Stephen King

SIX STORIES

SIX STORIES

Stephen King

Autopsy Room 4

Blind Willie

L.T.‘s Theory of Pets

Lunch at the Gotham Cafe

Luckey Quarter

The Man in the Black Suit

Published in a signed, limited edition of 1100 copies.

200 numbered in Roman numbers and 900 numbered in Arabic numbers.

This special limited edition is signed by author Stephen King.

This edition is limited to 1,100 copies.

This is copy IV.

AUTOPSY ROOM FOUR

Stephen King

IT'S SO DARK THAT FOR A WHILE - 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 rubbersmelling 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 ago, 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 baby-sitter 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 woodchucks 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 blacknessHey, 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 that 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

that 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 habitueòf 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 body bag.

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 twentyfive; he looks like one of those beach beefcakes on Baywatch or Melrose Place. Marginally smarter, though. He's got a lot of 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 green 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' gooood! This'z an honor! Sing for us, big boy! Sing your deadassoff!"

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 Bobcat Goldthwait 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-WHOM-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 ~ 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 comingout-of-the-novocaine way-and begins 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 wrrr-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. sign the log.”

Mike: “Come on, Rusty. Let’s go

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 I 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 whit athletic sock. A red-hot darning needle of pain, perfectly concentrated at first, then spreading …

… then darkness. Until the gurney, zipped up snug inside a body bag and listening to Mike (“Which one did they say?’) and Rusty (“Four, I think. Yeah, four.”)

I want to think it that’s only because was some kind of snake, but maybe 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 of 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 Gigh saw.

They use it to cut of 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 copilot,” 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

” tent-show 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 ribcage pops apart like a Couple of barrels that have been lashed together with twine. Then on up with those scissors that look like nothing so much as the poultry shears supermarket butchers usesnip-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.”

Snick-snick. 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 goosebumps, but of course, nothing happens; my flesh remains smooth.

“Remernber ,”, 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 in or movement, or they’re really going 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 Cotton 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.

Nnnnn-

"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 now 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 fuzz-tone guitar and Mick Jagger’s voice bashing off the walls““Awww, no it’s only rock and roll, but I LIYYYKE IT…”

“Turn it down!” Dr. Cisco yells, comically 0vershouting, 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 ribcage 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 undershorts.

"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. Probbably 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 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 held 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 Ciscoalias 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 says. “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 it 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, hanging down with the raised metal lip digging into the biceps. 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 down 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 that 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.

Mode of transmittal was Maine 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' 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 CO, cartridge for those intimate moments.

He finally plucks the thermometer out-oh dear God, the relief-and on the wall I can see his shadow holding it up.

“Ninety-four point two,” he says. “Gee, that ain’t too shabby. This guy could almost be alive, Katie … Dr. Arlen.”

“Remember where they found him,” she says from across the room. The record they are listening to is between selections, and for a moment I can hear her lecturely tones clearly. “Golf course?

Summer afternoon? If you’d gotten a reading of ninety-.eight point six, I would not be surprised.”

“Right, right,” he says, 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 says, “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 is 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 snakebites 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 tie. 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.

.II am commencing the autopsy at five forty-nine P.M.,” he says,

“on Saturday, August twenty, nineteen ninety-four.”

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 foot pedal which pauses the recording tape. "Man, this guy really could still be alive!"

I hum frantically, and at that 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, ME.),

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 novocaine. 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 mailorder 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 of-I feel her rubber-gloved hand slide around my penis as if she means 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 twentyfive 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 golfbag 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 Cotton, 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 recover 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. In the first three months after my misadventure, I think that 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. 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 mid-century, according to consulting zoologists.

Kerr failed to show up for work at Derry Community Bank on August 22, 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 that has reportedly caused cases of full-body paralysis in humans. This is the Peruvian Boomslang, a nasty viper that has supposedly been extinct since the I920s. 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 I994 through February of I995. We broke it off by mutual consent, due to sexual incompatibility.

I was impotent unless she was wearing rubber gloves.

BLIND WILLIE

Stephen King

6:15 A.M.

He wakes to music, always to music; the shrill beep-beep-beep of the clock-radio's alarm is too much for his mind to cope with during those first blurry moments of the day. It sounds like a dump truck backing up. The radio is bad enough at this time of year, though; the easy-listening station he keeps the clock-radio tuned to is wall-to-wall Christmas carols, and this morning he wakes up to one of the two or three on his Most Hated List, something full of breathy voices and phony wonder. The Hare Krishna Chorale or the Andy Williams Singers or some such. Do you hear what I hear, the breathy voices sing as he sits up in bed, blinking groggily, hair sticking out in every direction. Do you see what I see, they sing as he swings his legs out, grimaces his way across the cold floor to the radio, and bangs the button that turns it off. When he turns around, Sharon has assumed her customary defensive posture - pillow folded over her head, nothing showing but he creamy curve of one shoulder, a lacy nightgown strap, and a fluff of blonde hair.

He goes into the bathroom, closes the door, slips off the pajama bottoms he sleeps in, drops them into the hamper, clicks on his electric razor. As he runs it over his face he thinks, Why not run through the rest of the sensory catalogue while you're at it, boys? Do you smell what I smell, do you taste what I taste, do you feel what I feel. I mean, hey, go for it.

'Humbug,' he says as he turns on the shower. 'All humbug.'

Twenty minutes later, while he's dressing (the dark grey suit from Paul Stuart this morning, plus his favorite Sulka tie), Sharon wakes up a little. Not enough for him to fully understand what she's telling him, though.

‘Come again?’ he asks. ‘I got eggnog, but the rest was just ugga-wugga.’

‘I asked if you’d pick up two quarts of eggnog on your way home,’ she says. ‘We’ve got the Allens and the Dubrays coming over tonight, remember?

‘Christmas,’ he says, checking his hair carefully in the mirror. He no longer looks like the glaring, bewildered man who sits up in bed to the sound of music five mornings a week - sometimes six. Now he looks like all the other people who will ride into New York with him on the 7:40, and that is just what he wants.

‘What about Christmas?’ she asks with a sleepy smile. ‘Humbug, right?

‘Right,’ he agrees. ‘All humbug.’

‘If you remember, get some cinnamon too - ‘

‘Okay.’

‘ - but if you forget the eggnog, I’ll slaughter you, Bill.’

‘I’ll remember.’

‘I know. You’re very dependable. Look nice too.’

‘Thanks.’

She flops back down, then props herself up on one elbow as he makes a final minute adjustment to the tie, which is a dark blue. He has never worn a red tie in his life, and hopes he can go to his grave untouched by that particular virus. ‘I got the tinsel you wanted,’ she says.

‘Mmmmm?’

‘the tinsel,’ she says. ‘It’s on the kitchen table.’

‘Oh.’ Now he remembers. ‘Thanks.’

‘Sure.’ She’s back down and already starting to drift off again. He doesn’t envy the fact that she can stay in bed until nine - hell, until eleven, if she wants - but he envies that ability of hers to wake up, talk, then drift off again. She says something else, but now she’s back to ugga-wugga. He knows what it is just the same, though: have a good day hon.

‘Thanks,’ he says, kissing her cheek. ‘I will.’

‘Look very nice,’ she mumbles again, although her eyes are closed. ‘Love you, Bill.’

‘Love you too,’ he says and goes out.

His briefcase - Mark Cross, not quite top of the line but almost - is standing in the front hall, by the coat tree where his topcoat (from Barney’s on Madison) hangs. He grabs the case on his way by and takes it into the kitchen. The coffee is all made - God bless solid state electronics and microchips - and he pours himself a cup. He opens the briefcase, which is entirely empty, and picks up the ball of tinsel on the kitchen table. He holds it up for a moment, watching the way it sparkles under the light of the kitchen fluorescents, then puts it in his briefcase.

‘Do you hear what I hear,’ he says to no one at all and snaps the briefcase shut.

8:15 A.M.

Outside the dirty window to his left, he can see the city drawing closer. The grime on the glass makes it look like some filthy, gargantuan ruin - Atlantis, maybe, just heaved back to the surface. It’s a grey day with a load of snow caught in its throat, but that doesn’t worry him much; it is just eight days until Christmas, and business will be good.

The car reeks of morning coffee, morning deodorant, morning aftershave, morning perfume, and morning stomachs. There is a tie in almost every seat - even the women wear them these days it seems. The faces have that puffy eight o'clock look, the eyes both introspective and defenseless, the conversations halfhearted. This is the hour at which even people who don't drink look hung over. Most people just stick to their newspapers. He himself has the Times crossword open in front of him, and although he's filled in a few squares, it's mostly a defensive measure. He doesn't like to talk to people on the train, doesn't like loose conversation of any sort, and the last thing in the world he wants is a commuter buddy. When he starts seeing the same faces in any given car, when people start to nod to him or say 'How you doin today?' as they go to their seats, he changes cars. It's not that hard to remain unknown, just another commuter, one who is conspicuous only in his adamant refusal to wear a red tie. Not that hard at all.

'All ready for Christmas?' the man in the aisle seat asks him.

He looks up, almost frowning, then decides it's not a substantive remark, but only the sort of empty time-passer some people seem to feel compelled to make. The man beside him is fat and will undoubtedly stink by noon no matter how much Speed Stik he used this morning … but he's hardly even looking at his seatmate, so that's all right.

'Yes, well, you know,' he says, looking down at the briefcase between his shoes - the briefcase that contains a ball of tinsel and nothing else. 'I'm getting in the spirit, little by little.'

8:40 A.M.

He comes out of Penn Station with a thousand other topcoated commuters and commuterettes, mid-level executives for the most part, sleek gerbils who will be running full tilt on their exercise wheels by noon. He stands still for a moment, breathing deep of the cold grey air. Madison Square Garden has been tricked out with greenery and Christmas lights, and a little distance away a Santa Claus who

looks Puerto Rican is ringing a bell. He's got a pot for contributions with an easel set up beside it. HELP THE HOMELESS THIS CHRISTMAS, the sign on the easel says, and the man in the blue tie thinks, How about a little truth in advertising, Santa? How about a sign that says, HELP ME SUPPORT MY CRACK HABIT THIS CHRISTMAS? Nevertheless, he drops a couple of dollar bills into the pot as he walks past. He has a good feeling about today. He's glad Sharon remembered the tinsel - he would have forgotten, himself; he always forgets stuff like that, the grace notes.

He walks five short blocks and then comes to his building. Standing outside the door is a young black man - a youth, actually, surely no more than seventeen - wearing black jeans and a dirty red sweater with a hood. He jives from foot to foot, blowing puffs of steam out of his mouth, smiling frequently, showing a gold tooth. In one hand he holds a partly crushed Styrofoam coffee cup. There's some change in it, which he rattles constantly.

'Spare a little?' he asks the passersby as they stream toward the revolving doors. 'Spare a little, sir? Spare a little, ma'am? Just trying to get lil spot of breffus. Than you, gobless you, merry Christmas. Spare a little, sir? Quarter, maybe? Than you. Spare a little, ma'am?'

As he passes, Bill drops a nickel and two dimes into the young black man's cup.

'Thank you, sir, gobless, merry Christmas.'

'You, too,' he says.

The woman next to him frowns. 'You shouldn't encourage them,' she says.

He gives her a shrug and a small, shamefaced smile. 'It's hard for me to say no to anyone at Christmas,' he tells her.

He enters the lobby with a stream of others, stares briefly after the opinionated bitch as she heads for the newsstand, then goes to the

elevators with their old-fashioned floor dials and their art deco numbers. Here several people nod to him, and he exchanges a few words with a couple of them as they wait - it's not like the train, after all, where you can change cars. Plus, the building is an old one, only fifteen stories high, and the elevators are cranky.

'How's the wife, Bill?' a scrawny, constantly grinning man from the fifth floor asks.

'Andi? She's fine.'

'Kids?'

'Both good.' He has no kids, of course - he wants kids about as much as he wants a hiatal hernia - and his wife's name isn't Andi, but those are things the scrawny, constantly grinning man will never know.

'Bet they can't wait for the big day,' the scrawny man says, his grin widening and becoming unspeakable. Now he looks like an editorial cartoonist's conception of Famine, all big eyes and huge teeth and shiny skin.

'That's right,' he says, 'but I think Sarah's getting kind of suspicious about the guy in the red suit.' Hurry up, elevator he thinks, Jesus, hurry up and save me from these stupidities.

'Yeah, yeah, it happens,' the scrawny man says. His grin fades for a moment, as if they are discussing cancer instead of Santa. 'How old's she now?'

'Eight.'

'Boy, the time sure flies when you're having fun, doesn't it? Seems like she was just born a year or two ago.'

'You can say that again,'he says, fervently hoping the scrawny man won't say it again. At that moment one of the four elevators finally

gasps open its doors and they herd themselves inside.

Bill and the scrawny man walk a little way down the fifth floor hall together, and then the scrawny man stops in front of a set of old-fashioned double doors with the words CONSOLIDATED INSURANCE written on one frosted-glass panel and ADJUSTORS OF AMERICA on the other. From behind these doors comes the muted clickety-click of computer keyboards and the slightly louder sound of ringing phones.

‘Have a good day, Bill.’

‘You too.’

The scrawny man lets himself into his office, and for a moment Bill sees a big wreath hung on the far side of the room. Also, the windows have been decorated with the kind of snow that comes in a spray can. He shudders and thinks, God save us, every one.

9:05 A.M

His office - one of two he keeps in this building - is at the far end of the hall. The two offices up from it are dark and vacant, a situation that has held for the last six months and one he likes just fine. Printed on the frosted glass of his own office door are the words WESTERN STATES LAND ANALYSTS. There are three locks on the door: the one that was on it when he moved into the building nine years ago, plus two he has put on himself. He lets himself in, closes the door, turns the bolt, then engages the police lock.

A desk stands in the center of the room, and it is cluttered with papers, but none of them mean anything; they are simply window dressing for the cleaning service. Every so often he throws them all out and redistributes a fresh batch. In the center of the desk is a telephone on which he makes occasional random calls so that the phone company won’t register the line as totally inactive. Last year he purchased a fax, and it looks very businesslike over in its corner

by the door to the office's little second room, but it has never been used.

'Do you hear what I hear, do you smell what I smell, do you taste what I taste,' he murmurs, and crosses to the door leading to the second room. Inside are shelves stacked high with more meaningless paper, two large file cabinets (there is a Walkman on top of one, his excuse on the few occasions when someone knocks on the locked door and gets no answer), a chair, and a stepladder.

Bill takes the stepladder back to the main room and unfolds it to the left of the desk. He puts his briefcase on top of it. Then he mounts the first three steps of the ladder, reaches up (the bottom half of his coat bells out around his legs as he does), and carefully moves aside one of the suspended ceiling panels.

Above is a dark area which cannot quite be called a utility space, although a few pipes and wires do run through it. There's no dust up here, at least not in this immediate area, and no rodent droppings, either - he uses D-Con Mouseprufe once a month. He wants to keep his clothes nice as he goes back and forth, of course, but that's not really the important part. the important part is to respect your work and your field. This he learned in the Marines, and he sometimes thinks it is the most important thing he did learn there. He stayed alive, of course, but he thinks now that was probably more luck than learning. Still, a person who respects his work and his field - the place where the work is done, the tools with which it is done - has a leg up in life. No doubt about that.

Above this narrow space (a ghostly, gentle wind hoots endlessly through it, bringing a smell of dust and the groan of the elevators) is the bottom of the sixth floor, and here is a square trap door about thirty inches on a side. Bill installed it himself; he's handy with tools, which is one of the things Sharon most appreciates about him.

He flips the trap door up, letting in muted light from above, then grabs his briefcase by the handle. As he sticks his head into the space between the floors, water rushes gustily down the fat

bathroom conduit twenty or thirty feet north of his present position. An hour from now, when the people in the building start their coffee breaks, that sound will be as constant and as rhythmic as waves breaking on a beach. Bill hardly notices this or any of the other interfloor sounds; he's used to them.

He climbs carefully to the top of the stepladder, then boosts himself through into his sixth floor office, leaving Bill down on five. Up here he is Willie. This office has a workshop look, with coils and motors and vents stacked neatly on metal shelves and what looks like a filter of some kind squatting on one corner of the desk. It is an office, however; there's a computer terminal, an IN/OUT basket full of papers (also window dressing, which he periodically rotates like a farmer rotating crops), and file cabinets. On one wall is a framed Norman Rockwell print showing a family praying over Thanksgiving dinner. Next to it is a blowup of his honorable discharge from the marines, also framed; the name on the sheet is William Teale, and his decorations, including the Bronze Star, are duly noted. On another wall is a poster from the sixties. It shows the peace sign. Below it, in red, white, and blue, is this punchline: TRACK OF THE GREAT AMERICAN CHICKEN.

Willie puts Bill's briefcase on the desk, then lies down on his stomach. He pokes his head and arms into the windy, oil-smelling darkness between the floors and replaces the ceiling panel of the fifth-floor office. it's locked up tight, he doesn't expect anyone anyway (he never does; Western States Land Analysts has never had a single customer), but it's better to be safe. Always safe, never sorry.

With his fifth floor office set to rights, Willie lowers the trapdoor in this one. Up here the trap is hidden by a small rug which is Superglued to the wood, so it can go up and down without too much flopping or sliding around.

He gets to his feet, dusts off his hands, then turns to the briefcase and opens it. He takes out the ball of tinsel and puts it on top of the laser printer which stand nest to the computer terminal.

‘Good one,’ he says, thinking again that Sharon can be a real peach when she sets her mind to it … and she often does. He relatches the briefcase and then begins to undress, doing it carefully and methodically, reversing the steps he took at six-thirty, running the film backward. He strips off everything, even his undershorts and his black, knee-high socks. Naked, he hangs his topcoat, suit jacket, and shirt carefully in the closet where only one other item hangs - a bulky red thing, a little too bulky to be termed a briefcase. Willie puts his mark Cross case next to it, then places his slacks in the pants press, taking pains with the crease. The tie goes on the rack screwed to the back of the closet door, where it hangs all by itself like a long blue tongue.

He pads barefoot-naked across to one of the file cabinets. On top of it is an ashtray embossed with a pissed-off-looking eagle and the Marine motto. In it are a pair of dogtags on a chain. Willie slips the chain over his head, then slides out the bottom drawer of the cabinet stack. Inside are underclothes. Neatly folded on top are a pair of khaki boxer shorts. He slips them on. Next come white athletic socks, followed by a white cotton T-shirt - roundneck, not strappy. The shapes of his dogtags stand out against it as do his biceps and quads. They aren’t as good as they were in ‘67, under the triple canopy, but they aren’t bad. As he slides the drawer back in and opens the next, he begins to hum under his breath - not ‘Do You Hear What I Hear’ but the Doors, the one about how the day destroys the night, the night divides the day.

He slips on a plain blue chambray shirt, then a pair of fatigue pants. He rolls this middle drawer back in and opens the top one. Here there is a pair of black boots, polished to a high sheen and looking as if they might last until the trump of judgement. Maybe even longer. They aren’t standard Marine issue, not these - these are jumpboots, 101st Airborne stuff. But that’s all right. He isn’t actually trying to dress like a soldier. If he wanted to dress like a soldier, he would.

Still, there is no more reason to look sloppy than there is to allow dust to collect in the pass-through, and he’s careful about the way he

dresses. He does not tuck his pants into his boots, of course - he's headed for Fifth Avenue in December, not the Mekong in August - but he intends to look squared away. Looking god is as important to him as it is to Bill, maybe even more important. Respecting one's work an one's filed begins, after all, with respecting one's self.

The last two items are in the back of the top drawer: a tube of makeup and a jar of hair gel. He squeezes some of the makeup into the palm of his left hand, then begins applying it, working from forehead to the base of his neck. He moves with the unconcerned speed of long experience, giving himself a moderate tan. With that done, he works some of the gel into his hair and then recombs it, getting rid of the part and sweeping it straight back from his forehead. It is the last touch, the smallest touch, and perhaps the most telling touch. There is no trace of the commuter who walked out of Penn Station an hour ago; the man in the mirror mounted on the back of the door to the small storage annex looks like a washed-up mercenary. There is a kind of silent, half-humbled pride in the tanned face, something people won't look at too long. It hurts them if they do. Willie knows this is so; he has seen it. He doesn't ask why it should be so. He has made himself a life pretty much without questions, and that's the way he likes it.

'All right,' he says, closing the door to the storage room. 'Lookin good, trooper.'

He goes back to the closet for the red jacket, which is the reversible type, and the boxy case. He slips the jacket over his desk chair for the time being and puts the case on the desk. He unlatches it and swings the top up on sturdy hinges; now it looks a little like the cases the street salesmen use to display their cheap watches and costume jewelry. There are only a few items in Willie's, one of them broken down into two pieces so it will fit. He takes out a pair of gloves (he will want them today, no doubt about that), and then a sign on a length of stout cord. The cord has been knotted through holes in the cardboard at either side, so Willie can hang the sign over his neck. He closes the case again, not bothering to latch it, and puts the sign

on top of it - the desk is so cluttery, it's the only good surface he has to work on.

Humming (we chased our pleasure here, dug our treasures there), he opens the wide drawer above the kneehole, paws past the pencils and Chapsticks and paper clips and memo pads, and finally finds his stapler. He then unrolls the ball of tinsel, places it carefully around the rectangle of his sign, snips off the extra, and staples the shiny stuff firmly into place. He holds it up for a moment, first assessing the effect, then admiring it.

'Perfect!' he says. 'Wonderful! Sharon, you're a geni - '

The telephone rings and he stiffens, turning to look at it with eyes which are suddenly very small and hard and totally alert. One ring. Two. Three. On the fourth, the machine kicks in, answering in his voice - the version of it that goes with this office, anyway.

'Hi, you've reached Midtown Heating and Cooling,' Willie Teale says. 'No one can take your call right now, so leave a message at the beep.'

Bee-eep

He listens tensely, standing over his just-decorated sign with is hands balled into fists.

'Hi, this is Ed, from the Nynex Yellow Pages,' the voice from the machine says, and Willie lets out breath he hasn't known he was holding His hands begin to loosen. 'Please have your company rep call me at 555-1000 for information on how you can increase your ad space in both versions of the Yellow Pages, and at the same time save big money on your yearly bill. Thanks.'

Click

Willie looks at the answering machine a moment longer, almost as if he expects it to speak again - to threaten him, perhaps, or to accuse him of some crime - but nothing happens.

‘Squared away,’ he murmurs, putting the decorated sign back into the case. This time when he closes it, he latches it. Across the front is a bumper sticker, its message flanked by small American flags. I WAS PROUD TO SERVE, it reads. And below that: SEMPER FI.

‘Squared away, baby, you better believe it.’

He leaves the office, closing the door with MIDTOWN HEATING AND COOLING printed on the frosted-glass panel behind him, and turning all three of the locks.

9:40 A.M.

Halfway down the hall, he sees Ralph Williamson, one of the tubby accountants from Garowicz Financial Planning (all the accountants at Garowicz are tubby, from what Willie has been able to observe). There’s a key chained to an old wooden paddle in one of Ralph’s pink hands, and from this Willie deduces that he is looking at an accountant in need of a wee. Key on a paddle, just like in grade school, he thinks, and you know what? That’s probably a comfort to him.

‘Hey, Ralphie, what’s doin?’

Ralph turns, sees Willie, brightens. ‘Hey, hi, merry Christmas!’ Willie grins at the look in Ralph’s eyes. Tubby little fucker worships him, and why not? Just why the fuck not? If I were Ralph, I’d worship me too. Last of the fucking pioneers.

‘Same to you, bro.’ He holds out his hand (now gloved so he doesn’t have to worry about it not matching his face), palm up. ‘Gimme five!’

Smiling shyly, Ralph does.

‘Gimme ten!’

Ralph turns his pink, pudgy hand over and allows Willie to slap it.

‘So goddamn good I gotta do it again!’ Willie exclaims, and give Ralph five more. ‘Got your Christmas shopping done, Ralphie?’

‘Almost,’ Ralph says, grinning and jingling the bathroom key. ‘Yes, almost. How about you, Willie?’

Willie tips him a wink. ‘Oh, you know how it is, brother-man; I got two-three women, and I just let each of em buy me a little keep-sake.’

Ralph’s admiring smile suggest he does not, in fact, know how it is, but rather wishes he did. ‘Got a service call?’

‘A whole day’s worth,’ Willie says. ”Tis the season, you know.’

‘Seems like it’s always the season for you. Business must be good. You’re hardly ever in your office.’

‘That’s why God gave us answering machines, Ralphie-baby. Believe it. You better go on, now, or you’re gonna be dealin with a wet spot on your best gabardine slacks.’

Laughing (blushing a little too), Ralph heads for the men’s room.

Willie goes on down to the elevators, carrying his case in one hand and checking to make sure his glasses are still in his jacket pocket with the other. They are. The envelope is in there, too, thick and crackling with twenty-dollar bills. Fifteen of them. It’s time for a little visit from Officer Wheelock; Willie expected him yesterday. Maybe he won’t show until tomorrow, but Willie is betting on today … not that he likes it. He knows it’s the way of the world, you have to grease the wheels if you want your wagon to roll, but he still has a resentment. There are lots of days when he thinks about how pleasant it would

be to put a bullet in Jasper Wheelocks's head. Rip his tongue out as a trophy, too, maybe - he could hang it in the closet next to Bill Teale's tie.

When the elevator comes, Willie gets in with a smile.

It doesn't stop on five, but the thought of that happening no longer makes him nervous. He has ridden down to the lobby many times with people who work on the same floor as Bill Teale - including the scrawny drink of water from Consolidated insurance - and they don't recognize him. They should, he know they should, but they don't. He used to think it was the change of clothes and the makeup, then he decided it was the hair, but in his hear he knows that none of those things can account for it. Not even their droning, numb-hearted insensitivity to the world they live in can account for it. What he's doin just isn't that radical - fatigue pants, billyhop boots, and a little brown makeup don't make a disguise. No way to they make a disguise. He doesn't know exactly how to explain it, and so mostly leaves it alone. He learned this technique, as he learned so many other things, in the Nam.

The young black man is still standing outside the lobby door (he's flipped up the hood of his grungy old sweater now), and he shakes his crumpled Styrofoam cup at Willie. He sees that the dude carrying the Mr. Repairman case in one hand is smiling, and so his own smile widens.

'Spare a little?' he asks Mr. Repairman. 'What do you say, my man?'

'Get the fuck out of my way, you worthless, lazy dickhead, that's what I say,' Willie tells him, still smiling. The young man falls back a step, the Styrofaoam cup still at last, looking at Willie with shocked, wide eyes. Before he can think of anything to say, Mr. Repairman is halfway down the block and almost lost in the throngs of shoppers, his big, blocky case swinging from one gloved hand.

9:55 A.M

He goes into the Whitmore Hotel, crosses the lobby, and takes the escalator up to the mezzanine, where the public restrooms are. This is the only part of the day he ever feels nervous about, and he can't say why; certainly nothing has ever happened before, during, or after one of his hotel bathroom stops (he rotates among roughly two dozen of them in the midtown area), but he is somehow certain that if things every do turn dinky-dau on him, it will happen in a hotel shithouse. Because it's not like transforming from Bill Teale to Willie Teale; that feels clean and perfectly normal. the workday's final transformation, however - from Willie Teale to Blind Willie - has never felt that way. The last morph always feels murky and furtive, and until it's done and he's back on the street again, tapping his white cane in front of him, he feels as a snake must feel after it has shed its old skin and before the new one has grown back.

He looks around and sees the restroom is empty except for a pair of feet under the door of the second stall in a long row of them - a dozen in all. A throat clears softly. A newspaper rattles. There is the ffft sound of a polite little midtown fart.

Willie goes all the way down the line to the last stall. He puts down his case, latches the door shut, and takes off his red jacket. He turns it inside-out as he does so, reversing it. The other side is olive green. It has become an old soldier's field jacket with a single pull of the arms. Sharon, who really does have a touch of genius, bought this side of his coat in an army surplus store and tore out the lining so she could sew it easily into the red jacket. Before sewing, however, she put a staff sergeant's stripes on it, plus black strips of cloth where the name-and-unit slugs would have gone. She then washed the garment thirty or forty times. The stripes and the rest are gone now, of course, but the places where they were stand out clearly - the cloth is greener on the sleeves and the left breast, fresher in patterns any veteran of the armed services must recognize at once.

Willie hangs the coat on the hook, drops trou, sits, then picks up his case and settles it on his thighs. He opens it, takes out the two pieces of his cane, and quickly screw them together. Holding it far

down the shaft, he reaches up from his sitting position and hooks the handle over the top of his jacket. Then he relatches the case, pulls a little paper off the roll in order to create the proper business-is-finished sound effect (probably unnecessary, but always safe, never sorry), and flushes the john.

Before stepping out of the stall he takes his glasses from the jacket pocket which also holds the payoff envelope. They're big wraparounds, retro shades he associates with lava lamps and outlaw biker movies starring Peter Fonda. They're good for business, though, partly because they somehow say veteran to people, and partly because no one can peek in at his eyes, even from the sides.

Willie Teale stays behind in the mezzanine restroom of the Whitmore just as Bill Teals stays behind in the fifty-floor office of Western States Land Analysts. The man who comes out - a man wearing an old fatigue jacket, shades, and tapping a white cane lightly before him - is Blind Willie, a Fifth avenue fixture since Reagan's first term.

As he crosses the smaller upstairs lobby toward the stairs) unaccompanied blind men never use escalators), he sees a woman in a red blazer coming toward him. With the heavily tinted lenses between them, she looks like some sort of exotic fish swimming in muddy waters. And of course it is not just the glasses; he is Blind Willie now, and by two this afternoon he really will be blind, just as he was blind when he and Bernard Hogan, his best friend, were medivacked out of the DMZ back in '67. Only then he had been damned near deaf too. I'm blind, he kept telling the guy who was kneeling between him and Bernard. He could hear himself talking, but faintly, as if his mind had come loose from his head and blown like a balloon into another room while his stupid mouth just went on quacking. I'm blind, oh Christ, kid, the whole world blew up in our fucking faces and now I'm blind. The kid had cheek. You look okay around the eyes to me, he said. If you're lucky, maybe it's just concussion blindness. And that was what it turned out to be, although it hadn't worn off for nearly a week (well, three days, but he'd never let on until he was back in the States). Bernard hadn't

been so lucky. Bernard had died, and so far as Willie knows, that doesn't wear off.

'Can I help you, sir?' the woman in the red blazer asks him.

'No, ma'am,' Blind Willie says. The ceaselessly moving cane stops tapping floor and quests over emptiness. It pendulums back and forth, tapping the sides of the staircase. Blind Willie nods, then moves carefully but confidently forward until he can touch the railing with the hand which holds the bulky case. He switches the case to his cane-hand so he can grasp the railing, then turns toward the woman. He's careful not to smile directly at her but a little to her left. 'No, thank you - I'm fine.'

He starts downstairs, tapping ahead of him as he goes, big case held easily in spite of the cane - it's light, almost empty. Later, of course, it will be a different story.

10:10 A.M.

Fifth Avenue is dressed up and decked out for the holiday season - glitter and finery he can only see dimly. Streetlamps wear garlands of holly. Trump Tower has become a garish Christmas package, complete with gigantic red bow. A wreath which must be forty feet across graces the staid grey facade of Bonwit Teller. Lights twinkle in show windows. In the Warner Brothers store, the Tasmanian Devil which usually sits astride the Harley-Davidson has been temporarily replaced by a Santa Claus in a black leather jacket. Bells jingle. Somewhere nearby, carolers are singing 'Silent Night,' not exactly Blind Willie's favorite tune, but a good deal better than 'Do You Hear What I Hear.'

He stops where he always stops, in front of St. Patrick's across the street from Saks, allowing the package-laden shoppers to flood past in front of him. His movements now are simple and dignified. His discomfort in the men's room - that feeling of gawky and undignified nakedness about to be exposed - has passed. Now he feels like a

man in the heart of some ritual, a private mass for both the living and the dead.

He squats, unlatches the case, and turns it so those approaching from uptown will be able to read the sticker on the top. He takes out the sign with is brave skirting of tinsel, and ducks under the string. The sign comes to rest against the front of his field jacket.

S/SGT WILLIAM J. TEALE, USMC RET

SERVED DMZ, 1966-1967

LOST MY SIGHT CON THIEN, 1967

ROBBED OF BENEFITS BY A GRATEFUL GOVERNMENT, 1979

LOST HOME, 1985

ASHAMED TO BEG BUT HAVE A SON IN SCHOOL

THINK WELL OF ME IF YOU CAN

He raises his head so that the white light of this cold, almost-ready-to-snow day slides across the blind bulbs of his dark glasses. Now the work begins, and it is harder work than anyone will ever know. There is a way to stand, not quite the military posture which is called parade rest, but close to it. The head must stay up, looking both at and through the people who pass back and forth in their thousands and tens of thousands. The hands must hang straight down in their black gloves, never fiddling with the sign or with the fabric of his pants or with each other. The feeling he projects must continue to be that sense of hurt and humbled pride. There must be no cringing, no sense of shame or shaming, and most of all no taint of insanity. He never speaks unless spoken to, and only then when he is spoken to in kindness. He does not respond to people who ask him angrily why he doesn’t get a real job, or ask him what he means about being robbed of his benefits, or accuse him of faking, or what to know what kind of son allows his father to put him through school by begging on

a street corner. He remembers breaking this ironclad rule only once, on a sweltering summer afternoon in 1990. What school does your son go to? a woman asked him angrily. He doesn't know what she looked like, by then it was almost four and he had been as blind as a bat for thee hours, but he had felt anger exploding out of her in all directions, like bedbugs exiting an old mattress. Tell me which one, I want to mail him a dog turd. Don't bother, he replied, turning toward the sound of her voice. If you've got a dog turd you want to mail somewhere send it to LBJ. Federal express must deliver to hell, they deliver everyplace else.

'God bless you, man,' a guy in a cashmere overcoat says, and his voice trembles with surprising emotion. Except Blind Willie is not surprised. He's heard it all, he reckons, and if he hasn't, he soon will. The guy in the cashmere coat drops a bill into the open case. A five. The workday has begun.

10:45 A.M.

So far, so good. He lays his cane down carefully behind the case, drops to one knee, and sweeps a hand back and forth through the bills, although he can still see them pretty well. He picks them up - there's four or five hundred dollars in all, which puts him on the way to a three-thousand-dollar day, not great for this time of year, but not bad, either - then rolls them up and slips a rubber band around them. He then pushes a button on the inside of the case, and the false bottom drops down on springs, dumping the load of change all the way to the bottom. He adds the roll of bills, making no attempt to hide what he's doing, but feeling no qualms about it either; in all the years he has been doing this his case has never been stolen. God help the asshole who ever tries.

He lets go of the button, allowing the false bottom to snap back into place, and stands up. A hand immediately presses into the small of his back.

'Merry Christmas, Willie,' the owner of the hand says. Blind Willie recognizes him by the smell of his cologne.

‘Merry Christmas, Officer Wheelock,’ Willie responds. His head remains tilted upward in a faintly questioning posture; his hands hang at his sides; his feet in their brightly polished jumpboots remain apart in a stance not quite wide enough to be parade rest but nowhere near tight enough to pass as attention. ‘How are you today, sir?’

‘In the pink, motherfucker,’ Wheelock says. ‘You know me, always in the pink.’

Here comes a man in a topcoat hanging open over a bright red ski sweater. His hair is short, black on top, gray on the sides. His face has got a stern, carved look Blind Willie recognizes at once. He’s got a couple of handle-top bags - one from Saks, one from Bally - in his hands. He stops and reads the sign.

‘Con Thien?’ he asks suddenly, speaking not as a man does when naming a place but as one does when recognizing an old acquaintance on a busy street.

‘Yes, sir,’ Blind Willie says.

‘Who was your CO?’

‘Lieutenant Bob Grissum - with a ‘u,’ not an ‘o’ - and above him, Colonel Andrew Shelf, sir.’

‘I heard of Shelf,’ says the man in the open coat. His face suddenly looks different. As he walked toward the man on the corner, it looked as if it belonged on Fifth Avenue. Now it doesn’t. ‘Never met him, though.’

Blind Willie says nothing. He can smell Wheelocks’ cologne, though, stronger than ever, and the man is practically panting in his ear, sounding like a horny kid at the end of a hot date. Wheelock has never bought his act, and although Blind Willie pays for the privilege of being left alone on this corner, and quite handsomely by going rates, he knows that part of Wheelock is still cop enough to hope

he'll fuck up. Part of Wheelock is actively rooting for that. But what the Wheelocks of the world never understand is that what looks fake isn't always fake. Sometimes the issues are a little more complicated than they look at first glance. That was something else the Nam had to teach him, back in the years before it became a political joke and a crutch for hack filmwriters.

'Sixty-seven was a hard year,' the gray-haired man says. He speaks in a slow, heavy voice. 'I was at Loc Ninh when the regulars tried to overrun the place. Up by the 'Bodian border. Do you remember Loc Ninh?'

'Ah, yes, sir,' Blind Willie says. 'I lost two friends on Tory Hill.'

'Tory Hill,' the man in the open coat says, and all at once he looks a thousand years old, the bright red ski sweater an obscenity, like something hung on a museum mummy by vandals who believe they are exhibiting a sense of humor. His eyes are off over a hundred horizons. Then they come back here, to this street where a nearby carillion is playing the one that goes I hear those sleighbells jingling, ring-ting tingling too. He sets his bags down between his expensive shoes and takes a pigskin wallet out from an inner pocket. He opens it, riffles through a neat thickness of bills.

'Son all right, Teale?' he asks. 'Making good grades?'

'Yes sir.'

'How old?'

'Twenty one, sir.'

'God willing, he'll never know what it's like to see his friends die and then get spit on in an airport concourse,' the man in the open topcoat says. He takes a bill out of his wallet. Blind Willie feels as well as hears Wheelock's little gasp and hardly has to look at the bill to know it is a hundred.

‘Yes, sir, God willing, sir.’

The man in the topcoat touches Willie’s hand with the bill, looks surprised when the gloved hand pulls back, as if it were bare and had been touched by something hot.

‘Put it in my case, sire, if you would,’ Blind Willie says.

The man in the topcoat looks at him for a moment, eyebrows raised, frowning slightly, then seems to understand. He stoops, puts the bill in the case, then reaches into his front pocket and brings out a small handful of change. This he scatters across the face of old Ben Franklin, in order to hold the bill down. Then he stands up. His eyes are wet and bloodshot.

‘Do you any good to give you my card?’ he asks Blind Willie. ‘I can put you in touch with several veterans’ organizations.’

‘Thank you, sir, I’m sure you could, but I must respectfully decline.’

‘Tried most of them?’

‘Tried some, yes sir.’

‘Where’d you V.A.?’

‘San Francisco, sir.’ He hesitates, then adds, ‘The Pussy Palace, sir.’

The man in the topcoat laughs heartily at this, and when his face crinkles, the tears which have been standing in his eyes run down his weathered cheeks. ‘Pussy Palace! he cries. ‘I haven’t heard that in fifteen years! Christ! A bedpan in every bed, and a naked nurse to hold it in place, right? Except for the lovebeads, which they left on.’

‘Yes, sir, that about covers it, sir.’

‘Or uncovers it. Merry Christmas, soldier.’ The man in the topcoat ticks off a little one-finger salute.

‘Merry Christmas to you, sir.’

The man in the topcoat picks up his bags again and walks off. He doesn’t look back. Blind Willie would not have seen him do so if he had; his vision is now down to ghosts and shadows.

‘That was beautiful,’ Wheelock murmurs. The feeling of Wheellocks freshly used air puffing into the cup of his ear is hateful to Blind Willie - gruesome, in fact - but he will not give the man the pleasure of moving his head so much as an inch. ‘The old fuck was actually crying. As I’m sure you saw. But can talk the talk, Willie, I’ll give you that much.’

Willie said nothing.

‘Some V.A. hospital called the Pussy Palace, huh?’ Wheelock asks. ‘Sounds like my kind of place. Where’d you read about it, Soldier of Fortune?’

The shadow of a woman, a dark shape in a darkening day, bends over the open case and drops something in. A gloved hand touches Willies glove hand and squeezes briefly. ‘God bless you.’ she says.

‘Thank you, ma’am.’

The shadow moves off. The little puffs of breath in Blind Willie’s ear do not.

‘You got something for me, pal?’ Wheelock asks.

Blind Willie reaches into his jacket pocket. He brings out the envelope and holds it out, jabbing the chilly, unseen air with it. It is snatched from his fingers as soon as Wheelock can track it down and get hold of it.

‘You asshole!’ There’s a touch of panic as well as anger in the cop’s voice. ‘How many times have I told you, palm it, palm it!’

Blind Willie says a lot more nothing - he is giving a sermon of silence this morning.

‘How much?’ Wheelock asks after a moment.

‘Three hundred.’ Blind Willie says. ‘Three hundred dollars, Officer Wheelock.’

This is greeted by a little thinking silence, but he takes a step back from Blind Willie, and the puffs of breath in his ear diffuse a little. Blind Willie is grateful for small favors.

‘That’s okay,’ Wheelock says at last. ‘This time. But a new year’s coming, pal, and your friend Jasper the Police-Smurf has a piece of land in upstate New York that he wants to build a little cabańa on. You understand? The price of poker is going up.’

Blind Willie says nothing, but he is listening very, very carefully now. If this were all, all would be well. But Wheeelock’s voice suggests it isn’t all.

‘Actually, the cabańa isn’t the important part,’ Wheelock goes on, confirming Blind Willie’s assessment of the situation. ‘The important thing is I need a little better compensation if I have to deal with a lowlife fuck like you.’ Genuine anger is creeping into his voice. ‘How you can do this every day - even at Christmas - man, I don’t know. People who beg, that’s one thing, but a guy like you … you’re no more blind than I am.’

Oh, you’re lots blinder than me, Blind Willie thinks, but still he holds his peace.

‘And you’re doing okay, aren’t you? Probably not as good as that PTL fuck they busted and sent to the callabozo, but you must clear what? A grand a day, this time a year? Two grand?’

He is way low, but Blind Willie does not, of course, correct him. The miscalculation is actually music to his ears. It means that his silent

partner is not watching him too closely or frequently … not yet, anyway. But he doesn't like the anger in Wheelock's voice. Anger is like a wild card in a poker game.

'And you're no more blind than I am,' Wheelock repeats. Apparently this is the part that really gets him. 'Hey, pal, you know what? I ought to follow you some night when you get off work, you know? See what you do.' He pauses. 'Who you turn into.'

For a moment Blind Willie actually stops breathing … then he starts again.

'You wouldn't want to do that Officer Wheelock,' he says.

I wouldn't, huh? Why not, Willie? Why not? You lookin out for my welfare, is that it? Afraid I might kill the shitass who lays the golden turds? Hey, thirty six hundred a year ain't all that much when you weigh it against a commendation, maybe a promotion.' He pauses. When he speaks again, his voice has a dreamy quality which Willie finds especially alarming. 'I could be in the Post. HERO COP BUSTS HEARTLESS SCAM ARTIST ON FIFTH AVENUE.'

'You'd be in the Post all right, but there wouldn't be any commendation,' Blind Willie says. 'No promotion, either. In fact, you'd be out on the street, Officer Wheelock, looking for a job. You could skip applying for one with the security companies, though - a man who'll take a payoff can't be bonded.'

It is Wheelock's turn to stop breathing. When he starts again, the puffs of breath in Blind Willie's ear have become a hurricane; the cop's moving mouth is almost on his skin. 'What do you mean?' he whispers. A hand settles on the arm of Blind Willie's field jacket. 'You just tell me what the fuck you mean.'

But Blind Willie is silent, hands at his sides, head slightly raised, looking attentively into the darkness that will not clear until daylight is almost gone, and on his face is that lack of expression which so many passersby read as ruined pride, bruised grace, courage

brought low but still somehow intact. It is that, not the sign or the dark glasses, which has allowed him to do so well over the years … and Wheelock is wrong: he is blind. They both are blind.

The hand on his arm shakes him slightly. It is almost a claw now. ‘You got a friend? Is that it, you son of a bitch? Is that why you hold the envelope out that way half the damned time? You got a friend taking my picture? Is that it?’

Blind Willie says nothing, has to say nothing. People like Jasper Wheelock will always think the worst if you let them. You only have to give them time to do it.

‘You don’t want to fuck with me, pal’ Wheelock says viciously, but there is a subtle undertone of worry in his voice, and the hand on Blind Willie’s jacket loosens. ‘We’re going up to four hundred a month starting next week, and if you try playing any games with me, I’m going to show you where the real playground is. You understand me?’

Blind Willie says nothing. The puffs of air stop hitting his ear, and he knows Wheelock is going. But not yet; the nasty little puffs come back.

‘You’ll burn in hell for what you’re doing,’ Wheelock tells him. He speaks with great, almost fervent, sincerity. ‘What I’m doing when I take your dirty money is a venial sin - I asked the priest, so I’m sure - but yours is mortal. You’re going to hell, see how many handouts you get down there.’

He walks away then, an Willie’s thought - that he is glad to see him go - causes a rare smile to touch his face. It comes and goes like an errant ray of sunshine on a cloudy day.

1:40 P.M.

Three times he has banded the bills into rolls and dumped the change into the bottom of the case (this is really a storage function,

and not an effort at concealment), now working completely by touch. He can no longer see the money, doesn't know a one from a hundred, but he senses he is having a very good day, indeed. There is no pleasure in the knowledge, however. There's never very much, pleasure is not what Blind Willie is about, but even the sense of accomplishment he might have felt on another day has been muted by his conversation with Officer Wheelock.

At quarter to twelve, a young woman with a pretty voice - to Blind Willie she sounds like Whitney Houston - comes out of Saks and gives him a cup of hot coffee, as she does most days at this time. At quarter past, another woman - this one not so young, and probably white - brings him a cup of steaming chicken noodle soup. He thanks them both. The white lady kisses his cheek, calls him Will instead of Willie, and wishes him the merriest of merry Christmases.

There is a counterbalancing side to the day, though; there almost always is. Around one o'clock a teenage kid with his unseen posse laughing and joking and skylarking all around him speaks out of the darkness to Blind Willie's left, says he is one ugly motherfuck, then asks if he wears those gloves because he burned his fingers off trying to read the waffle iron. He and his friends charge off, howling with laughter at this ancient jape. Fifteen minutes or so later, someone kicks him, although that might have been an accident. Every time he bends over to the case, however, the case is right there. It is a city of hustlers, muggers, and thieves, but the case is right there, just as it has always been right there.

And through it all, he thinks about Wheelock.

The cop before Wheelock was easy; the one who comes when Wheelock either quits the force or gets moved out of Midtown North may also be easy. Wheelock will not last forever - something else he has learned in the Nam - and in the meantime, he, Blind Willie, must bend like a reed in a windstorm. Except that sometimes even the reed that bends is broken … if the wind blows hard enough.

Wheelock wants more money, but that isn't what bothers the man in the dark glasses and the army coat. Sooner or later they all want more money: when he started on this corner, he paid Officer Hanratty a hundred and a quarter, and although Hanratty was easy, he had Blind Willie up to two hundred a month by the time he retired in 1989. But Wheelock was angry this morning, angry, and Wheelock talked about having consulted a priest. These things worry him, but what worries him most of all is what Wheelock said about following him. See what you do. Who you turn into.

It would be easy, God knows - what could be simpler than shadowing a blind man, or even one who can see little more than shadows? Watching him turn into some hotel (one on the uptown side, this time), watching him go into the public men's room, watching him go into a stall? Watching him change from Blind Willie into plain old Willie, maybe even from Willie into Bill?

Thinking this brings back his morning jitters, his feeling of being a snake between skins. The fear that he has been photographed taking a bribe will hold Wheelock for a while, but if he is angry enough, there is no predicting what he may do. And that is scary.

'God love you, soldier,' says a voice out of the darkness. 'I wish I could do a few bucks more.'

'Not necessary, sir,' Blind Willie says, but his mind is still on Jasper Wheelock, who smells of cheap cologne and talked to a priest about the blind man with the sign, the blind man who is not, Wheelock thinks, blind at all. What had he said? You're going to hell, see how many handouts you get down there. 'Have a very merry Christmas, sir, thank you for helping me.'

And the day goes on.

4:25 P.M.

His sight has started to resurface - dim, distant, but there. It is his cue to pack up and go.

He kneels, back ramrod stiff, and lays his cane behind the case again. He bands the last of the bills, dumps them and the last coins into the bottom of the case one more time, then puts the tinsel-decorated sign inside. He latches the case and stands up, holding his cane in the other hand. Now the case is heavy, dragging at his arm with the dead-weight of well-meant metal. There is a heavy rattling crunch as the coins avalanche into a new position, and then they are as still as ore plugged deep in the ground..

He sets off down Fifth, dangling the case at the end of his left arm like an anchor (after all these years he's used to the weight of it, could carry it much further than he'll need to this afternoon, if circumstances demanded), holding the cane in his right hand and tapping it delicately on the paving in front of him. The cane is magic, opening a pocket of empty space before him on the crowded, jostling sidewalk in a teardrop shaped wave. By the time he gets to Fifth and Forty-third, he can actually see this space. He can also see the DON'T WALK sign at Forty-second stop flashing and hold solid, but he keeps walking anyway, letting a well-dressed man with long hair and gold chains reach out and grasp his shoulder to stop him.

'Watch it, big fella,' the longhair says. 'Traffic in a sec.'

'Thank you, sir,' Blind Willie says.

'Don't mention it - merry Christmas.'

Blind Willie crosses, goes down two more blocks, then turns toward Broadway. No one accosts him; no one has loitered, watching him collect all day long, and then followed, waiting for the opportunity to bag the case and run (not that many thieves could run with it, not this case). Once, back in the summer of '91, two or three young guys, maybe black (he couldn't say for sure; they sounded black, but his vision had been slow coming back that day, it was always slower in warm weather, when the days stayed bright longer), had accosted him and began talking to him in a way he didn't quite like. It wasn't like the kids this afternoon, with their jokes about reading the waffle iron and what does a Playboy centerfold look like in braille. It was

softer than that, and in some weird fashion almost kind - questions about how much he took in by St. Pat's back there, and would he perchance be generous enough to make a contribution to something called the Polo Recreational League and did he want a little protection getting to his bus stop or train station or whatever. One, perhaps a budding sexologist, had asked if he liked a little young pussy once in a while. 'It pep you up,' the voice on his left said softly, almost longingly. 'Yessir, you must believe that shit.'

He had felt the way he imagined a mouse must feel when the cat is still just pawing at it, claws not out yet, curious about what the mouse will do, and how fast it can run, and what sorts of noises it will make as its terror grows. Blind Willie had not been terrified, however. He is never terrified. That is his advantage, and it had been their mistake. He had simply raised his voice, speaking as a man might speak to a large room filled with old friends. 'Say!' he had exclaimed to the shadowy phantoms all around him on the sidewalk. 'Say, does anyone see a policeman? I believe these young fellow here mean to take me off.' And that did it, easy as pulling a segment off a peeled orange; the fellows who had been bracketing him were suddenly gone like a cool breeze.

He only wishes he could solve the problem of Officer Wheelock that easily.

4:40 P.M.

The Sheraton Gotham, at Fortieth and Broadway, is one of the largest first-class hotels in the world, and in the cave of its lobby thousands of people school back and forth beneath the gigantic chandelier. They chase their pleasures here, and dig their treasures there, oblivious of the Christmas music flowing from the speakers, of the chatter from three different restaurants and five bars, of the scenic elevators sliding up and down in their notched shafts like pistons powering some exotic glass engine … and of the blind man who taps among the, working his way toward a public men's room almost the size of a subway station. He walks with the sticker on the

case turned inward now, and he is as anonymous as a blind man can be. In this city, that's very anonymous.

Still, he thinks as he enters one of the stalls and takes off his jacket turning it inside-out as he does so, how is it that in all these years no one has ever followed me? No one has ever noticed that the blind man who goes in and the sighted man who comes out are the same size, and carrying the same case?

Well, in New York, hardly anyone notices anything that isn't his or her own business - in their own way, they are all as blind as Blind Willie. Out of their offices, flooding down the sidewalks, thronging in the subway stations and cheap restaurants, there is something both repulsive and sad about them; they are like nests of moles turned up by a farmer's harrow. He has seen this blindness over and over again, and he knows that this is one reason for his success … but surely not the only reason. They are not all moles, and he has been rolling the dice for a long time now. He takes precautions, of course he does, many of them, but there are still those moments (like now, sitting here with his pants down, unscrewing the white cane and stowing it back in his case) when he would be easy to catch, easy to rob … easy to expose. Wheelock is right about the Post; they would love him. The News would too. They would hang him higher than Haman, higher than O.J. Simpson. They would never understand, never even want to understand, or hear his side of it. What side?

He leaves the stall, leaves the bathroom, leaves the echoing confusion of the Sheraton Gotham, and no one walks up to him and says, 'Excuse me, sir, but weren't you just blind?' No one looks at him twice as he walks out into the street, carrying the bulky case as if it weighed twenty pounds instead of a hundred. It has started to snow.

He walks slowly, Willie Teale again now, switching the case frequently from hand to hand, just one more tired guy at the end of the day. He continues to think about his inexplicable success as he goes. There's a verse from the Book of Matthew which he has committed to memory. They be blind leaders of the blind, it goes.

And if the blind lead the blind, both shall fall into the ditch. Then there's the old saw that says that in the kingdom of the blind, the one-eyed man is king. Is he the one-eyed man? Has that been the secret of his success all these years?

He doesn't think so. In his heart of hearts he believes he has been protected. Not by God, exactly (he doesn't think he quite believes in God, certainly not the one advertised by the church in front of which he stands most days), but maybe by some half-sentient force that has always seen him as Blind Willie. Fate, you could call it that if you liked, or you could call it a higher power - Generic Brand God - as the alkies do. Or maybe it's only blind justice, balancing her scales. Most likely it doesn't matter. All he knows for sure is that he has never been caught or taken off.

Of course, there has never been a Jasper Wheelock in his life, either..

Maybe I ought to follow you some night, Officer Wheelock whispers in his ear as Willie shifts the increasingly heavy case from one hand to the other. Both arms ache now; he will be glad to reach his building. See what you do. See who you turn into.

What, exactly, was he going to do about Officer Wheelock? What could he do?

He doesn't know.

5:15 P.M.

The young panhandler in the dirty red sweatshirt is long gone. His place taken by yet another streetcorner Santa. Willie has no trouble recognizing the tubby young fellow currently dropping a dollar into Santa's pot.

'Hey, Ralphie!' he cries.

Ralph Williamson turns, and his face lights up when he sees Willie, and he raises one gloved hand. It's snowing harder now; with the bright lights around him and Santa Claus beside him, Ralph looks suspiciously like the central figure in a holiday greeting card. Or maybe a modern-day Bob Cratchet.

'Hey, Willie! How's it goin?'

'Goin like a house afire,' he says, approaching the other man with an easy grin on his face. He sets his case down with a grunt, feels in his pants pocket, and finds a buck for Santa's pot. Probably just another crook, and he looks like shit, but what the hell.

'What you got in there?' Ralph asks, looking down at Willie's case as he fiddles with his scarf. 'Sounds like you busted open some little kid's piggy bank.'

'Nah, just heating coils,' Willie says. "Bout a damn thousand of 'em.'

'You working right up until Christmas?'

'Yeah,' he says, and suddenly knows what he is going to do about Wheelock. Not how, not yet, but that's okay; how is just a technicality. What is where the creative work is done. There's no burst of revelation, no feeling of eureka; it is as if part of him knew all along. He supposes part of him did. 'Yeah, right up until Christmas. No rest for the wicked, you know.'

Ralph's wide and pleasant face creases in a smile. 'I doubt if you're very wicked, though.'

Willie smiles back. 'You don't know what evil lurks in the heart of the heatin-n-coolin man, that's all. I'll probably take a few days off after Christmas, though. I'm thinking that might be a really good idea.'

'Go south?'

‘South?’ Willie looks startled, then laughs. ‘Oh, no,’ he says. ‘Not this kid. Plenty to do around my house, you know. A person’s got to keep their house in order, Ralphie. Else it might just come down around their ears some day.’

‘I suppose.’ Ralph bundles the scarf higher around his ears. ‘See you tomorrow?’

‘You bet,’ Willie says and holds out his gloved hand. ‘Gimme five.’

Ralphie gives him five, then turns his hand over. His smile is shy but eager. ‘Give me ten, Willie.’

Willie gives him ten. ‘How good is that, Ralphie-baby?’

The man’s shy smile becomes a gleeful boy’s grin. ‘So goddamn good I gotta do it again!’ he cries, and slaps Willie’s hand with real authority.

Willie laughs. ‘You the man, Ralph.’

‘You the man, too, Willie,’ Ralph replies, speaking with a prissy earnestness that’s really sort of funny. ‘Merry Christmas.’

‘Right back atcha.’

He stands where he is for a moment, watching Ralph trudge off into the snow. Beside him, the streetcorner Santa rings his bell monotonously. Willie picks up his case and starts for the door of his building. Then something catches his eye, and he pauses.

‘Your beard’s on crooked,’ he says to the Santa. ‘If you want people to believe in you, fix your goddamn beard.’

He goes inside.

5:25 P.M.

There's a big carton in the storage annex of Midtown Heating and Cooling. It is full of the cloth bags, the sort banks use to hold loose coins. Such bags usually have various banks' names printed on them, but these don't - Willie orders them direct from the company in Moundsville, West Virginia, that makes them.

He opens the case, quickly sets aside the rolls of bills (these he will carry home in his Mark Cross briefcase), then fills four bags with coins. In a far corner of the storage room is a battered old metal cabinet simply marked PARTS. Willie swings it open - there is no lock to contend with - and reveals another two or three hundred coin-stuffed bags. A dozen times a year he and Sharon tour the midtown churches, pushing these bags through the contribution slots where they will fit, simply leaving them by the door where they won't. The lion's share always goes to St. Pat's, the vast church in front of which Blind Willie can be found most days, wearing his dark glasses and his sign.

But not every day, he thinks, I don't have to be there every day, and he thinks again that maybe both Blind Willie and Willie Teale will take the week after Christmas off. There might be work for Bill, though, and why not? Bill has it easy, as a rule. He wakes up to the clock radio, shaves, dresses, goes into the city … and then disappears until it's time to go home. Maybe it's time for Bill to do a little work, pitch in and do his share. There is stuff he could do in the week or so before New Year's Ever, when he and Sharon will once more tour the churches, leaving off the coins that are too bulky and troublesome to deal with.

I ought to follow you some night … see what you do. Who you turn into.

But maybe, he thinks, taking off Willie and putting on Bill (Paul Stuart, J. Press, Mark Cross, Sulka, Bally), maybe it's I who ought to follow you Officer Wheelock. The part of me you'd never recognize in a million years, any more than Ralph Williamson would recognize Bill … or Blind Willie, for that matter. Maybe Bill needs to follow you, see

what you do, who you turn into when you go home and take off your day along with your uniform.

Yes, I could do that, Bill thinks. He's used cold cream to remove his makeup and now steps carefully through the trap door and finds his footing on top of the stepladder. He takes the handle of his briefcase and pulls it through. He descends to the third step, then lowers the trap door into place and slides the ceiling panel back where it belongs. Yes, I could to that very easily. And …

Well, accidents sometimes happen. Sad but true. Even to big, brave fellows like Jasper the Police-Smurf, accidents sometimes happen.

'Do you hear what I hear,' he sings softly as he folds the stepladder and puts it back, 'do you smell what I smell, do you taste what I taste?'

Five minutes later he closes the door of Western States Land Analysts firmly behind him and triple locks it. Then he goes down the hallway. When the elevator comes and he steps in, he thinks, Eggnog. Don't forget. The Allens and the Dubrays.

'Also cinnamon,' he says out loud. The three people in the elevator car with him look around, and Bill Teale grins self-consciously.

Outside, he turns toward Penn Station, registering only one thought as the snow beats full into his face and he flips up his coat collar: the Santa outside the building has fixed his beard.

11:35 P.M.

'Share?'

'Hmmmm?'

'Her voice is sleepy, distant. They have made long, slow love after the Dubrays finally left at eleven o'clock, and now she is drifting way That's all right, though; he is drifting too. He has a feeling that all of

his problems are solving themselves … or that the higher power upon whom he sometimes speculates, that savior of temporarily skinless snakes, is solving them for him.

‘I may take a week or so off after Christmas. Do some inventory. Poke around some new sites. I’m thinking about changing locations.’ There is no need for her to know what he may really doing in the week before New Year’s, he reasons; she couldn’t do anything but worry and - perhaps, perhaps not, he sees no reason to find out for sure - feel guilty.

‘Good,’ she says. ‘See a few movies while you’re at it, why don’t you?’ Her hand gropes out of the dark and touches his arm briefly. ‘You work so hard.’ Pause. ‘Also, you remembered the eggnog. I really didn’t think you would. I’m very pleased with you.’

He grins in the dark at that, helpless not to. It is so perfectly Sharon.

‘The Allens are all right, but the Dubrays are boring, aren’t they? she asks.

‘A little,’ he allows.

‘If that dress of hers had been cut any lower, she could have gotten a job in a topless bar.’

He says nothing to that, but grins again.

‘It was good tonight, wasn’t it? she asks him. It’s not their little party that she’s talking about.

‘Yes, excellent.’

‘Did you have a good day? I didn’t have a chance to ask.’

‘Fine day, Share.’

‘I love you, Bill.’

‘Love you, too.’

‘Goodnight.’

‘Goodnight.’

He lies on his side, drifting into sleep while thinking about the man in the open topcoat and the bright red ski sweater. He crosses over without knowing it, thought melting effortlessly into dream. ‘Sixty-seven was a hard year,’ the man in the red sweater says. ‘I was at Loc Ninh, you know. Tory Hill. We lost a lot of good men.’ Then he brightens. ‘But I got this.’ From the lefthand pocket of his topcoat he takes a white beard hanging on a string. ‘And this.’ From the righthand pocket he takes a crumpled Styrofoam cup, which he shakes. A few loose coins rattle in the bottom like teeth. ‘So you see,’ he says, fading now, ‘there are compensations to even the blindest life.’

Then the dream fades and he sleeps deeply until 6:15 the next morning, when the clock-radio wakes him to the sound of ‘The Little Drummer Boy.’

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 cheek 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 Screwlucy for you. I thought this would probably be the way you’d want it. Love, Lulu.’ “

If the DeWitt family was a fork, Screwlucy 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), Screwlucy 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 Lucy, soon to be Screwlucy, for Lulubelle (second wedding anniversary), they each wound up with the other. one’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 goddarn 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.

LUNCH AT THE GOTHAM CAFE

Stephen King

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 needed some time alone, and that I would hear from her therapist. I sat on the chair at the kitchen end of the table, reading this communication over and over again, not able to believe it. The only clear thought I remember having in the next half hour or so was I didn't even know you had a therapist, Diane.

After a while I got up, went into the bedroom, and looked around.

All her clothes were gone (except for a joke sweatshirt someone had given her, with the words RICH BLOND printed on the front in spangly stuff), and the room had a funny dislocated look, as if she had gone through it, looking for something. I checked my stuff to see if she'd taken anything. My hands felt cold and distant while I did this, as if they had been shot full of some numbing drug. As far as I could tell, everything that was supposed to be there was there. I hadn't expected anything different, and yet the room had that funny look, as if she had pulled at it, the way she sometimes pulled on the ends of her hair when she felt exasperated.

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 she'd left behind over again. It was the same but looking into the strangely rumpled bedroom and the half-empty 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.

Therapist. My eye kept going back to that word. Therapist. I supposed I should have been glad it wasn't lawyer, but I wasn't.

You will hear from William Humboldt my therapist.

'Heat from this, sweetiepie,' I told the empty room, and squeezed my crotch. It didn't sound rough and funny, as I'd hoped, and the face I saw in the mirror across the room was as pale as paper.

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 hadn't seen it coming. I didn't have a clue. What therapist? When did she see him? What did she talk about? Well, I supposed I knew what she talked about - me. Probably stuff about how I never remembered to put the ring down again after I finished taking a leak, how I wanted oral sex a tiresome amount of the time (how much was tiresome? I didn't know), how I didn't take enough interest in her job at the publishing company. Another question: how could she talk about the most intimate aspects of her marriage to a man named 'William Humboldt? He sounded like he should be a physicist at CalTech, or maybe a back-bencher in the House of Lords.

Then there was the Super Bonus Question: Why hadn't I known something was up? How could I have .walked into it like Sonny Liston into Cassius Clay's famous phantom uppercut? Was :it stupidity? Insensitivity? As the days passed and I thought about the last six or eight months of our two-year marriage, I decided it 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.

Two days later I got a call at work from the famous William Humboldt. After ascertaining that he was indeed speaking to Steven Davis, he promptly began calling me Steve. You may find that a trifle hard to believe, but it is nevertheless exactly what happened. Humboldt's voice was soft, small, and intimate. It made me think of a car purring on a silk pillow.

When I asked after Diane, Humboldt told me that she was doing as well as expected,' and when I asked if I could talk to her, he said he believed that would be 'counterproductive to her case at: this time.' Then, even more unbelievably (to my mind, at least) he asked in a grotesquely solicitous voice how I was doing.

I'm in the pink,' I said. 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. 'Mr Humboldt … it is mister, I take it, and -not doctor?'

'I use mister, although I have degrees-'

'Mr Humboldt, if Diane doesn't want to come home and doesn't want to talk to me, what does she want? Why did you call me?'

'Diane would like access to the safe deposit box,' he said in his mooch, purry little voice. 'Your joint safe deposit box.'

I suddenly understood the punched, rumpled look of the bedroom and felt the first bright stirrings of anger. She had been looking for the key to the box, of course. She hadn't been interested in my little collection of pre-World War II silver dollars or the onyx pinkie ring she'd bought me for our first anniversary (we'd only had two in all) … but in the safe deposit box was the diamond necklace I'd given her, and about thirty thousand dollars' worth of negotiable securities. The key was at our little summer cabin in the Adirondacks, I realized. Not on purpose, but out of simple forgetfulness. I'd left it on top of the bureau, pushed way back amid the dust and the mouse turds.

Pain in my left hand. I looked down and my hand rolled into a right fist, and rolled it open. The nails had cut crescents in the pad of the palm.

‘Steve?’ Humboldt was purring. ‘Steve, are you there?’

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘I’ve got two things for you. Are you ready?’

‘Of course,’ he said in that parry little voice, and for a moment I had a bizarre vision: William Humboldt blasting through the desert on a Harley-Davidson, surrounded by a pack of Hell’s Angels. On the back of his leather jacket: BORN TO COMFORT.

Pain in my left hand again. It had closed up again on its own, just liken clam. This time when I unrolled it, two of the four little crescents were oozing blood.

‘First,’ I said, ‘that box is going to stay closed unless some divorce court judge orders it opened in the presence of Diane’s attorney and mine. In the meantime, no one is going to loot it, and that’s a promise. Not me, not her.’ I paused. ‘Not you, either.’

‘I think that your hostile attitude is counterproductive,’ he said.

‘And if you examine your last few statements, Steve, you may begin to understand why your wife is so emotionally shattered, so—‘

‘Second,’ I overrode him (it’s something we hostile people are good at), ‘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 you’ll find out just how hostile my attitude can be.’

‘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.

That afternoon I talked to a friend in the legal department, and he recommended a friend of his who did divorce work. I didn't want a divorce - I was furious at her, but had not the slightest question that I still loved her and wanted her back - but I didn't like Humboldt. I didn't like the idea of Humboldt. He made me nervous, him and his purry little voice. I think I would have preferred some hardball shyster who would have called up and said, You give us a copy of that lockbox key before the close of business today, Davis, and maybe my client will relent and decide to leave you with something besides two pairs of underwear and your blood donor's card-got it?

That I could have understood. Humboldt, on the other hand, felt sneaky.

The divorce lawyer was John Ring, and he listened patiently to my tale of woe. I suspect he'd heard most of it before.

'If I was entirely sure she wanted a divorce, I think I'd be easier in my mind,' I finished.

'Be entirely sure,' Ring said at once. 'Humboldt's a stalking horse, Mr Davis … and a potentially damaging witness if this drifts into court. I have no doubt that your wife went to a lawyer first, and when the lawyer found out about the missing lockbox key, he suggested Humboldt. A lawyer couldn't go right to you; that would be unethical. Come across with that key, my friend, and Humboldt will disappear from the picture. Count on it.'

Most of this went right past me. I was concentrating on what he'd said first.

'You think she wants a divorce,' I said.

'Oh, yes,' he replied. 'She wants a divorce. Indeed she does. And she doesn't intend to walk away from the marriage empty-handed.'

I made an appointment with Ring to sit down and discuss things further the following day. I went home from the office as late as I

could, walked back and forth through the apartment for a while, 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 Viceroys 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, or 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 crossed my mind 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.

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, motherfucher, that's mine!, 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 had 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 had 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, if you see what I mean. Very likely you don't, but I can't think of any other way to put it.

Have I speculated that quitting when I did may have played a part in what happened at the Gotham Cafe that day? Of course I have. .

. but I haven't lost any sleep over it. None of us can predict the final outcomes of our actions, after all, and few even try; most of us just

do what we do to prolong a moment's pleasure or to stop the pain for a while. And even when we act for the noblest reasons, the last link of the chain all too often drips with someone's blood.

Humboldt called me again two weeks after the evening when I'd bombed West 83rd Street with my cigarettes, and this time he stuck with Mr Davis as a form of address. He asked me how I was doing, and I cold him I was doing fine. With that amenity our of the way, he told me that he had called on Diane's behalf. Diane, he said, wanted to sit down with me and discuss 'certain aspects' of the marriage-I suspected that 'certain aspects' meant the key to the safe deposit box - not to mention various other financial issues Diane might want to investigate before hauling her lawyer onstage

- but what my head knew and what my body was doing were completely different things. I could feel my skin flush and my heart speed up; I could feel a pulse tapping away in the wrist of the hand holding the phone. You have to remember that 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.

Still I retained enough sense to ask him just what aspects we were talking about here.

Humboldt chuckled fatly in my ear and said he would rather save that for our actual meeting.

'Are you sure this is a good idea?' I asked. As a question, it was nothing but a time-buyer- I knew it wasn't a good idea. I also knew I was going to do it. I wanted to see her again. Felt I had to see her again.

'Oh, yes, I think so.' At once, no hesitation. Any question that Humboldt and Diane had worked this out very carefully between them (and yes, very likely with a lawyer's advice) evaporated. 'It's always best to let some time pass before bringing the principals together, a little cooling-off period, but in my judgment 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 … my own therapist?’

The fat chuckle came again, shivering in my ear like something just turned out of a Jell-O mold. ‘Do you have one, Mr Davis?’

‘No, actually, I don’t. 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 rip of a toothpick under my thumb-nail 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 cigaretteless on the waves of the world. ‘Pardon me?’

‘I asked if you know the Gotham Card on 53rd Street,’ he said, sounding a touch impatient now. ‘Between Madison and Park.’

‘No, but I’m sure I can find it.’

‘Noon?’

I thought of telling him to tell Diane to wear the green dress with the little black speckles and the deep slit up the side, then decided that would probably be counterproductive- ‘Noon will be fine,’ I said.

We said the things that you say when you’re ending a conversation with someone you already don’t like but have to deal with.

When it was over, I 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.

It wasn't fine with John Ring, none of it.

'He's setting you up,' he said. 'They both are. Under this arrangement, Diane's lawyer is there by remote control and I'm not in the picture at all. It stinks.'

Maybe, but you never had her stick her tongue in your month when she feels you start to come, I thought. But since that wasn't the sort of thing you could say to a lawyer you'd just hired, I only told him I wanted to see her again, see if there was a chance to salvage things.

He sighed.

'Don't be a putz. You see him at this restaurant, you see her, you break bread, you drink a little wine, she crosses her legs, you look, you talk nice, she crosses her legs again, you look some more, maybe they talk you into a duplicate of the safe deposit key—'

'They won't.'

'—and the next time you see them, you'll see them in court, and everything damaging you said while you were looking at her legs and thinking about how it was to have them wrapped around you will turn up on the record. And you're apt to say a lot of damaging stuff, because they'll come primed with all the right questions. I understand that you want to see her, I'm not insensitive to these things, but this is not the way. You're nor Donald Trump and she's nor Ivana, burt this isn't a no-faulter we got here, either, buddy, and Humboldt knows it. Diane does, too.'

'Nobody's been served with papers, and if she just wants to talk—'

'Don't be dense,' he said. 'Once you get to this stage of the party, no one wants to just talk - They either want to fuck or go home.

The divorce has already happened, Steven. This meeting is a fishing expedition, pure and simple. You have nothing to gain and everything to lose. It's stupid.'

'Just the same—'

'You've done very well for yourself, especially in the last five years—'

'I know, but—'

'—and, for thuhree 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 see knew damned well it was my favorite.

He sighed again. 'I can't have this discussion, or I'm going to end up drinking my lunch instead of eating it.'

'Go and eat your lunch. Diet plate. Cottage cheese.'

'Okay, but first I'm going to make one more effort to get through to you. A meeting like this is like a joust. They'll show . up in full armor. You're going to he there dressed in nothing but 1 smile, without even a jock to hold up your balls. And that's exactly the region of your anatomy they're apt to go for first.'

'I want to see her,' I said. 'I want to see how she is. I'm sorry.'

He uttered a small, cynical laugh. I'm not going to talk you our 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 am.’

‘Good. Don’t yell at her, Steven. They may set it up so you really feel like doing that, but don’t. Okay?’

‘Okay.’ 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. He’s a … a therapist. 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, chat’s how. If she tells him you flipped her over and raped her with a corncob, he doesn’t say prove it, he says oh you poor thing and how many times. 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 wants to ear his lunch and forget the whole thing.

‘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. Stick with all the touchy-feely stuff. If they get pissed off and ask why you kept the lunch date if you weren’t going

to discuss nuts and bolts, tell them 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 strongly sensed that Ring wanted to be done with this conversation.

'As a lawyer - your lawyer - I'm telling you that this is a bull-shit 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 that diet plate for me.'

'Fuck the diet plate,' Ring sold morosely. 'If I can't have a double bourbon on the rocks an lunch anymore, I can at least have a double cheeseburger at Brew 'n Burger.

'Rare,' I said.

'That's right, rare.'

'Spoken like a true American-'

'I hope she stands you up, Steven-'

'I know you do.'

He hung up and went out to get his alcohol substitute. 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 Humboldt had been a lawyer instead of a therapist, he, John Ring, would have been in on our luncheon meeting. And in that case he might have wound up as dead as William Humboldt.

I walked from my office to the Gotham Cafe leaving at 11:15 and arriving across from the restaurant at 11:45.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 ordinary, just one of the eight hundred or so pricey restaurants crammed together in Midtown.

With the meeting place located and my mind temporarily set to 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, even pitiable. 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 12:05. 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 been just Diane, I would have gone in at 12:45, 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 have been 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 heavyset, balding man she was sitting with certainly looked like a Humboldt. I took a deep breath, opened the restaurant door, and went in.

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 flatness, 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 you 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 simply to 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 would have been 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 hack 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 haft-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 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, which I had forgotten to check.

Perhaps on the Island of the maitre d’s, dog was a slang for umbrella, especially when carried by a patron on a day when rain did not look 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 inquiry - 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.

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, deep or otherwise) and the new :hairdo; The heavyset 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 at me. And although she hadn't said a single word, I was already furious at her. The expression in her eyes was a dead negative; she might as well have been a CLOSED UNTIL FURTHER NOTICE sign on her forehead between them. I thought I deserved better. Of course, that may just be a way of saying I'm human.

'Monsieur,' the maitre d' said, pulling out the chair to Diane's left.

I barely heard him, and certainly any thought of his eccentric behaviours and crooked bow tie had left my head. I think that 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 at her and still want her so much it made me ache to look at her. Absence may or may nor 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.

‘We’ll get you a drink,’ Humboldt said, looking around for waiter like a man who did it a lot. Her therapist had all the bells and whistles of the incipient alcoholic. Wonderful.

‘Perrier and lime is good.’

‘For what?’ Humboldt inquired with a big smile. 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. ‘WEB, perhaps we’d better get started.’

I paid no attention. I already had gotten started; I’d done it the instant Diane looked up at me. ‘Hi, Diane,’ I said. It was marvelous, really, how she looked smarter and prettier than previous. More desirable than previous, too. 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.

‘Steve -Mr Davis,’ Humboldt said, ‘I thought we might begin by getting you to look at a list of grievances which Diane has worked out during our sessions - our exhaustive sessions, I might say -

over the last couple of weeks. Certainly it can serve as a springboard to our main purpose for being here, which is how to order a period of separation that will allow growth on both of your parts.’

There was a briefcase on the floor beside him. He picked it up with a grunt and set it on the table’s one empty chair. Humboldt began unsnapping the clasps, but I quit paying attention at that point. I wasn’t interested in springboards to separation, whatever that meant. I felt a combination of panic and anger that was, in some ways, the most peculiar emotion I have ever experienced.

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. Horror was followed by anger.

‘Isn’t that just like you!’ she exclaimed.

‘Diane—‘

‘Where’s the safe deposit box key, Steven? Where did you hide it?’

Humboldt looked alarmed. He reached out and touched her arm.

‘Diane .. I thought we agreed—‘

‘What we agreed is that this son of a bitch will hide everything under the nearest rock and then plead poverty if we let him!’

‘You searched the bedroom for it before you left, didn’t you’ I asked quietly. ‘Tossed it like a burglar.’

She flushed at that. I don’t know if it was shame, anger, or both.

‘It’s my box as well as yours! My things as well as yours!’

Humboldt was looking more alarmed than ever. Several diners had glanced around at us. Most of them looked mused, actually. People are surely God’s most bizarre creatures. ‘Please… please, let’s not —‘

‘Where did you hide it, Steven?’

‘I didn’t hide it. I never hid it. I left it up at the cabin by accident, that’s all.’

She smiled knowingly. ‘Oh, yes. By accident. Uh-huh.’ I said nothing, and the knowing smile slipped away. ‘I want it,’ she said, then amended hastily: ‘I want a copy.’

People in hell want icewater, I thought. Out loud I said, ‘There’s nothing more to be done about it, is there?’

She hesitated, maybe hearing something in my voice she didn’t actually want to hear, or to acknowledge. ‘No,’ she said. ‘The next time you see me, it will be with my lawyer. I’m divorcing you.’

‘Why?’ What I heard in my voice now was a plaintive note like a sheep’s bleat. I didn’t like it, but there wasn’t a goddamned thing I

could do about it. ‘Why?’

‘Oh, I Jesus. Do you expect me to believe you’re really that dense?’

‘I just can’t—’

Her cheeks were brighter than ever, the flush now rising almost her temples. ‘Yes, probably you expect me to believe just that very thing. 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 stop a scuffle before it gets started, but he seemed to have forgotten all about Diane’s shit-list; his eyes were sweeping the rear part of the room, looking out for our waiter, or any waiter whose eye he could catch. He was lot less interested in therapy, at that particular moment, than he was in obtaining what the British like to call the other half.

‘I only want to know—‘ I began.

‘What you want to know doesn’t have anything to do with why Humboldt said, and for a moment he actually sounded alert.

‘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. ‘If you wanted to try joint counselling instead of… uh… therapy…

whatever it is Humboldt does… I’m not against it if—‘

She raised her hands to shoulder level, palms out. ‘Oh, God, Joe Camel goes 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 clients soon-to-be ex-husband (it was going to happen, all right; even the slight unreality that comes with not-smoking couldn’t conceil 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 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 tossed the joint and then walked out when you couldn’t find what you wanted, 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: the grievances. Diane’s shit-list, in other words. And a lot more about the key to the lockbox. Probably the only satisfaction I was going to get out of this sorry situation was telling them that neither of them was going to see a copy of that key until an officer of the court presented me with a paper ordering me to turn one over. I hadn’t touched the stuff in the box since Diane booked on out of my life, and I didn’t

intend to touch any of it in the immediate future.. but she wasn't going to touch it, either. Let her chew crackers and try to whistle, as my grandmother used to say.

Humboldt took out a sheaf of papers. They were held by one of those designer paper clips - the ones that come in different colors.

It occurred to me that I had arrived abysmally unprepared for this meeting, and not just because my lawyer was jaw-deep in a cheeseburger somewhere, either. Diane had her new dress; Humboldt had his designer briefcase, plus Diane's shit-list held together by a color-coded designer paper clip; all I had was a new umbrella on a sunny day. I looked down at where it lay beside my chair 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.

‘ The major problems your wife has articulated - so far, at least -

are insensitivity on your part regarding her job, and an inability to trust in personal affairs,’ Humboldt said. ‘In regard to the second, I’d say your unwillingness to give Diane fair access to the safe deposit box you maintain in common pretty well sums up the trust issue.’

I opened my mouth to tell him I had a trust issue, too, that I didn't trust Diane not to take the whole works and then sit on it. Before I could say anything, however, 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 youf fave, 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 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. No amusement on the surrounding faces now; only astonishment. The maitre d’s bow tie had turned 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 bar 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 masteter of ceremonies had gone bonkers.

‘Eeeeee.!… 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.

'Eeeeee! EEEEEEEEE!' the maitre d' screamed, and swung the butcher knife fiat 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 water glass 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 therapist, 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… Eeeeee! … DOG LOVER!’

Now other people were screaming, mostly at the sight of the blood, I think. 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 hack. 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 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 Schutz'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 got cancer, 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 top 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 words 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 head wound 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 blood-spattered hands to her face, over her eyes. The maitre d'

paid no attention to her. Instead, he turned to me.

'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 that 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 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 plowed 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. Didn't like it? It terrified me. Not that I wasn't terrified already.

I grabbed Dianne's wrist and yanked her to her feet. She came without a word, took a step toward me, them stumbled on her high heels and feel clumsily into my arms. I was aware of her breasts pushing against me, and the wet, warm clamminess over them.

'Eeee! 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. Later than night, the little questions haunted 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 open 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!… Eeee!…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 all!'

I saw three doors, two 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 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 ladle that was dripping some sort of brown sauce. 'Ay, you can't come in here likea dat!'

'We have got to get out' I said. 'He's crazy. He's -'

An idea struck me then, a way of 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, ever wild, hair sticking 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 soft-bellied bulk of the Chef. We went passed 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 them 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 afer us, babbling.

I wanted to keep at the bolt, wanted to believe I could open the door and get us out 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, and he looked more like the village idiot than ever.

‘Forgetful of me you shouldn’t have been!’ Guy screamed, sounding like Yoda in the Star War movies. ‘Your hateful dog!…

Your loud music, so disharmonious! … Eeee!… 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 gas flame underneath a skillet where mushrooms which had been sauteeing 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 inner tube, 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 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 feinted 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 canisters.

‘Bug-infested stinkpot,’ he said. He sounded like a man discussing the Mets’ chances in the forthcoming season. ‘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 hi 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 the side of my mouth like a prison con. ‘Pull the goddamn 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-‘

‘EEEEEEEEE!’ 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 mop head into the nape of his neck. The strings draggled 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 mop head 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 5 3rd 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 therapist 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 53rd 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 Boston Seaquarium 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.’

‘You kicked my ass in there, you bitch,’ I said. ‘You kicked my ass and almost got me killed. Both of us. I can’t believe you.’

‘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 hauled off and 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, judgmental, smallminded, conceited, complacent son of a bitch. I hate you.’

‘Fuck that jerk-off crap. If it wasn’t for the conceited, smallminded 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 53rd Street and pulled up in front of the Gotham Cafe. Cops poured out of them like downs 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 the lie 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 up 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.goddamn 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 53rd, 53rd 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 53rd 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 just 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 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 in the dark 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 - Eeeeee!- 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. Eeeeee.'

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 flattened 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.

Eeeeeee.

Eeeeeee.

Eeeeeee.

LUCKEY QUARTER

Stephen King

Oh, you cheap son of a gun! 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 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! [Signed,] 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. Surely, 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 … after all, I'm rich. If I could find you, mister, I'd drop down on my knees and

kiss your saintly 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 7, 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 gun-shell bosoms 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 into his. Darlene sighed. She was about to drop the quarter back in, then saw there was something inside: a note scrawled 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.

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 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 unpleasant little surprises, 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 man left a woman who was trying to raise two kids on her own a 25-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 played in 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 down 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 7, silent and afflicted with what seemed to be a perpetual case of the sniffles.

Darlene also thought he might be the only 7-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 maybe she'd find a 50, 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.

There was a one-armed bandit - just that single one - in the lobby of the Rancher's, and though 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 fool-catcher. She hadn't forgotten her intention to give the quarter to Paul, but a quarter meant nothing to kids these days. 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 10 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 punch line 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. Lucky me, she thought. Lucky, lucky 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 $15, 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 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 or Patsy's damn braces. Paul wouldn't mind that, and you know it.

No, Paul wouldn't mind, and that was the worst 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. 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.

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 - $18 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 18 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 18 more pink chips - to Darlene they looked like squashed Canada Mints - over to her. Darlene 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 $576 in front of her after the 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.

Lucky me. Darlene Pullen thought. Oh, lucky, lucky 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 5 o'clock in the afternoon, groaned.

Ma'am, I can't allow that bet without the pit boss' OK, the roulette wheel's minder said. He looked considerably more awake now than when Darlene had 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 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.

Lucky, she thought, she prayed. Lucky me, lucky mom, lucky 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 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 28 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. Twentyfive. 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 to know when one of them meant exactly what he was saying. House policy, Mrs. Pullen.

All right, she said. All right, Robin Hood. 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 5 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 about winning, 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 plaquette 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 quiet.

Darlene looked up, across the room, and wasn't surprised to see that the bank of TVs that had been showing horse races and boxing matches were now showing the spinning roulette wheel and her.

I'm even a TV star. Lucky me. Lucky me. Oh, so lucky 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.

Lucky 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 sneezing all over the place, she explained, her voice dripping with disdain, which only a 13-year-old can 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 cowboy) was away from the desk. Probably back in the office salving his saddle sores.

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, fog horning voice.

Even Patsy looked depressed. He'll probably be dead by the time he's 16, 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 subthing, 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 junk pile - deluminum slag, perhaps - 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, 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, 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 maids' 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 slag heap, 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, 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, my God! Oh, you booger, you hit the jackpot. Paulie! You hit the damn jackpot!

Lucky, Darlene thought. So lucky. Oh, lucky me.

THE MAN IN THE BLACK SUIT

Stephen King

I am now a very old man and this is something that 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 not long before America got into the First World War. I've never told anyone about what happened at the fork in the stream that day, and I never will. 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 works will probably be read. A better question is whether 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 eighties 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 my—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 hank to write this pointless anecdote in the diary one of my great-grandchildren—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 half a mile down from there, Harry's Restaurant, which my mother called, with unfailing 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 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 on wouldn't be installed for another five years, and by the time there was a phone 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 there were no more than a dozen houses in what you would call town. There were no neighborhoods (I'm not even sure we knew the work, 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 the middle of March we mostly hunkered down in the little pockets of stove warmth 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 a bee sting. 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 be 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 hanks over her ears, got up, and walked out of the church basement. She'd never been back since, 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 as if 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 were the water 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 water jugs 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 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, out 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 barechested. 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 were yesterday. It was the only time I ever heard my dad take the Saviour's name in vain.

“What do you promise, Gary?” she asked.

“Promise not to go no further than where the stream 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 the stream 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 snow fence, 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 the way boys did back then, holding my creel in my other hand like a valise along a road that 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 mid-spring, or so it felt. The cool rose gently off the water, and there was 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, further 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 once or twice and ate half my worm, but whatever it was was too sly for my nine-year old hands-

-or maybe just not hungry enough to be careless—so I quit that place.

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, 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 that 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 late, 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 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 my 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 sure 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 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 that 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 honeybees 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 my 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 that had been laid for him in his very making—a trap that I had somehow escaped. But as I crossed my eyes until it 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 cruelly that my father had slipped down the straps of his over-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. I

would die in convulsion 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—ready to bolt to my feet and then bolt 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 that moment, 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. A rainbow trout, a good bit larger than either of the ones I had already caught, rose out of the water in a wet flash, spraying fine drops of water from its tail—it looked like one of those 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 mean just 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 apparently walked out of thirty miles of trackless western Maine woods in 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 to 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 dressing the steep bank, but they didn’t nor did they leave tracks, 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 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 those radio announcers on the big-band shows years later, the ones that would sell Geritol and Serutan and Ovaltine and Dr. Granbow 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 crossed my mind to hope I was having a dream, although it might have, I suppose, if I had been older. But I was nine, and I knew the truth when it squatted down 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 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!” He threw himself on his back in the little flat place and laughed.

I thought about running, but my legs seemed two counties away from my brain. 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 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 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.

“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, of her 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. 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 the moon had fallen on Vermont. 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 at 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. It struck the big gray rock where the waters divided, spun around twice in the whirlpool eddy that formed there, and then floated away in the direction of Castle Rock.

Meanwhile, the terrible stranger turned his burning eyes on my 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.”

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 know 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 to your brother. 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 tsk-tsk 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 can’t tolerate 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.

“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’s been lying on the floor for fifteen minutes or so with no sound but the stove ticking with that little thread 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

as 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 eat your guys, 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 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, biiig 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 aquarium in Boston 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 orange, the same color as his 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 hank 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 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 burning 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 that has almost boiled dry, I reached this second, steeper bank and charged up.

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 any more; 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 hanks with splinters and bumping my head so hard on the boards when I came down that I saw stars. I rolled over on 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 right-hank wheel rut 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 wind-broken 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. An yet I sensed him somewhere near in those woods, watching me with his grassfire eyes, smelling of burned 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 kept looking over my shoulder, needing again and again to verify the road behind my was still empty. It was each time I looked, but those backward glances seemed to increase my fear rather than lessen it. The firs looked darker, massier, and I kept imagining what lay behind the trees that 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.

A mile or so farther 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. 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 …"

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 own 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 skinned 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 that 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 down into my face and I could look up 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 see 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 and 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 black-currant 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.

“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. 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 swollen and purple, as

Dan's had been when my father carried him in from the west filed, 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 who ever lived would have been able to convince his father he'd seen the Devil walking out of the woods in a black suit.

"I'll come," I said. I had come out of the house to join him before he left, mustering all my courage 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 the 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, swollen 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 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 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, my heart thumping. 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. I looked in my empty creel again. “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 each other 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 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 live, 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 that 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 firs cigarette I ever smoked (cornshuck behind Dicky Hamner'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 that whispers that the nine-year-old fisherboy I was had done nothing for which he might legitimately fear the Devil, either, and yet the Devil came—to him. And in the dark I sometimes hear that voice drop even lower, into ranges that 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.