. She screamed indignantly, and as she did, a flood of maggots flew from her mouth. Most struck the floor between her feet, but some clung to her lower lip, squirming obscenely.

The young waitress turned away with a sad, sick grimace, raising one blocking hand to her face. And for Mary Willingham, who suddenly understood they had very likely been playing with her all along, running ceased to be something she had planned and became an instinctive reaction. She was up and off the stool like a shot and sprinting for the door.

“Hey!” the redhead screamed. “Hey, you didn’t pay for the pie! Or the sodas, either! This ain’t no Dine and Dash, you crotch! Rick! Buddy! Get her!”

Mary grabbed for the doorknob and felt it slip through her fingers. Behind her, she heard the thump of approaching feet. She grabbed the knob again, succeeded in turning it this time, and yanked the door open so hard she tore off the overhead bell. A narrow hand with hard calluses on the tips of the fingers grabbed her just above the elbow. This time the fingers were not just squeezing but pinching; she felt a nerve suddenly go critical, first sending a thin wire of pain from her elbow all the way up to the left side of her jaw and then numbing her arm.

She swung her right fist back like a short-handled croquet mallet, connecting with what felt like the thin shield of pelvic bone above a man's groin. There was a pained snort—they could feel pain, apparently, dead or not—and the hand holding her arm loosened. Mary tore free and bolted through the doorway, her hair standing out around her head in a bushy corona of fright.

Her frantic eyes locked on the Mercedes, still parked on the street. She blessed Clark for staying. And he had caught all of her brainwave, it seemed; he was sitting behind the wheel instead of grovelling under the passenger seat for her wallet, and he keyed the Princess's engine the moment she came flying out of the Rock-a-Boogie.

The man in the flower-decorated top-hat and his tattooed companion were standing outside the barber shop again, watching expressionlessly as Mary yanked open the passenger door. She thought she now recognized Top-Hat—she had three Lynyrd Skynyrd albums, and she was pretty sure he was Ronnie Van Zant. No sooner had she realized that than she knew who his illustrated companion was: Duane Allman, killed when his motorcycle skidded beneath a tractor-trailer rig twenty years ago. He took something from the pocket of his denim jacket and bit into it. Mary saw with no surprise at all that it was a peach.

Rick Nelson burst out of the Rock-a-Boogie. Buddy Holly was right behind him, the entire left side of his face now drenched in blood.

“Get in!” Clark screamed at her. “Get in the fucking car, Mary!”

She threw herself into the passenger bucket head-first and he was backing out before she could even make a try at slamming the door. The Princess’s rear tires howled and sent up clouds of blue smoke. Mary was thrown forward with neck-snapping force when Clark stamped the brake, and her head connected with the padded dashboard. She groped behind her for the open door as Clark cursed and yanked the transmission down into drive.

Rick Nelson threw himself onto the Princess’s gray hood. His eyes blazed. His lips were parted over impossibly white teeth in a hideous grin. His cook’s hat had fallen off, and his dark-brown hair hung around his temples in oily snags and corkscrews.

“You’re coming to the show!” he yelled.

“Fuck you!” Clark yelled back. He found drive and floored the accelerator. The Princess’s normally sedate diesel engine gave a low scream and shot forward. The apparition continued to cling to the hood, snarling and grinning in at them.

“Buckle your seatbelt!” Clark bellowed at Mary as she sat up.

She snatched the buckle and jammed it home, watching with horrified fascination as the thing on the hood reached forward with its left hand and grabbed the windshield wiper in front of her. It began to haul itself forward. The wiper snapped off. The thing on the hood glanced at it, tossed it overboard, and reached for the wiper on Clark’s side.

Before he could get it, Clark tramped on the brake again—this time with both feet. Mary’s seatbelt locked, biting painfully into the underside of her left breast. For a moment there was a terrible feeling of pressure inside her, as if her guts were being shoved up into the funnel of her throat by a ruthless hand. The thing on the hood was thrown clear of the car and landed in the street. Mary

heard a brittle crunching sound, and blood splattered the pavement in a starburst pattern around its head.

She glanced back and saw the others running toward the car. Janis was leading them, her face twisted into a haglike grimace of hate and excitement.

In front of them, the short-order cook sat up with the boneless ease of a puppet. The big grin was still on his face.

“Clark, they’re coming!” Mary screamed.

He glanced briefly into the rear-view, then floored the accelerator again. The Princess leaped ahead. Mary had time to see the man sitting in the street raise one arm to shield his face, and wished that was all she’d had time to see, but there was something else, as well, something worse: beneath the shadow of his raised arm, she saw he was still grinning.

Then two tons of German engineering hit him and bore him under. There were crackling sounds that reminded her of a couple of kids rolling in a pile of autumn leaves. She clapped her hands over her ears—too late, too late—and screamed.

“Don’t bother,” Clark said. He was looking grimly into the rear-view mirror. “We couldn’t have hurt him too badly—he’s getting up again.”

“What?”

“Except for the tire-track across his shirt, he’s—” He broke off abruptly, looking at her. “Who hit you, Mary?”

“What?”

“Your mouth is bleeding. Who hit you?”

She put a finger to the corner of her mouth, looked at the red smear on it, then tasted it. “Not blood—pie,” she said, and uttered a

desperate, cracked laugh. “Get us out of here, Clark, please get us out.”

“You bet,” he said, and turned his attention back to Main Street, which was wide and—for the time being, at least—empty. Mary noticed that, guitars and amps on the town common or not, there were no power-lines on Main Street, either. She had no idea where Rock and Roll Heaven was getting its power (well ... maybe some idea), but it certainly wasn’t from Central Oregon Power and Light.

The Princess was gaining speed as all diesels seem to—not fast, but with a kind of relentless strength—and chumming a dark brown cloud of exhaust behind her. Mary caught a blurred glimpse of a department store, a bookstore, and a maternity shop called Rock and Roll Lullabye. She saw a young man with shoulder-length brown curls standing outside The Rock Em & Sock Em Billiards Emporium, his arms folded across his chest and one snakeskin boot propped against the whitewashed brick. His face was handsome in a heavy, pouting way, and Mary recognized him at once.

So did Clark. “That was the Lizard King himself,” he said in a dry, emotionless voice.

“I know. I saw.”

Yes—she saw, but the images were like dry paper bursting into flame under a relentless, focused light which seemed to fill her mind; it was as if the intensity of her horror had turned her into a human magnifying glass, and she understood that if they got out of here, no memories of this Peculiar Little Town would remain; the memories would be just ashes blowing in the wind. That was the way these things worked, of course. A person could not retain such hellish images, such hellish experiences, and remain rational, so the mind turned into a blast-furnace, crisping each one as soon as it was created.

That must be why most people can still afford the luxury of disbelieving in ghosts and haunted houses, she thought. Because

when the mind is turned toward the terrifying and the irrational, like someone who is turned and made to look upon the face of Medusa, it forgets. It has to forget. And God! Except for getting out of this hell, forgetting is the only thing in the world I want.

She saw a little cluster of people standing on the tarmac of a Cities Service station at an intersection near the far end of town. They wore frightened, ordinary faces above faded ordinary clothes. A man in an oil-stained mechanic's coverall. A woman in a nurse's uniform—white once, maybe, now a dingy gray. An older couple, she in orthopedic shoes and he with a hearing aid in one ear, clinging to each other like children who fear they are lost in the deep dark woods. Mary understood without needing to be told that these people, along with the younger waitress, were the real residents of Rock and Roll Heaven, Oregon. They had been caught the way a pitcher-plant catches bugs.

“Please get us out of here, Clark,” she said. “Please.” Something tried to come up her throat and she clapped her hands over her mouth, sure she was going to upchuck. Instead of vomiting, she uttered a loud belch that burned her throat like fire and tasted of the pie she had eaten in the Rock-a-Boogie.

“We'll be okay. Take it easy, Mary.”

The road—she could no longer think of it as Main Street now that she could see the end of town just ahead—ran past the Rock and Roll Heaven Municipal Fire Department on the left and the school on the right (even in her heightened state of terror, there seemed something existential about a citadel of learning called the Rock and Roll Grammar School). Three children stood in the playground adjacent to the school, watching with apathetic eyes as the Princess tore past. Up ahead, the road curved around an outcrop with a guitar-shaped sign planted on it: YOU ARE NOW LEAVING ROCK AND ROLL HEAVEN * GOODNIGHT SWEETHEART GOODNIGHT.

Clark swung the Princess into the curve without slowing, and on the far side, there was a bus blocking the road.

It was no ordinary yellow schoolbus like the one they had seen in the distance as they entered town; this one raved and rioted with a hundred colors and a thousand psychedelic swoops, an oversized souvenir of the Summer of Love. The windows flocked with butterfly decals and peace signs, and even as Clark screamed and brought his feet down on the brake, she read, with a fatalistic lack of surprise, the words floating up the painted side like overfilled dirigibles: THE MAGIC BUS.

Clark gave it his best, but wasn't quite able to stop. The Princess slid into The Magic Bus at ten or fifteen miles an hour, her wheels locked and her tires smoking fiercely. There was a hollow bang as the Mercedes hit the tie-dyed bus amidships. Mary was thrown forward against her safety harness again. The bus rocked on its springs a little, but that was all.

"Back up and go around!" she screamed at Clark, but she was nearly overwhelmed by a suffocating intuition that it was all over. The Princess's engine sounded choppy, and Mary could see steam escaping from around the front of her crumpled hood; it looked like the breath of a wounded dragon. When Clark dropped the transmission lever down into reverse, the car backfired twice, shuddered like an old wet dog, and stalled.

Behind them, they could hear an approaching siren. She wondered who the town constable would turn out to be. Not John Lennon, whose life's motto had been Question Authority, and not the Lizard King, who was clearly one of the town's pool-shooting bad boys. Who? And did it really matter? Maybe, she thought, it'll turn out to be Jimi Hendrix. That sounded crazy, but she knew her rock and roll, probably better than Clark, and she remembered reading somewhere that Hendrix had been a jump-jockey in the 101st Airborne. And didn't they say that ex-service people often made the best law-enforcement officials?

You're going crazy, she told herself, then nodded. Sure she was. In a way it was a relief. "What now?" she asked Clark dully.

He opened his door, having to put his shoulder into it because it had crimped a little in the frame. “We run,” he said.

“What’s the point?”

“You saw them; do you want to be them?”

That rekindled some of her fear. She released the clasp of her seatbelt and opened her own door. Clark came around the Princess and took her hand. As they turned back toward The Magic Bus, his grip tightened painfully as he saw who was stepping off—a tall man in an open-throated white shirt, dark dungarees, and wrap-around sunglasses. His blue-black hair was combed back from his temples in a lush and impeccable duck’s ass ‘do. There was no mistaking those impossible, almost hallucinatory good looks; not even sunglasses could hide them. The full lips parted in a small, sly smile.

A blue-and-white police cruiser with ROCK AND ROLL HEAVEN P.D. written on the doors came around the curve and screeched to a stop inches from the Princess’s back bumper. The man behind the wheel was black, but he wasn’t Jimi Hendrix after all. Mary couldn’t be sure, but she thought the local law was Otis Redding.

The man in the shades and black jeans was now standing directly in front of them, his thumbs hooked into his belt-loops, his pale hands dangling like dead spiders. “How y’all t’day?” There was no mistaking that slow, slightly sardonic Memphis drawl, either. “Want to welcome you both to town. Hope you can stay with us for awhile. Town ain’t much to look at, but we’re neighborly, and we take care of our own.” He stuck out a hand on which three absurdly large rings glittered. “I’m the mayor round these parts. Name’s Elvis Presley.”

*

Dusk, of a summer night.

As they walked onto the town common, Mary was again reminded of the concerts she had attended in Elmira as a child, and she felt a

pang of nostalgia and sorrow penetrate the cocoon of shock which her mind and emotions had wrapped around her. So similar ... but so different, too. There were no children waving sparklers; the only kids present were a dozen or so huddled together as far from the bandshell as they could get, their pale faces strained and watchful. The kids she and Clark had seen in the grammar-school play-yard when they made their abortive run for the hills were among them.

And it was no quaint brass band that was going to play in fifteen minutes or half an hour, either—spread across the bandshell (which looked almost as big as the Hollywood Bowl to Mary's eyes) were the implements and accessories of what had to be the world's biggest—and loudest, judging from the amps—rock-and-roll band, an apocalyptic bebop combination that would, at full throttle, probably be loud enough to shatter window-glass five miles away. She counted a dozen guitars on stands and stopped counting. There were four full drum-sets ... bongos ... congas ... a rhythm section ... circular stage pop-ups where the backup singers would stand ... a steel grove of mikes.

The common itself was filled with folding chairs—Mary estimated somewhere between seven hundred and a thousand—but she thought there were no more than fifty spectators actually present, and probably less. She saw the mechanic, now dressed in clean jeans and a Perma-Pressed shirt; the pale, once-pretty woman sitting next to him was probably his wife. The nurse was sitting all by herself in the middle of a long empty row. Her face was turned upward and she was watching the first few glimmering stars come out. Mary looked away from this one; she felt if she looked at that sad, longing face too deeply, her heart would break.

Of the town's more famous residents there was currently no sign. Of course not; their day-jobs were behind them now and they would all be backstage, duding up and checking their cues. Getting ready for tonight's rilly big shew.

Clark paused about a quarter of the way down the grassy central aisle. A puff of evening breeze tousled his hair, and Mary thought it

looked as dry as straw. There were lines carved into Clark's forehead and around his mouth that she had never seen before. He looked as if he had lost thirty pounds since lunch in Oakridge. The Testosterone Kid was nowhere in evidence, and Mary had an idea he might be gone for good. She found she didn't care much, one way or the other.

And by the way, sugarpie-honeybunch, how do you think you look?

"Where do you want to sit?" Clark asked. His voice was thin and uninterested—the voice of a man who still believes he might be dreaming.

Mary spotted the waitress with the cold sore. She was on the aisle about four rows down, now dressed in a light-gray blouse and cotton skirt. She had thrown a sweater over her shoulders. "There," Mary said, "beside her." Clark led her in that direction without question or objection.

The waitress looked around at Mary and Clark, and Mary saw that her eyes had at least settled down tonight, which was something of a relief. A moment later she realized why: the girl was cataclysmically stoned. Mary looked down, not wanting to meet that dusty stare any longer, and when she did, she saw that the waitress's left hand was wrapped in a bulky white bandage. Mary realized with horror that at least one finger and perhaps two were gone from the girl's hand.

"Hi," the girl said. "I'm Sissy Thomas."

"Hello, Sissy. I'm Mary Willingham. This is my husband, Clark."

"Pleased to meet you," the waitress said.

"Your hand ..." Mary trailed off, not sure how to go on.

"Frankie did it." Sissy spoke with the deep indifference of one who is riding the pink horse down Dream Street. "Frankie Lymon. Everyone says he was the sweetest guy you'd ever want to meet when he was

alive and he only turned mean when he came here. He was one of the first ones ... the pioneers, I guess you'd say. I don't know about that. If he was sweet before, I mean. I only know he's meaner than cat-dirt now. I don't care. I only wish you'd gotten away, and I'd do it again. Besides, Crystal takes care of me."

Sissy nodded toward the nurse, who had stopped looking at the stars and was now looking at them.

"Crystal takes real good care. She'll fix you up, if you want—you don't need to lose no fingers to want to get stoned in this town."

"My wife and I don't use drugs," Clark said, sounding pompous.

Sissy regarded him without speaking for a few moments. Then she said, "You will."

"When does the show start?" Mary could feel the cocoon of shock starting to dissolve, and she didn't much care for the feeling.

"Soon."

"How long do they go on?"

Sissy didn't answer for nearly a minute, and Mary was getting ready to restate the question, thinking the girl either hadn't heard or hadn't understood, when she said: "A long time. I mean, the show will be over by midnight, they always are, it's a town ordinance, but still ... they go on a long time. Because time is different here. It might be ... oh, I dunno ... I think when the guys really get cooking, they sometimes go on for a year or more."

A cold gray frost began creeping up Mary's arms and back. She tried to imagine having to sit through a year-long rock show and couldn't do it. This is a dream and you'll wake up, she told herself, but that thought, persuasive enough as they stood listening to Elvis Presley in the sunlight by The Magic Bus, was now losing a lot of its force and believability.

“Drivin out this road here wouldn’t do you no good nohow,” Elvis had told them. “It don’t go noplac but Umpqua Swamp. No roads in there, just a lot of polk salad. And quicksand.” He had paused then, the lenses of his shades glittering like dark furnaces in the late-afternoon sun. “And other things.”

“Bears,” the policeman who might be Otis Redding had volunteered from behind them.

“Bears, yep,” Elvis agreed, and then his lips had curled up in the too-knowing smile Mary remembered so well from TV and the movies. “And other things.”

Mary had begun: “If we stay for the show ...”

Elvis nodded emphatically. “The show! Oh yeah, you gotta stay for the show! We really rock. You just see if we don’t.”

“Ain’t nothin but a stone fact,” the policeman had added.

“If we stay for the show ... can we go when it’s over?”

Elvis and the cop had exchanged a glance that had looked serious but felt like a smile. “Well, you know, ma’am,” the erstwhile King of Rock and Roll said at last, “we’re real far out in the boonies here, and attractin an audience is kinda slow work... although once they hear us, ever body stays around for more ... and we was kinda hopin you’d stick around yourselves for awhile. See a few shows and kind of enjoy our hospitality.” He had pushed his sunglasses up on his forehead then, for a moment revealing wrinkled, empty eyesockets. Then they were Elvis’s dark-blue eyes again, regarding them with somber interest.

“I think,” he had said, “you might even decide you want to settle down.”

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There were more stars in the sky now; it was almost full dark. Over the stage, orange spots were coming on, soft as night-blooming flowers, illuminating the mike-stands one by one.

“They gave us jobs,” Clark said dully. “He gave us jobs. The mayor. The one who looks like Elvis Presley.”

“He is Elvis,” Sissy Thomas said, but Clark just went on staring at the stage. He was not prepared to even think this yet, let alone hear it.

“Mary is supposed to go to work in the Be-Bop Beauty Bar tomorrow,” he went on. “She has an English degree and a teacher’s certificate, but she’s supposed to spend the next God-knows-how-long as a shampoo girl. Then he looked at me and he says, ‘Whuh bou-chew, sir? Whuh-chore speciality?’ ” Clark spoke in a vicious imitation of the mayor’s Memphis drawl, and at last a genuine expression began to show in the waitress’s stoned eyes. Mary thought it was fear.

“You hadn’t ought to make fun,” she said. “Makin fun can get you in trouble around here ... and you don’t want to get in trouble.” She slowly raised her bandage-wrapped hand. Clark stared at it, wet lips quivering, until she lowered it into her lap again, and when he spoke again, it was in a lower voice.

“I told him I was a computer software expert, and he said there weren’t any computers in town... although they ‘sho would admiah to git a Ticketron outlet or two.’ Then the other guy laughed and said there was a stockboy’s job open down at the superette, and—”

A bright white spotlight speared the forestage. A short man in a sportcoat so wild it made Buddy Holly’s look tame strode into its beam, his hands raised as if to stifle a huge comber of applause.

“Who’s that?” Mary asked Sissy.

“Some oldtime disc jockey who used to run a lot of these shows. His name is Alan Tweed or Alan Breed or something like that. We hardly

ever see him except here. I think he drinks. He sleeps all day—that I do know.”

And as soon as the name was out of the girl’s mouth, the cocoon which had sheltered Mary disappeared and the last of her disbelief melted away. She and Clark had stumbled into Rock and Roll Heaven, but it was actually Rock and Roll Hell. This had not happened because they were evil people; it had not happened because the old gods were punishing them; it had happened because they had gotten lost in the woods, that was all, and getting lost in the woods was a thing that could happen to anybody.

“Got a great show for ya tonight!” the emcee was shouting enthusiastically into his mike. “We got the Big Bopper... Freddie Mercury, just in from London-Town ... Jim Croce ... my main man Johnny Ace ...”

Mary leaned toward the girl. “How long have you been here, Sissy?”

“I don’t know. It’s easy to lose track of time. Six years at least. Or maybe it’s eight. Or nine.”

“... Keith Moon of The Who ... Brian Jones of the Stones ... that cute li’l Florence Ballard of the Supremes ... Mary Wells ...”

Articulating her worst fear, Mary asked: “How old were you when you came?”

“Cass Elliot ... Janis Joplin ...”

“Twenty-three.”

“King Curtis ... Johnny Burnette ...”

“And how old are you now?”

“Slim Harpo ... Bob ‘Bear’ Hite ... Stevie Ray Vaughan ...”

“Twenty-three,” Sissy told her, and on stage Alan Freed went on screaming names at the almost empty town common as the stars came out, first a hundred stars, then a thousand, then too many to count, stars that had come out of the blue and now glittered everywhere in the black; he tolled the names of the drug o.d.’s, the alcohol o.d.’s, the plane crash victims and the shooting victims, the ones who had been found in alleys and the ones who had been found in swimming pools and the ones who had been found in roadside ditches with steering columns poking out of their chests and most of their heads torn off their shoulders; he chanted the names of the young ones and the old ones, but mostly they were the young ones, and as he spoke the names of Ronnie Van Zant and Steve Gaines, she heard the words of one of their songs tolling in her mind, the one that went Oooh, that smell, can’t you smell that smell, and yes, you bet she certainly could smell that smell; even out here, in the clear Oregon air, she could smell it and when she took Clark’s hand it was like taking the hand of a corpse.

“Awwwwwwlllll RlllllYyyyyGHT!” Alan Freed was screaming. Behind him, in the darkness, scores of shadows were trooping onto the stage, lit upon their way by roadies with Penlites. “Are you ready to PAAAARTY?”

No answer from the scattered spectators on the common, but Freed was waving his hands and laughing as if some vast audience were going crazy with assent. There was just enough light left in the sky for Mary to see the old man reach up and turn off his hearing aid.

“Are you ready to BOOOOOGIE?”

This time he was answered—by a demonic shriek of saxophones from the shadows behind him.

“Then let’s go ... BECAUSE ROCK AND ROLL WILL NEVER DIE!”

As the show-lights came up and the band swung into the first song of that night’s long, long concert—“I’ll Be Doggone,” with Marvin Gaye

doing the vocal—Mary thought: That's what I'm afraid of. That's exactly what I'm afraid of.